

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE				<i>Form Approved</i> OMB No. 0704-0188	
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1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 19-04-2018		2. REPORT TYPE Master's of Military Studies		3. DATES COVERED (From - To) SEP 2017 - APR 2018	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE The Casualty of Truth				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER N/A	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER N/A	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER N/A	
6. AUTHOR(S) Thomas II, Craig W., Major, USMC				5d. PROJECT NUMBER N/A	
				5e. TASK NUMBER N/A	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER N/A	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) USMC Command and Staff College Marine Corps University 2076 South Street Quantico, VA 22134-5068				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER N/A	
9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S) Dr. Linda Di Desidero	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S) N/A	
12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release, distribution unlimited.					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT Adapting Soviet techniques of subversion and destabilization, today's Russian government conducts consistent, sophisticated information warfare against its adversaries. These information campaigns are successful because the Kremlin has created a mass-media ecosystem where propaganda and disinformation masquerade as legitimate news, obfuscate facts, and erode faith in objective reporting. This complex, adaptive media system consists of state-run media outlets, cyber troops, and online "bots." Three focus areas: 1.) Moscow's current information warfare benefits from a century of Soviet and Tsarist leaders honing the art and science of propaganda, political warfare, and disinformation. 2.) State-run media, RT and Sputnik, produce news coverage that portray Western nations in decline, the US government as corrupt, and sow discord among Russia's perceived enemies. 3.) Russia employs cyber troops to conduct influence operations online to silence Kremlin critics, distract audiences with outlandish stories, and pollute the internet with fake content that makes discovering truth difficult. Russia's manipulation of traditional and social media floods the information environment with junk and conspiracy theories, defames Western leaders, and diminishes public trust in the media. The truth is being discredited, blurred, and drowned while facts are rearranged to create alternate realities that legitimize Kremlin actions on the domestic and international stages.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS Russia; information warfare; propaganda; disinformation; state-run media; cyber troops; social media; Soviet; subversion; truth					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF: Unclass			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT UU	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 40	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON USMC Command and Staff College
a. REPORT Unclass	b. ABSTRACT Unclass	c. THIS PAGE Unclass			19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (include area code) (703) 784-3330 (Admin Office)

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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

THE CASUALTY OF TRUTH

REQUIREMENT FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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AY 2017-18

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Executive Summary

Title: The Casualty of Truth

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Thesis: Adapting traditional Soviet techniques of subversion and destabilization, today's Russian government conducts consistent, sophisticated information warfare against its adversaries. These information campaigns are successful because the Kremlin has created a mass-media ecosystem where Russian propaganda and disinformation masquerade as legitimate news, obfuscate facts, and erode faith in objective reporting.

Discussion: Moscow's mass-media ecosystem is adaptive, self-supporting, and consists of state-run media outlets, cyber troops, and automated algorithms or "bots." Russian leaders insert their narrative into the information environment, then state-backed news agencies run it through their channels, followed by cyber troops trolling the internet dispensing variations of the messages, all while supported by automated software generating social media posts.

Three focus areas provide background on how the Kremlin successfully spreads propaganda and disinformation.

- Moscow's current information warfare strategy benefits from more than a century of Soviet and Tsarist leaders honing the art and science of propaganda, political warfare, and disinformation.
- State-run media like Russia Today and Sputnik produce news coverage that portrays Western nations in decline, the US government as corrupt, and sows discord among Russia's perceived enemies.
- Russia employs cyber troops to conduct influence operations online to silence Kremlin critics, distract audiences with outlandish, dramatic stories, and pollute the internet with fake content that makes discovering the truth difficult.

Conclusion: The Russian government is not only conducting an information war against the West; it is conducting a war on information. Moscow's manipulation of traditional and social media enables it to further its own narratives, flood the information environment with junk and conspiracy theories, defame Western leaders, and diminish public trust in the media to report unvarnished facts. When truth is discredited, blurred, or drowned out, then facts can be rearranged and alternate realities can be created to legitimize Kremlin actions on both the domestic and international stages.

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Acknowledgements

This paper would not be possible without the patience and love of my wife and three little girls. Katie, Wren, Robin, and Lark, you are my inspiration and support chain. Thank you for always desiring to spend time with me and dragging me out of my office every once in a while.

A heartfelt thank you to my brother, Joshua E. Thomas. Your review of my paper provided solid feedback and I appreciate all the suggestions.

Finally, my deepest gratitude and respect for my mentor Dr. Linda Di Desidero. Your guidance and insight turned an average research paper into something worth reading. You have a gift for helping writers pull themselves out of the minute facts and details of a paper while nudging them to craft an overarching narrative that makes a compelling statement. I cannot thank you enough for all your assistance over the year. Command and Staff College students are lucky to have you as a resource.

