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The Soviet Information Machine: The USSR's Influence on Modern Russian Media Practices & Disinformation Campaigns

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Abstract

The legacy of the Soviet state information machine remains alive in Russia. The Kremlin exerts control over domestic and foreign media, capitalizing on digital technology to organize disinformation campaigns. In surprising ways, the Soviet approach to information control mirrors the modern-day Russian state. Overall, I argue that while the scale and mechanisms for state control may have updated with modern times, control over information by the Russian government emulates censorship and propaganda practices of the past, perpetuating a domestic neo-authoritarian media space (Becker, 2014, 149).

Keywords: Politics, Russia, censorship, propaganda, information, etc

Modern Censorship Theory & the Weaponization of Information

Modern censorship theory focuses on decentralised and structural forms of weaponizing information, moving past a solely state-oriented analysis. Information weaponization is described as a type of political instrumentality, which uses the media towards targeted agendas (Hansen, 2017, 28). This new theory analyzes a diffuse host of actors across political and civil structures, allowing for civilians and local actors to self-police (Bunn, 2015, 1). Inversely, scholarship around Soviet-era information mechanisms tended to rely on traditional censorship theory, focusing on state control. I argue that temporal analysis of the similarities and differences between Soviet-era and modern Russia yields productive insights into our understanding of censorship and propaganda as structural social forces. The comparison also permits analysis of globalization and technology impacts on information politics in modern Russia. Analyzing the structures of modern and historical information doctoring has profound impacts on how we consume information and the legitimacy we give to media sources.

History of the Russian State Information Machine

State propaganda and censorship have a history in Russia, dating back to the Tsarist period, World War I, and the country's civil war, laying the roots for the communist regime's information weaponization tactics. Monitoring civilian moods on a mass scale began during WWI to ensure the loyalty of the country's troops and population. Perilustration or "the strategic opening of mail for surveillance purposes" was conducted on a mass scale that was never before attempted (Oxford English Dictionary, 2020). The Tsarist government formally structured the practice through the Temporary Statute on Military Censorship (Hoffman, 2011, 186). In addition, during the country's civil war, the Red Army formed its own information branch, categorizing soldiers based on their moods, "discipline, level of consciousness, relationship to Soviet Power, and relationship to Communists" (Hoffman, 2011, 196).

During the soviet-era, state manufactured information and surveillance became an early tool to ensure class consciousness amongst the masses, ensuring the creation of the New Soviet Person from the ashes of the old Tsarist autocracy (Hoffman, 2011, 182). The regime sought firm control amongst the political fragmentation left by the civil war. In July of 1919, the new Soviet government published a decree on censorship and perilustration, creating a formalized legal precedent for the monitoring of telegraph, radio, telephone, and mail. The state-organized key information was collected into categories, including peasant movements, civil unrest in the countryside, and general trends of sociopolitical life. Further surveillance policies ensued, including the creation of weekly political support trend maps, which identified potential hotspots for civil unrest. This legal groundwork allowed the regime to combat enemies domestically, such as the growing battle against illegal petty capitalism (Hoffman, 2011, 196).

Soviet Ideological Control: Instruments of Propaganda

Propaganda became one of the main methods for soviet ideological indoctrination and weaponization of information. Propaganda is defined as "information, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote or publicize a particular political cause or point of view" (Armstrong, 1965, 9). Thus, propaganda strategically doctors material towards state aims rather than controlling already existent sources of information. One of the most formative vehicles of state information control included the use of propaganda during communist rallies, the celebrations of government holidays, and party elections. The government-printed posters became a popular medium during these celebrations, especially during Stalin's time in power. Due to the large uneducated lower classes in the Soviet Union, complex communist state ideologies had to be simplified for successful mass indoctrination. Posters became a vessel to convey propaganda to the masses, declaring the "way in which the leadership wished to present itself and indicating those values that were considered most important to the creation of the new man and the new civilization" (Pisch, 2016, 3). The images of Stalin, therefore, took on a life outside of the personal qualities of the man, representing the essential qualities of Bolshevism and giving a tangible face to communism for the masses to both, strive to be, and to fear (Pisch, 2016, 4).

Soviet propaganda was not limited to print media. Capitalizing on the technological advances of the day, the symbiosis of Bolshevism and cinema became a formidable coupling, churning out state formulated moving images to the masses. On 27 August 1919, Lenin signed the decree nationalizing the former Tsarist cinema (Kepley, 1990, 4). The first state's cinematic propaganda piece was titled *Agitka*, which held "an explicit propagandistic purpose, seeking to educate the largely illiterate masses in the Bolshevik cause" (Gillispie, 2000, 4). State-sponsored dispersal

methods were even included in campaigns where the film was taken to rural parts of the country on trains known as “agitated” (Gillispie, 2000, 4). This allowed even the most rural Soviets to be influenced by the state's agenda.

