

A Lesson from the Cold War – Using the Example of Communist Disinformation in Czechoslovakia to Better Understand Current Practices¹

Peter Rendek

'They did nothing, drank endlessly, stole from themselves, grabbed and pushed bribes, lied in their summary reports from the podium and on the pages of newspapers; they were even intoxicated by their own deceitfulness and hung medals on each other's chests.'

Nikolai Ivanovich Ryzhkov²

What does the communist past have in common with today's online world of alternative facts, fake news, hoaxes, conspiracy theories and the like? Today, as in the past, it is about spreading half-truths, lies, fear, apprehension and uncertainty, undermining stability and questioning the value system and bonds on which European democracy stands. **The current phenomenon of Russian disinformation in the digital era can also be understood through the lens of the past.** We can learn a lot from the [Cold War's history](#), from the Soviet Union and its satellites in Eastern Europe, which spent an enormous amount of time on their disinformation activities against the democratic world.

What is currently taking place today comes from and has direct and ongoing links to the Soviet's Cold War history. What has changed since then? Of course,

¹The text is a modified version of the authors' texts from the Platform of European Memory and Conscience online project entitled 'Czechoslovakia in the 1948–1989 (dis)information war'. As of 30 November 2020 available online here: www.memoryandconscience.eu/2020/01/07/czechoslovakia-in-the-1948-1989-disinformation-war (accessed 4 March 2021).

² Nikolai Ivanovich Ryzhkov (b. 1929) – Ryzhkov was a member of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and chairman of the Council of Ministers from 1985 to 1991 under Mikhail Gorbachev. See more: Andrei Zubov (ed.): *A History of 20th Century Russia*, Argo 2014.

the form. Now the 'old ways' have been replaced by the internet, but the strategy and methods remain the same. From the perspective of the pre-internet communist bloc under Soviet leadership, **the (dis)information war was aimed at its own citizens as well as those of foreign democratic countries, along with their political systems.**

Using former Czechoslovakia (1948–89) as an example, we can learn how the individual tools of information warfare were used in the past. **Up until 1989, communist Czechoslovakia was an active player and ally of the Soviet Union in the (dis)information war against the West.**³ This was, of course, more or less similar for the whole of the Central and Eastern European region before the collapse of the communist regimes. On a domestic level, **propaganda and disinformation played a key role in supporting the ruling party**, and in educating and indoctrinating the younger generation. However, **there still remained ways to read, watch and listen to free and uncensored broadcasts.** Despite the communist regime barring the broadcasts of many foreign radio stations, residents could watch and listen to West German television, the Austrian broadcasting station ORF, the British BBC, the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, Deutsche Welle, Vatican Radio and so on.

What tools were used for information control?

After February 1948, under the direction of the Communist Party, institutionalized instruments for controlling and disseminating propaganda and disinformation abroad and towards its own population were fairly quickly established. **The media, such as newspapers, radio and television, immediately underwent a rapid 'cleansing' and all journalists not loyal to the ideas of new rulers were dismissed.** Up until the Velvet Revolution of 1989, in addition to insisting on the party line, there was a state apparatus dedicated to this activity, functioning under the dictates of the party.

Until as late as November 1989, the regime obtained private information from its citizens through the clandestine control of correspondence. This was, however,

³ For closer information about the disinformation in Czechoslovakia please see the online project 'Czechoslovakia in the 1948–1989 (dis)information war': www.minulost.cz/en/czechoslovakia-disinformation-war-1948-1989 (accessed 18 March 2021).

an unlawful state activity according to the valid Penal Code of that time. This task was handled by the state secret police (Státní bezpečnost – StB) and the Administration VI of the FMV (Federal Ministry of the Interior Operative Technique Administration). Special workplaces were set up at selected post offices in all regional cities. These workplaces were manned by StB personnel trained in this area. The surveillance of correspondence largely focused on that with 'capitalist countries'. This channel of information was an important source of news for the state security forces and the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia.



← Protesters waving the Czechoslovak flag and taking control of a tank during the invasion by Warsaw Pact troops. Prague, August 1968.

Disinformation section of the Czechoslovak intelligence

The purpose of disinformation activities (in other words, active and influencing measures) was to influence the positions and actions of individuals, groups of people and the inhabitants of a certain region of interest or decision-making centres in favour of the foreign policy of the communist bloc.

Systematic influencing measures were carried out by foreign intelligence (Administration I of the Federal Ministry of the Interior). Later, it expanded into a specialized workplace.

During the 1960s, small workplaces for disinformation were also introduced to civil and military counterintelligence. Their activity was coordinated with apparatus similar to that used by the Intelligence Administration of the General Staff of the Ministry of Defence.

The section in foreign intelligence directed and carried out psychological actions and operations focusing on politics, the economy, science and technology, the military, the fight against exile and emigration, the fight against the special forces of the enemy, etc. Active measures were carried out in individual operations that followed long-term strategic goals on specific issues (e.g. the support of the 'peace movement' in Western Europe, compromising NATO, exiles or the opposition in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic [ČSSR]). The operations focused on specific areas of foreign intelligence in capitalist and developing countries, one after the other and in increasingly numbers.