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Introduction

No amount of propaganda can make right something that the world knows is wrong.
US President Barack Obama, March 26, 2014¹

The idea that truth dispels lies is powerful. It is the standard the West advocates for judging Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns. A false sense of security occurs when democratic nations unearth facts and identify falsehoods in Kremlin narratives. Assuming audiences will reject implausible storylines once a truthful counter-narrative is presented fails to account for the real intentions of Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns.² In today's world where facts are less important than narratives and people feed on emotion rather than discussion, Russia understands truth can be blurred, shrugged off, drowned out, and questioned.³ No longer is the Kremlin trying to persuade foreign audiences that its governance is right; rather, it seeks to create an alternate reality showing Western societies with untrustworthy governments, fake news producing media outlets, and ignorant citizens chiding one another over opposing views. This Moscow-crafted vision suggests all information is tainted, biased, and used for manipulating the masses. The underlying message: no one can be trusted. When truth becomes a casualty, democracies begin to die.

Since 2014, Russia has annexed Crimea, threatened Eastern Ukraine, interfered in a US presidential election, established a second Russian military base in Syria during the country's civil war, and executed war games near the Baltics.⁴ All of these actions involved massive overt and covert information operations that rearranged facts and stressed alternate truths to legitimize Kremlin actions on the domestic and international stages. Like any country, Russia seeks to defend itself and increase its economic growth. Still, Moscow has plans to restore elements of

the Soviet empire around its borders, to re-establish its world power status, and to challenge America's hegemony.⁵ Presently, Russia's armed forces could not win a military fight against the United States and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies. Thus, it relies on information operations to pursue an aggressive foreign policy without engaging in physical war.⁶

Adapting traditional Soviet techniques of subversion and destabilization, today's Russian government conducts consistent, sophisticated information warfare against its adversaries. These information campaigns are successful because the Kremlin has created a mass-media ecosystem where Russian propaganda and disinformation masquerade as legitimate news, obfuscate facts, and erode faith in objective reporting. This self-supporting, complex media system consists of state-run media outlets, cyber troops, and automated algorithms or "bots." Through the manipulation of traditional and social media, Moscow leaders introduce narratives that are highlighted and discussed by media outlets with ties to the Kremlin and then reinforced online via news and social media forums. These messages are delivered to target audiences at a rapid rate, in large quantities, and with reoccurring themes. While Russia conducts information warfare in different regions of the world for various aims, its three overarching goals are to weaken the United States' influence as a world power, cause disunity amongst US allies, and convince Western societies their politicians and media are corrupt, manipulative, and pawns of an elite class.⁷

Soviet Mindset: Propaganda and Disinformation Are Tools of National Power

To appreciate the success of Moscow's information warfare, one must understand Russian President Vladimir Putin's government benefits from more than a century of Soviet and Tsarist leaders honing the art and science of propaganda, political warfare, and disinformation.⁸ Even before the 1917 Russian Revolution, the Bolshevik organizers led by Vladimir Lenin

described world politics as “a continuing state of conflict or struggle.”⁹ This mindset is distinctly different from that of the United States, which believes international relations are conducted differently in times of peace and war. Knowing Russia views foreign policy through a permanent lens of warfare reveals why the methods used to accomplish political objectives could include everything from diplomacy and propaganda to disinformation and assassination. All manner of tactics is viable when waging war for one’s country.¹⁰

In the 1950s, the Soviet government started using the phrase “active measures” to describe overt and covert techniques to influence foreign governments and their populations.¹¹ Examples include manipulation or control of the media, written or oral disinformation, use of front organizations, purchasing agents of influence, secret radiobroadcasts, and support of proxy forces and terrorist organizations.¹² Throughout the Cold War, the Russian Politburo integrated these active measures into everyday government activities and launched long-term campaigns to weaken adversaries.¹³ These endeavors exalted the Communist Party as the premier form of government and condemned perceived deficiencies within democratic nations such as corruption, failing foreign policies, or being an unreliable ally. John McMahon, former Deputy Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, expounds on the Soviet’s devious practices of international relations:

Active measures are an unconventional adjunct to traditional diplomacy. They are quintessentially an offensive instrument of Soviet policy. Specifically, they are intended to influence the policies of foreign governments, disrupt relations between other nations, undermine confidence in foreign leaders and institutions, and discredit opponents.¹⁴

McMahon’s description of an adversary who aggressively and consistently, even during times of reduced tensions or cooperation, wields propaganda and active measures to systematically weaken the United States was provided to the US Congress in 1982.¹⁵ If the past is prologue, it

