

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

Dr Ana-Maria Cătănuș

Keywords

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

Introduction for the teacher

The lesson script is intended for students aged between 14 and 18. The subject matter discussed can be used 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 seven pieces of source material and a worksheet with exercises to be implemented during three lessons (45 mins). The lesson structure can be modified by the teacher to achieve specific objectives. The source materials and worksheet can be adapted or used only partially according to the class requirements. The lesson will benefit from using the Internet (computer, multimedia projector and interactive white board), including devices connected to the Internet (smartphones, tablets, etc).

Operational goals

The student is able to:

- define the concept of disinformation,
- characterise disinformation campaigns led by the USSR relating to health issues,

- explain the differences between disinformation during the Cold War and current times,



- analyse sources, texts and photographs indicating the cause-effect link between them and historical events,
- develop an independent argument and contribute to the debate.

Teaching methods

- teacher-led discussion,
- group work,
- brainstorming,
- analysis of source material, texts and illustrations,
- four-corners method,¹
- independent work with a set of exercises.

Teaching aids

- board/flipcharts, felt pens/chalk,
- large paper sheets/Bristol board sheets, post-its,
- a computer with Internet access and a multimedia projector and interactive white board.

Before the lesson

Ask the students to read the essay titled ['America's Countering Soviet Disinformation in the 1980s'](#).

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.

Worksheet

Exercise 1

Use Source A to evaluate whether the statements in the table below are true (T) or false (F).

The Cold War was not an ideological war.	
The political discourse was used to influence people.	
Disinformation was used for domestic and external purposes.	
The Cold War was due to political, economic and ideological rivalry.	
The Soviets did not blame the US for the AIDS epidemic.	
The era of social media increases the incidences of disinformation.	
Traditional media (newspapers) can compete with instant social media information.	
Social media makes the spread of disinformation easier.	
Trusted networks of information are safe from disinformation.	
It is easy to differentiate between true and false information on the Internet.	

Exercise 2

Using the Sources B, C and D debate whether Source B is justified by the Sources C and D. Discuss your answer by referring to specific elements in Sources C and D.

Your answer:

Exercise 3

Using Sources C and D provide an answer for the following question: what were the objectives of the initiators of the disinformation campaigns?

Your answer:

Exercise 4

Use Sources E, F and G to assess how President Ronald Reagan and General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev contributed to the end of the Cold War.

Your answer:

Answers

Exercise 1

The Cold War was not an ideological war.	F
The political discourse was used to influence people.	T
Disinformation was used for domestic and external purposes.	T
The Cold War was due to political, economic and ideological rivalry.	T
The Soviets did not blame the US for the AIDS epidemic.	F
The era of social media increases the incidences of disinformation.	T
Traditional media (newspapers) can compete with instant social media information.	F
Social media makes the spread of disinformation easier.	T
Trusted networks of information are safe from disinformation.	F
It is easy to differentiate between true and false information on the Internet.	F

Exercise 2

Possible answer:

During the 1980s, Soviet disinformation campaigns increased in number. It also targeted issues affecting the wider population – such as health issues – which led to increased panic and a sense of vulnerability among people. Specific examples refer to

Operation TARAKANY ('cockroaches'). The Soviets created a science-fiction-style story about genetically modified mosquitoes that carried viruses and infected water sources (Source C). Another disinformation campaign that created panic within the population was the AIDS virus that was allegedly an American made virus (Source D).

Exercise 3

Possible answer:

The Soviets' claim that the United States created biological weapons was intended to undermine American influence globally and within international organisations. It led to panic in the US population and increased distrust in government institutions.

Exercise 4

Possible answer:

Although the two presidents were initially reluctant to enter into a dialogue, in the second part of the 1980s, diplomatic negotiations led to arms-reduction agreements. It also stopped campaigns such as the disinformation relating to AIDS.