This disinformation unit changed its name over time:

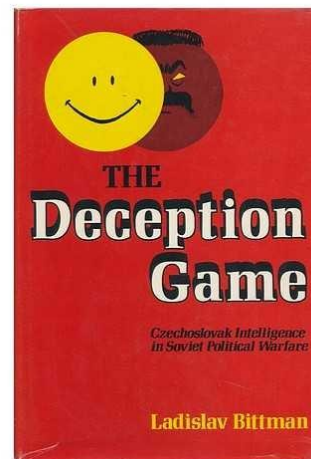
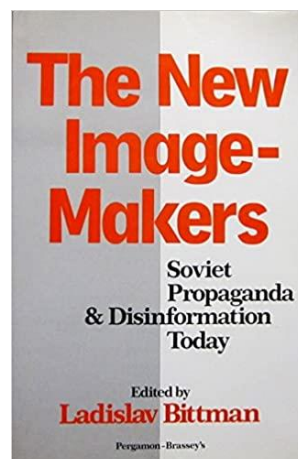
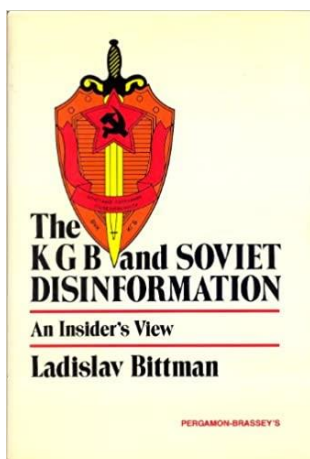
- **1963: Disinformation Section of Administration I**
- **1964–68: Section for Active Measures and Disinformation – Section 8 of Administration I**
- **1969–71: Department 1 Section 3 Administration B**
- **1971–74: Section of Psychological Operations of Administration I**
- **1974–89: Section 36 of Administration I – Active and Influencing Measures**

Between 1964 and 1966 its deputy chief was Major Ladislav Bittman 'Brychta' (1913–2018) who later, after the August invasion of Czechoslovakia in [1968](#), escaped to the United States. He revealed a lot of important information on those activities.

Major Ladislav Bittman joined the Czechoslovak intelligence service fresh out of university in September 1954. He participated in Operation Neptune in 1964,

an infamous disinformation operation that involved Nazi era documents. **The objective was to discredit Western politicians by revealing the names of former Nazi informants whom they were still using as spies in Eastern Europe.** As a spy, he operated from Berlin and Vienna, elite espionage postings during the Cold War for both sides. After the Warsaw Pact invasion in August 1968, he defected to the USA and later wrote a memoir published as *The Deception Game: Czechoslovak Intelligence in Soviet Political Warfare* (Syracuse 1972). He worked as an author and lecturer on disinformation and propaganda at Boston University. In 2009 in the NBC News series *Dateline*, he said 'I openly admit that I did a lot of damage to the West, particularly to the United States, as a specialist in dirty tricks, [...].'

The Czechoslovak service, which collaborated with others in the Soviet-dominated Eastern bloc, was deeply involved in forgeries, such as taking the signatures of American diplomats from Christmas cards and using them on faked documents detailing supposed American conspiracies worldwide, and political sabotage, including setting up a brothel with the Soviets to trap West German politicians in compromising situations.



Book covers [accessed 14 April 2021]. Available on Amazon (from left to right):
https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0080315720/r ef=db_s_a_def_rvt_bibl_vppi_11,
<https://www.amazon.de/-/ref/Ladislav-Bittman/dp/0080349390>,
https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0815680783/r ef=db_s_a_def_rvt_bibl_vppi_13

↑ Ladislav Bittman worked at the Department for Active Measures and Disinformation of the Czechoslovak Security Service. During the Prague Spring of 1968, he decided to flee to the United States. He changed his name to Lawrence Martin-Bittman, became a professor at Boston University and published several books on disinformation.

What was the target?

The primary target of the communist bloc was the so-called 'main enemy' – the USA and NATO, the European Community, 'ideo-diverse centres' (that is, critics and opponents of the regime from among exiles) and the Vatican. The mass influencing of the Western public was carried out through international organizations, 'peace' associations, support for anti-war rallies and demonstrations, communist and socialist parties, politicians, journalists, academia, etc.

What were the most commonly used ways?

The Czechoslovak official disinformation operations in the pre-internet period used a network of secret collaborators abroad (politicians, journalists, people of influence, etc.). The operations were disseminated through these means:

- speeches, questions and debates in parliament and in the government;
- the official handing over of documents;
- falsified notes and documents of state institutions (taking the signatures of diplomats from Christmas cards and using them on faked documents), counterfeit letters;
- official interventions by ambassadors;
- spreading rumours in diplomatic circles;
- letters of solidarity to government officials;
- statements by political parties;
- blackmail;
- the publication of articles, documents, comments in the press, books, pamphlets, posters and stickers;
- protest telegrams and petitions;
- transmission of information and disinformation;
- radio commentary, broadcasting Czechoslovak radio abroad;
- TV movies and documentaries (i.e. in Czechoslovakia);
- letters from readers;
- press conferences, Czechoslovak News Agency statements;

- agency interventions, press campaigns;
- discussions, conferences, demonstrations, protest rallies, public meetings;
- speeches at meetings;
- photographic exhibitions;
- writing on local banknotes.

Conclusion

Every totalitarian or authoritarian regime controls the information flow in both directions, in and out. It denies its own people the right to proper and truthful information and presents itself abroad in a good light as if the country where paradise on earth is possible.

Widescale fake news and disinformation campaigns today requires, as we can see in our recent past, large amounts of political and financial support; it requires structures and leaders to orchestrate them, as well as a lot of manpower. **From the recipients of such information, it requires an elementary knowledge of how the information flow works, but most importantly a critical awareness and ability to analyse and compare sources.**

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