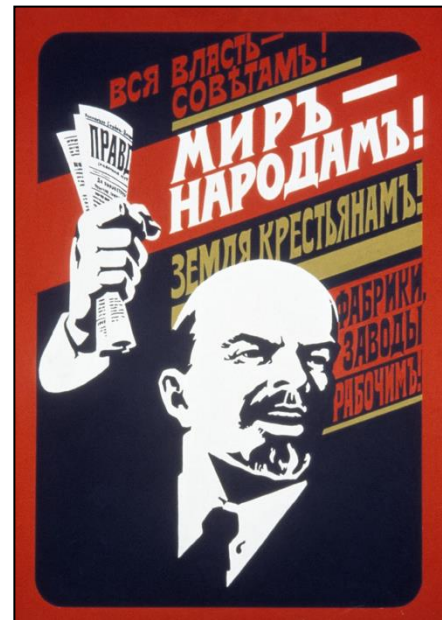
should come as no surprise similar testimonies cautioning Congress of Russia's active measures to subvert the West are emerging again 35 years later.¹⁶

Dezinformatsia, or disinformation, is a phrase coined by the Soviets in the initial years of the Cold War and describes “a non-attributed or falsely attributed communication, written or oral, containing intentionally false, incomplete, or misleading information that seeks to deceive, misinform, and/or mislead the target.”¹⁷ Covert disinformation can take numerous forms such as forged documents, international front organizations, and bribed or blackmailed agents of influence. During the four decades of chilled hostilities, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) conducted these veiled actions to reinforce overt propaganda narratives or policy objectives.¹⁸ Picking up where the Soviets left off, the Russians are leveraging 21st century technologies and communication habits to bring disinformation campaigns into the homes, schools, and businesses of their adversaries. With 95% of North America having access to the internet, the Kremlin has loaded cyberspace with phony news stories, websites, and social media accounts that support Russian rhetoric and divide Western societies.¹⁹

Moscow's current success producing and promulgating propaganda can be traced to the first Russian Communist Party leader Lenin and his underground newspaper, *Iskra* (spark).²⁰ Well before Lenin became head of the Soviet government, the paper's first issue was published in 1900, and was named after a one-lined poem by Alexander Odevsky, “from a spark a fire will flare up.”²¹ This was precisely Lenin's intent: to stoke a class struggle and ignite the population's outrage with the current government. Lenin's skillful application of propaganda demonstrated that tailored communication can inform and educate key audiences, which leads to influence over them. Enlightening the Russian people with propaganda became a cornerstone within the Bolshevik political party. Figure 1 is an example of a Soviet propaganda poster from the 1920s

featuring Lenin encouraging a productive society – “All power to the Soviets! Peace to the people! Land to the peasants! Factories and mills to the workers!”²² The CPSU significantly expanded the role of propaganda from educating their citizens to promoting communism around the globe for their own benefit to agitating, isolating, and discrediting opponents.²³ While today’s Russian Federation employs propaganda and disinformation just as its predecessors did, it no longer intensely labors to persuade international audiences that Russia is good. Instead, it seeks to cause turmoil, alienation, or incite anger in the masses. Once shocked, disillusioned, or united in rage, pockets of the international community may be more willing to support or tolerate Putin’s increasingly aggressive nationalism.²⁴

Figure 1: Soviet propaganda poster from the 1920s.



Source: Getty Images.

Kremlin Mass Media: “Trust No One”

Today’s Russia places a premium on disseminating its message to a world-wide audience. With a \$1.4 billion-a-year propaganda machine at home and abroad, the Kremlin boasts it can reach 600 million people across 130 countries in 30 languages.²⁵ This mass media ecosystem includes TV news networks, radio stations, web sites, bots, and troll farms. The flagship organization pumping out Russian-crafted narratives to the international community is a broadcast network called RT, formally known as Russia Today. Founded in 2005 and headquartered in Moscow, RT has sister news channels in Washington, London, and Paris, respectively called RT America, RT UK, and RT France. Additionally, the station broadcasts in Spanish and Arabic and posts content in German for the RT Deutsch website. This 24-hour news

network aspires to look and act like prominent worldwide media outlets BBC and CNN, but should not be considered an actual independent news agency. RT is at least 99 percent funded by the Russian government, and its leadership is closely tied to and controlled by the Kremlin.²⁶ RT's lack of management transparency underscores an absence of journalistic mainstays; that is, there is no accuracy of reporting, editorial independence, accountability, and diversity of opinions.²⁷ When former US Secretary of State John Kerry labeled RT as Russia's "propaganda bullhorn," he was not using strong enough language to warn audiences of the news network's consistent dealings in disinformation.²⁸

