

What the Cold War taught the Kremlin about controlling the truth

Decades after the fall of the USSR, Moscow's battle for hearts and minds has not ended; it has just gone digital in disguise



T-shirts with Vladimir Putin's image and the USSR emblem are sold at a Moscow gift shop on May 15. [Alexander Nemenov/AFP]

By Olha Chepil | 2025-06-19

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KYIV -- Long before satellites and nuclear standoffs, the Soviet Union mastered the art of warfare without weapons. From 1945 until its collapse, the USSR used propaganda and disinformation to promote its ideology, destabilize rivals, fracture alliances and reshape reality.

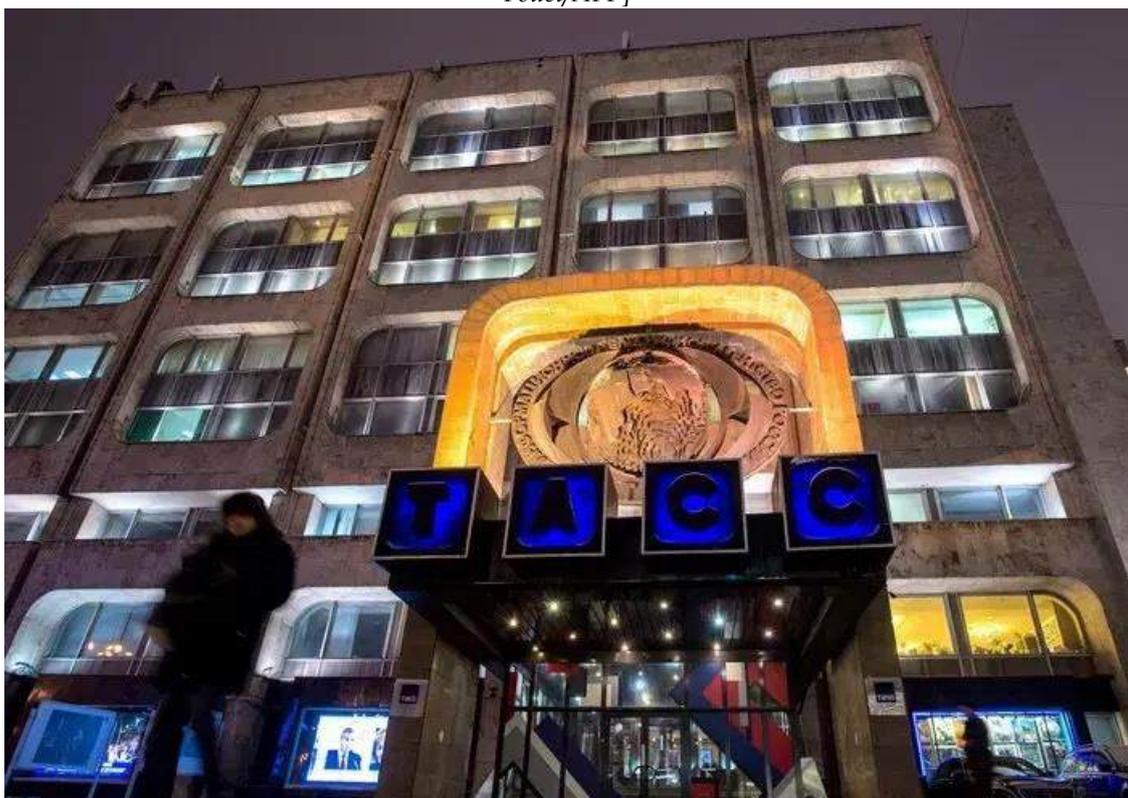
The tactics did not vanish with the Soviet flag; they were absorbed into the statecraft of modern Russia, repurposed to serve new ambitions with familiar tools.

"This was a traditional policy for the Soviet Union and for Russia," said Dmitry Gainetdinov, deputy director general at Ukraine's National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War.

"Divide and rule, undercut unity ... bring about a government of populists, undermine narratives. All of this is also relevant today," he told Global Watch.



A man holds up a copy of Pravda in front of the newspaper's building in Moscow August 28, 1991. [Gerard Fouet/AFP]



The building of the Russian state news agency TASS in Moscow is shown January 23, 2015. [Dmitry Serebryakov/AFP]

The strategy did not start with the Cold War. It began decades earlier under Vladimir Lenin, who said that control over information was as vital as control over territory. Soviet influence campaigns matured into a global effort to manipulate minds -- by exploiting every medium, from state radio to forged documents.

