

Practices of Control and Disinformation in Czechoslovakia during the Cold War

Dr Ana-Maria Cătănuș

Introduction for the teacher

The lesson script is intended for students aged between 14 and 18. The subject matter discussed allows for its use in interdisciplinary classes in history, culture, media education and social sciences.

The material has been divided into three parts: the lesson scenario, a set of source materials and a worksheet of exercises to be done during the class, in a group or individually.

Instructions

The script contains eight pieces of source material and a worksheet with exercises to be implemented during one lesson (45 mins). The lesson structure can be modified by the teacher to achieve specific objectives. The source materials and worksheet can also be adapted and used only in part according to the class requirements. The lesson will benefit from using the Internet (computer, multimedia projector and an interactive white board), including devices connected to the Internet (smartphones, tablets, etc).

Teaching objectives

The student will be able to:

- define the concepts of disinformation and black propaganda,
- acknowledge similarities and differences between disinformation during the Cold War and the present time,
- analyse source texts and photographs, indicating the cause-effect link between them and historical events,

- identify and analyse the methods used by the communist authorities to control people in Eastern Europe.

Teaching methods

- teacher-led discussion,
- group and individual work,
- analysis of source material, texts and illustrations, -
mind mapping.

Teaching aids

- sets of exercises and source material available on the '[Hi-story lessons](#)' platform,
- boards/flipcharts, felt pens/chalk,
- large paper sheets/Bristol board sheets, post-its,
- a computer with internet access and a multimedia projector/interactive white board.

Before the lesson

Ask the students to read the essays titled 'A Lesson from the Cold War – Using the Example of Communist Disinformation in Czechoslovakia to Better Understand Current Practices' and recommend they watch the film *The Hater* (2020), directed by Jan Komasa.

Lesson Scenario

Introduction

1. Begin your lesson by asking the students if they have seen films about social media manipulation. Refer to the Polish film *The Hater* (2020), where the main character, a young man, tries to find success and social acceptance by associating with a dark network that created and spread fake news on the Internet. Ask the students to remember how the main character behaved and what impact his actions had. Point the students' attention towards the way the character used social media feeds to spread fake news.
2. During the exchange of ideas, introduce disinformation as a phenomenon that has transferred across historical periods. Emphasise the idea that regardless of the methods and strategies of disinformation, its objective have not changed: feeding false information to people and groups to gain advantages.
3. State the main subject of the lesson: how communist regimes used control and disinformation to ensure their existence. In addition, discuss how the Western world and the people residing in communist countries fought authoritarianism by creating islands of freedom within communist countries.
4. Distribute the worksheets and sets of source materials among the students.
5. Let the students know that during the lesson, they will work both individually and in groups.

Development

1. Start the lesson by referring to the concept and practices of disinformation during the Cold War and current times. Outline the facts that regardless of the rapid technological evolution, the main objective of disinformation has remained the same: to manipulate states, groups of people or individuals to obtain strategic, political, economic or public image advantages.

At this point, it would be useful to draw the students' attention towards **Sources A** and **B** to familiarise them with the characteristics of disinformation during the Cold War and in the age of social media. Point students towards the fact that technology is perhaps not changing the scale and scope of disinformation that

much (more traditional forms such as the radio, rumour and gossip did this too), but the widespread access to modern technology has increased the pace of the spread.

2. Ask the students to work individually on **Exercise 1**. Once that is done, a student will read the answers while the rest will correct or agree.
3. To maintain political control, communist authorities used a variety of methods from ideological education and propaganda through art, literature and press oversight to constant surveillance of the people. To illustrate these aspects, direct the students' attention towards **Sources C** and **D** and work on **Exercise 2**. Divide the students into groups of four or six students. The objective is to familiarise students with the methods used by the Communist regime both within the country and abroad to maintain political control and gain advantages over Western democracies. At the end of the working time, each group will choose a representative to present their points of view. If the resulting opinions are contradictory, the volunteers will have to argue their case.
4. To understand the concept of black propaganda, direct the students' attention towards **Sources E** and **F** and ask them to work on **Exercise 3**.
5. Soon after the beginning of the Second World War, the United States and Western democracies set up broadcasts to break the information barrier imposed by the USSR and the communist regimes in Eastern Europe. Radio Free Europe, which started broadcasting as early as 1950, acted as a 'surrogate' radio station providing citizens in Eastern Europe with political, economic and cultural information. The broadcasts contributed to the dissemination of dissident ideas, offering alternative views on the communist societies. Direct the students' attention towards **Sources G** and **H** and ask them to complete **Exercise 4**. The students will work in groups, using the same collaborative learning methods as in Exercises 2 and 3.
6. At the end of the lesson, ask the students to create a mind map using the answers to the following questions:
 - How did the communist regimes maintain political power within each country?
 - What methods and tools did they use?
 - How did communist regimes behave towards Western democracies?
 - What methods did they use to weaken their adversaries?