In 2014, two RT on-air news personalities quit the company, citing they could no longer work for a media organization that laced its news coverage with half-truths and lies to twist reality in the Kremlin's favor.²⁹ "We are lying every single day at RT," said Sara Firth, a former RT UK reporter, during an interview with *Time* magazine. She said, "There are a million different ways to lie, and I really learned that at RT."³⁰ When the network is accused of lying or not presenting the whole picture, RT leadership simply responds with, "We're no less balanced or impartial than reports of other news organizations."³¹ RT's website claims its coverage provides a different view of the news and challenges its audience to question convention:

RT creates news with an edge for viewers who want to Question More. RT covers stories overlooked by the mainstream media, provides alternative perspectives on current affairs, and acquaints international audiences with a Russian viewpoint on major global events.³²

Another way to view RT's mission is from the lips of its CEO, Vladimir Putin, who envisioned an international news organization "that wouldn't just provide an unbiased coverage of the events in Russia but also try, let me stress, I mean – to break the Anglo-Saxon monopoly on the global information streams."³³

Putin's drive to deliver different news perspectives takes advantage of Western journalism and pluralism. Democratic societies expect their independent media to present all sides of an issue, so people can draw their own conclusions based on facts.³⁴ With the West's emphasis on balanced reporting, Kremlin narratives, regardless of plausibility, are presented to American audiences by their own news outlets. Thus, the old adage, "there must be two sides to every story," turns into air time or word space repeating Russian messages when in reality there might not be a second side to the story.³⁵ Elizabeth Wahl, an RT America news anchor, was fed up with delivering fraudulent news and resigned on live television at the conclusion of her March 5, 2014, broadcast. That evening, Wahl appeared on CNN discussing her dramatic departure from the Russian news network. She said, "The objective of RT has been to promote Putinist propaganda, to promote the conflict as Putin wants us to see, and to bash the US and make it look like we're the bad guys."³⁶ A year later, Wahl testified before the US Congress about Russia weaponizing information. She shared accounts of her time at RT where stories smearing America were given priority and stories clashing with Russia's foreign policy agenda were prohibited. If outside news threatened to implicate Russia with negative behavior, RT would push alternate stories or conspiracies to obscure facts and confuse the public.³⁷ While RT is pushing, and to some extent fashioning, stories that portray America in decline and disarray, Western media gives voice to Russian propaganda, even if the news networks label it as such.

The second most popular Russian Government financed news agency is Sputnik, which specializes in websites, newsfeeds, radio broadcasts, and a photo database where it sells photos, videos, and infographics.³⁸ Like RT, it engages audiences worldwide using the same pro-Moscow, anti-democratic, and "you can't trust anyone" type narratives.³⁹ Sputnik, named after the first satellite shot into space in 1957, has regional offices in Washington, Beijing, Paris,

Berlin, London, and Cairo. Launched in 2014, Sputnik content is offered in 30 languages with its radio broadcasts available online, and on FM and DAB/DAB+ frequencies.⁴⁰ Dmitry Kiselyev, Russia's most popular TV personality and CEO of Sputnik's parent company, proclaimed "the age of neutral journalism was over" at the Soviet Information Bureau's 75th anniversary. Elaborating further, he said if the West believes Russian news agencies promote propaganda, then Western journalists should look at their own reporting – because it is propaganda too.⁴¹ The charge that American media dispenses propaganda attempts to turn the argument into a mud-slinging "he said, she said" situation. Western journalists are left defending themselves with the ideals they feel differentiate them from state-run media: impartiality, plurality of opinions, willingness to challenge government and business elites, and the ability to concede points after close examination of the issues.⁴² Yet, when Russian and American leaders claim the US media engages in propaganda or fake news, it deteriorates the public's confidence in objective reporting.⁴³ When people believe the media incapable of reporting truth, it weakens the ability of the press to hold governments and influential corporations accountable for their actions. The Kremlin uses this to its advantage.

Sputnik and RT go to great lengths to find, shape, manufacture, and then amplify news that clears Russia of wrongdoing, distorts facts, distracts audiences, and incites anger.⁴⁴ Sputnik Whitehouse correspondent Andrew Feinberg explains in a self-penned article how the Russian news agency's motto, "Telling the Untold," involves reporting stories with untrue narratives designed to show the US government as hypocritical, corrupt, and unfit to condemn other countries' moral failings. During his five months at Sputnik, Feinberg's editor pushed him to ask the press secretary questions that--clearly or indirectly--progressed Kremlin messaging. Feinberg dreaded asking these questions because their topics ranged from nonsense to conspiracy theories.