Today, those same methods echo through social media feeds and comment threads. The message is still political. The medium is now digital. And the mission -- manipulate, mislead, destabilize -- remains intact.

Disinformation as the norm

During the Cold War, the KGB led the Soviet Union's disinformation campaigns. Within it, a unit known as Service A specialized in propaganda warfare -- not to persuade but to destabilize.

"That's where this propaganda machine was concentrated," **Pavlo Hai-Nyzhnyk**, a historian and political analyst with Ukraine's National Academy of Sciences, told Global Watch.

"They controlled everything and provided templates that were supposed to be used to fine-tune the message."

The Soviet propaganda network operated through official media such as TASS and Radio Moscow, along with pseudo-scientific publications, cultural centers and so-called friendship societies. The goal: inject Soviet narratives into Western discourse and erode trust in democratic institutions.

"There were bilateral friendship societies in every country that spread the Soviet ideology. Now Russia is using Russian Houses and similar institutions to accomplish that," Gainetdinov said.

Deception as a strategy

"Novosti headquarters in Moscow contained a section of 50 KGB officers who worked full time on disinformation programs," historian Calder Walton wrote in 2022 in the Texas National Security Review, paraphrasing a speech by William Casey, the director of the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), to the Dallas Council on World Affairs in 1985.

One of the KGB's most infamous efforts was a false claim that CIA labs created AIDS. The story first appeared in an Indian newspaper before spreading through Soviet and Western outlets. The goal, analysts say, was to undermine trust in science and the United States.

"They started spreading the claim that it was a CIA special operation. A biological weapon. It worked," Ihor Reiterovych, head of the political and legal programs of the Ukrainian Center for Social Development, told Global Watch.

The 3rd World as a 3rd front

Alongside its focus on NATO, the Soviet Union targeted the developing world with propaganda and covert support. Radio Moscow broadcast in dozens of languages, backing liberation movements in Asia, Africa and Latin America and casting the USSR as a "natural ally" of the oppressed.

"In its propaganda, the Soviet Union was the most peace-loving country. But at the same time it was saying, 'We must arm ourselves because others want to conquer us,'" Hai-Nyzhnyk said.

Behind anti-colonial slogans, Moscow supplied weapons, military instructors and ideological training to movements and regimes under its influence.

"In the past there were Soviet military personnel. Now there's Wagner. The names are changing, but the substance isn't," Hai-Nyzhnyk said, referring to a mercenary force that fought in Ukraine and in Africa for the Kremlin.

Networks of agents

The core of the Kremlin's propaganda has not changed since the Cold War, only the scale and presentation, said Reiterovych.

"During the Cold War the most important thing wasn't radio but the creation of a network of opinion leaders. Officially they were independent, but they essentially repeated the Kremlin line," he explained.

Today, those figures still exist, just under different labels. In Germany, they are often called *Putinverstehers* -- "those who understand [Russian President Vladimir] Putin," Reiterovych noted.

Russia uses such individuals -- researchers, activists and influencers -- to spread state-approved narratives under the guise of independent thought.

"It's very easy to promote narratives through someone like that," he said.

New form, old goal

Today's tools may be new -- TikTok, Telegram, troll farms -- but the Kremlin's goal remains the same: sow doubt, spread chaos and erode trust, analysts say.

"The aim isn't to prove that they're right -- it's to toss in a lie, foment scandal and demand evidence from the opponent," Reiterovych said.

In an age of digital overload, the result is confusion.

"They're spreading so many foolish ideas that the public is simply drowning in the swamp," he said.

These efforts follow a strategy rooted in Soviet-era doctrine. Universities that once trained disinformation specialists still operate, and many of the people running today's campaigns were educated under the USSR.

"The only thing that has changed is the scale," Reiterovych said.

The tactics have not disappeared; they have evolved, say historians.

Meanwhile, the essence has not changed: disinformation seeks to paralyze.

Its purpose is to weaken wills and understanding. Cold War lessons still apply, analysts argue: the antidotes are transparency, education and resilient democratic institutions.
