

# Unveiling the truth: how the United States fought Soviet disinformation during the Cold War

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## Lesson Scenario

### Introduction

1. Begin your lesson by asking the students about the recent COVID-19 pandemics. What they know about the virus (SARS-CoV-2) and how they found out about it (eg television, social media). Ask them if they have heard debates about the virus's origins, whether natural or created in a laboratory? As a warm-up activity, adapt the four-corner method and ask the students to choose a corner corresponding to the following assertions: natural virus, lab-created, I don't know and I need more information. Ask a representative of each corner to present the case for that choice.
2. During the exchange of ideas, ask the students how they have navigated through the daily often-contradictory avalanche of information and whether they believe there have been disinformation campaigns regarding the virus. Ask the students what sources of information they trust more: official institutions, national or international, television programmes, Internet news sites or social media?
3. Create a link with the topic of the lesson – disinformation during the Cold War.
4. Distribute the worksheets and 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 with a mini-lecture reminding them of the general characteristics of the Cold War. It was based on political, economic, scientific and military rivalry between two opposing ideological camps that emerged at the end of Second World War. On

one side were the United States and the Western democracies, and on the other side, the Soviet Union and the occupied countries of Eastern Europe. Both sides had significant spheres of influence in the developing world. Besides open competition in the areas above, the two blocs confronted one another through the unseen field of intelligence. Within the secret services, disinformation campaigns were developed and spread to smearing political adversaries.

At this point, it would be helpful to draw the students' attention towards Source A to familiarise them with disinformation. If necessary, explain the concept of disinformation using Łukasz Kamiński's guidebook ['NO to Disinformation! How to Recognise Historical Manipulation and Historical Fake News on the Internet'](#).

2. Ask the students to work individually on Exercise 1. Once that is done, a student will read the answers while the rest approve or correct them.
3. Divide the students into groups of four or six students. Ask them to use the Sources B, C and D to complete Exercises 2 and 3. The students should answer the following questions: Was the 'Evil Empire Speech' by Ronald Reagan justified by the disinformation campaigns of the Soviets? What were the purposes of the disinformation campaigns? After debates within the group, the students will name one representative to present their points of view. In case the resulting opinions differ, the volunteers need to argue their case.
4. To better understand disinformation strategies during the Cold War, direct the students' attention towards Sources C and D.

Analyse the 'Operation TARAKANY' source and comment on specific elements that lead to the idea of a fake story: the sensational language, how the story was built, the illustration. Then, move to Source D for clear proof of secret services involvement in the AIDS disinformation campaign.

5. Disinformation campaigns increased in the 1980s due to the growing tension between the United States and the Soviet Union. As a result, Soviet disinformation and fake news became more frequent. However, the change in the Soviet leadership in the mid-1980s increased the chances of American-Soviet dialogue. That led to agreements in disarmament and a stop to the disinformation campaigns.

To highlight that particular situation, direct the students' attention to the Sources E, F and G and ask them to complete Exercise 4.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, reflect on how disinformation changed from the Cold War years up to the present time. Discuss the methods to verify the information and to prevent the spreading of fake news.

## **Homework**

Using the online archive of a leading ideological newspaper in your country during the Cold War, try to identify an example of disinformation.

## **Keywords**

disinformation campaigns, ideology, AIDS campaign, intelligence, Ronald Reagan, Mikhail Gorbachev