Modern-day Russian Propaganda: Russia Disinformation Campaigns & Strategic use of the Cyberspace

Although the current Russian government no longer holds as much direct power to disperse propaganda, propaganda campaigns remain a tool in Russia's information politics. Following the opening up of Russia after the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia's audience for state propaganda began to shift. Fueled by globalization, new foreign markets became available to promote pro-Russian propaganda, leading to a shift in audience and medium. Thus, the information campaigns shifted from solely domestic campaigns to a foreign affairs political strategy, disseminating disinformation on a global scale. Here, disinformation is defined as “false information which is intended to mislead, especially propaganda issued by a government organization to a rival power or the media” (Meister, 2016, 10).

A significant component to Russian propaganda post-1991 has been investing in state-sponsored television networks, such as Sputnik, which produce radio, social media, and news agency content in local languages in 34 countries and are viewed by millions of people, especially ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers outside Russia (Aron, 2015, 5). The original aim of this content was to disseminate a Russian world view to other parts of the globe, countering main Western media conglomerates, such as CNN and BBC. To do so, the Russian state media perpetuates fake story campaigns by capitalizing on Russian political elite endorsements, such as those of Russia's former prime minister, Sergey Lavrov, to provide political weight to their accusations. Russian politicians have particularly capitalized on disinformation warfare in regional conflicts that hold strategic importance to the country. These include the regime change in Kyiv in 2015 and the Russian involvement in the downing of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 of 2019, where Russian media placed the blame on Ukrainian or Western authorities (Hansen, 2017, 28).

Much like the Soviet's use of mass cinema, social media had become the new weapon of choice for Russian disinformation campaigns. Russian interference through social media has even impacted foreign elections, including the 2016 American Presidential Election 2016. As the Mueller report published in March, 2019 by the US Department of Justice corroborates, Russian interference used social media campaigns to favor candidate Donald Trump and computer-intrusion tactics against members of the Clinton campaign, which culminated in the release of stolen documents, most notable through the Wikileaks scandal (U.S Justice Department, 2019).

Russians have also been documented using social media to pose as ordinary American citizens, while gradually publishing “increasingly divisive content on race, immigration, and religion, including anti-immigrant and anti-Black Live matter content (Polyakova, 2020, 2). This divisive content would go on to hold global political ramifications. Modern Russian tactics have been far-reaching, creating a step-by-step-guide for other countries, such as Iran, China, and Ukraine, to capitalize on chaos, not as a source of fear, but as a key strategy toward dominating the international arena (Agents of Chaos, 2020, Polyakova, 2020, 3).

Soviet Censorship: Gavlit & Measures Against the Bourgeois Press

Surveillance practices and censorship became crucial tools for Soviet control over information and to quell capitalist influences both, domestically, and over foreign sources. Censorship is defined as “the suppression or prohibition of any parts of books, films, and news that are

considered obscene, politically unacceptable, or a threat to security" (Sherry, 2015, 35). Formal institutionalization of censorship began early during Lenin's presidency. He signed a decree of the press on October 27th, 1917, which established temporary measures against the bourgeois press, who posed a threat to the newly established communist political order (Sherry, 2015, 45). The decree also created one of the government's main tools for state censorship, a new government branch called the Main Administration of Literature and Publishing, or 'Glavlit', as it was colloquially known.

Glavlit held a significant amount of political sway, remaining amongst the higher political rings of the Soviet hierarchical structure: it was subordinate only to major governmental bodies, such as the KGB and Central Committee's Department of Propaganda. Glavlit's foreign section, known as Innotdel, became a major component of the fight against foreign influence. Glavlit's role was to establish governmental and structural norms for censorship throughout the Soviet Union for items such as literature, newspapers, pamphlets and forms. During Stalin's reign, Innotdel removed unsuitable content from imported texts and blacked out certain sections, seizing any material deemed unsuitable by the state and any material that was critical against the Soviet Union's leadership. The state would "on average destroy two-thirds of publications addressed to private individuals" (Sherry, 2015, 50). Other options after confiscation included banned material being placed in the "spetskhran" ("special storage"), which was a library designated for contraband material storage by the government. Glavlit's annual report from 1957 states that "a total of 18.6 million individuals' items were controlled and a small number of a third of a million were judged to be dangerous inasmuch as they were considered anti-Soviet and were destroyed" (Sherry, 2015, 50).