How did the Western democracies react to the communist information barrier?

Conclusion

To conclude, reflect with your students on how difficult it was living in an authoritarian society. Discuss the benefits of living in a free society and the importance of checking information from several sources to avoid disinformation.

Homework

Imagine you are living in communist Czechoslovakia in the 1980s. You want to send a letter describing the difficulties of everyday life to Radio Free Europe. What would you write and what methods would you use so the secret police could not stop your letter.

Keywords

disinformation campaigns, black propaganda, dissent, surveillance, Radio Free Europe, Václav Havel

Worksheet

Exercise 1

Use **Sources A** and **B** to evaluate whether the statements in the table below are true (T) or false (F).

Disinformation means feeding prepared false data to the enemy.	
Disinformation includes some truth in order to have an aura of credibility.	
During the Cold War, disinformation could be contained in false documents and oral and written agency communication.	
Disinformation ended with the Cold War.	
Nowadays disinformation uses the primacy of emotions over facts and information.	
In the Internet era, people are easily attracted to photos and explosive messages.	
Authoritarian groups can easily manipulate people through disinformation.	
Disinformation in the social media does not affect peoples' trust in official institutions.	

Exercise 2

Using **Sources C** and **D**, debate on the methods used by the communist regime to control the population. Write down three things you noticed in the photograph from **Source D**.

Your answer:

Exercise 3

Using **Sources E** and **F**, provide an answer for the following question: was Operation Neptune a case of black propaganda? Was it successful?

Your answer:

Exercise 4

Using **Sources G** and **H**, ask the students to comment on the role of Western broadcasts, especially those of Radio Free Europe, in providing Eastern European citizens with true information and disseminating dissident ideas.

Your answer:

Exercise 5

Use the information discussed during the lesson to create a mind map to reflect how totalitarian regimes acted both inside their countries, to maintain control, and abroad, to gain political advantage, through disinformation. Include in the mind map media tools used by the Western world to provide free information for citizens behind the Iron Curtain. Mention how the people in Eastern Europe fought the authoritarian regimes.

Answers

Exercise 1

Disinformation means feeding prepared false data to the enemy.	T
Disinformation includes some truth in order to have an aura of credibility.	T
During the Cold War, disinformation could be contained in false documents and oral and written agency communication.	T
Disinformation ended with the Cold War.	F
Nowadays disinformation uses the primacy of emotions over facts and information.	T
In the Internet era, people are easily attracted to photos and explosive messages.	T
Authoritarian groups can easily manipulate people through disinformation.	T
Disinformation in the social media does not affect peoples' trust in official institutions.	F

Exercise 2

Possible answer:

Communist regimes controlled the population using ideological tools – education, art, literature and the press. It also made use of secret police surveillance, including private correspondence.

The photograph is of a secret police workplace. There appear to be letters on the desks and boards covered with information in the form of notes and two people probably reading and extracting information.

Exercise 3

Possible answer:

Operation Neptune can be seen as a form of black propaganda as it was intended to create the impression that it was the Nazis who created the documents 'discovered' in the Black Lake. It was successful as it achieved its goals: discrediting West German politicians and extending the statute of limitations for war criminals.

Exercise 4

Possible answer:

Western broadcasts acted like 'surrogate' radio stations, providing Eastern European citizens uncensored information about the economic and political situation. Moreover, it played a significant educational, cultural and spiritual role.

Exercise 5

Possible answer below