Glavlit utilized huge amounts of bureaucratic manpower to accomplish this task, further perpetuating the Soviet state's control over the masses. The USSR employed large numbers of civilian employees whose livelihoods were directly connected to the censoring of material deemed a threat to the communist regime. In the 1930s, the body had "around 6,708 employees and 305 members in the central apparatus in Moscow" (Sherry, 2015, 46). The beginnings of modern-day Russian censorship practices took root during the communist regime by using the country's citizens as cogs in the state's information machine.

Modern-Day Russian Censorship: Relics of the Old System

The modern Russian state no longer has such overt means of control over literature and other forms of media. Instead, the modern Russian state has turned to private media intermediaries, who have become unaccountable and nontransparent sources of information flows for the current Russian media branch, the Ministry of Communications and Mass Media, Information Technology, and Mass Media, or Roskomnadzor (Marechal, 2017, 31). Therefore, the Russian government now uses legal controls directed at third parties to enact censorship on its citizens.

The Russian government still impacts censorship practices today, setting up wide legal control to impose censorship precedent. Through this legal precedent, the Russian government has continued to target anti-government content, often redacting and banning work without court orders. While these systemic structures mirror their Soviet counterpart of Glavlit, the brunt of the censorship work is no longer conducted by state entities or employees. Instead, third party internet service providers implement state laws, leaving them legally responsible for any forbidden content that is accessible to users (Marechal, 2017, 32). This conscription of citizens into the process of censorship decentralizes it and perpetuates informal channels of state reach. Despite differences between Soviet and modern control channels, the ensuing state domination over information remains the same. A 2013 study published by the Center of Media and Society at the

New Economics School in Moscow found that “the majority of companies reported that they complied with all demands from the government and all reported being sensitive to government demands and having to contend with censorship issues” (Marechal, 2017, 34). Thus, the Russian government has strategically created a self-censoring public, lessening the need for direct government control over the populace to weaponize information towards the state’s aims.

Similarities between Soviet overt control mechanisms and modern-day Russian media culture remain, including direct ownership over media sources in the country. The state still controls a large percentage of popular media outlets in the country, making them subservient to political agendas and news content that benefit the aims of the Kremlin (Richter, 2008, 309). Yeltsin’s chosen successor, Putin, who assumed the presidency in 1999, solidified this precedent for state ownership over media channels, quickly restoring the Kremlin’s control over print and broadcast media- a move that he characterized as “liberating news outlets from the oligarchs” (Marechal, 2017, 31). One of the popular mediums for information control in modern-day Russia is state-sanctioned television. Russia Today (RT), one of the country’s most well-known television channels, is currently owned by TV-Novosti, making it operated through taxpayer dollars and directly controlled by the Russian state. The network has been dubbed by its Editor-in-Chief as a way to “wage the information war against the entire Western world” (Suroweic, 2017, 26). Thus, superiors at the helm of Russian media companies perpetuate a state-centric agenda in line with the Kremlin’s policies.

The modern Russian government has continued to control its citizens through anti-foreign rhetoric, framing the internet as “unreliable, biased, and dangerous” (Marechal, 2017, 32). Recent studies have shown that this tactic seems to be working. A recent report called Russia’s Appetite for Internet Control states that “49% of Russian think that information on the internet needs to be censored and 42% of Russian believe foreign countries are using the internet against Russian for their own interests (Marechal, 2017, 32). In contrast, populace studies from 2017 show that “88 % of the Russian population use television news as their prime source of information with 65% regarding the news reporters as objective and 51% showing trust in state television as an information source” (Schimpfoss, 2014, 1). Therefore, from an ideological perspective, Russia still controls both the information its population consumes and the perceived credibility of its sources. All in all, this works to bolster the legitimacy of state-sponsored information channels over sources that counter state narratives, mirroring state control tactics similar to their soviet counterparts.

Conclusion

Given the long history of state surveillance, propaganda, and censorship during the Tsarist autocracy and communist regime, structures of disinformation control have had a long legacy in Russia. Despite the disparities in technology mediums and scale between the modern Russian state and the Soviet Union, both regimes share similar characteristics in their information campaigns. Ultimately, both regimes chose not only to censor information, but to produce their own version of the truth, one that glorified and legitimized the party in power. The government and its structures aimed to perpetuate the sovereign state through the weaponization of information, tarnishing the perceived threat of the West in the process.

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