He recalls being told to ask if President Trump's proposed budget cut, one that included foreign aid sent to Ukraine, was related to "corruption" in Ukraine's government. Feinberg knew full well there had been no credible evidence of such corruption, and the decrease in aid was a result of across-the-board cuts to the State Department and other agencies, but his boss was looking for any scrap of wording that would disparage the Ukraine government. He offers another example of being ordered to ask a Russian-propagandist question: Did the White House or US intelligence community plan to review "new-found data" from a retired professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who theorized the chemical weapons attack on civilians in Syria by the Bashar Assad regime had, in fact, been committed by Syrian rebels? This was after the US Government determined the Syrian military dropped the sarin gas via airplane and Russia assisted with trying to cover up the facts. The only other news agency that gave coverage to the retired MIT professor's theory was RT. Feinberg concluded:

I began to realize that Sputnik's mission wasn't really to report the news as much as it was to push a narrative that would either sow doubts about situations that weren't flattering to Russia or its allies, or hurt the reputation of the United States and its allies.⁴⁵

Propaganda from Kremlin-run media outlets ranges from highlighting Russian culture to promoting Russian foreign policy interests to peddling negative stories that portray the United States in decline and saturated with chaos and crime.⁴⁶ Recent RT headlines show the variety of stories as described above: "Futuristic Moscow Bridge Recognized as International Masterpiece," "'Show of Impotence': Anti-Russia Sanctions Futile, Only Harm US Business – Moscow," and "Record Breaking Drop in Trust for US Institutions, Below China." Americans need to understand that RT and Sputnik news coverage of the United States is going to have either a negative connotation or use political and social issues with loaded language and

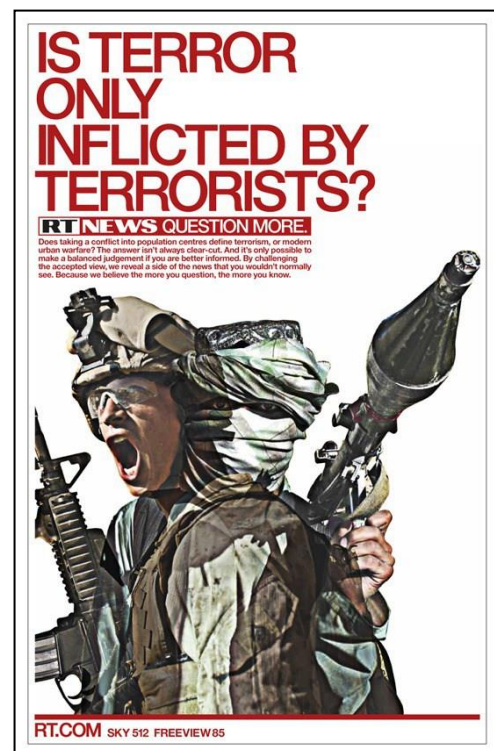
emotionally charged words to pit Americans against each other. There are no stories suggesting America is doing well or making any positive contributions to the world. To help educate Americans that RT is not an independent news organization, but an extension of the Russian government, the US Department of Justice required RT America to register as a foreign agent. Under the Foreign Agents Registration Act, RT America can still broadcast in the United States, but has to label their US coverage as "on behalf of the Russian government."⁴⁷ While this requirement may enlighten US cable viewers of RT's allegiance, it does not affect news segments streamed online or passed around on social media.

Russian propaganda, just like Soviet propaganda, is designed to damage America's credibility as a world leader, diminish its democratic governance, and further divide Americans over political issues.⁴⁸ Common anti-US themes directed to global audiences are:

- the United States seeks power and control to direct the world,
- US involvement in other countries' internal affairs causes global strife,
- the United States is in decline and its days as a superpower are dwindling,
- US foreign policy has failed in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria giving rise to terrorist organizations and states.⁴⁹

Figure 2 shows an RT News advertisement from 2009 that asks audiences, "Does taking a conflict into population centers define terrorism, or modern urban warfare?"⁵⁰ The military figure on the left appears to be a

Figure 2: RT News advertisement campaign from 2009.



Source: Chris Rawlinson | Adspiration.

US Marine and the poster suggests America's actions in the Middle East could be on par with those of the terrorists.

Russian information/disinformation tactics used within America to incite internal conflicts are:

- discrediting the US Government to erode trust in democracy,
- supporting both far-left and far-right movements to agitate tensions across the political spectrum,
- undermining trust in Western media by blurring the lines between fact, fiction, and disinformation,
- using social media as a force multiplier to saturate online forums with Kremlin narratives.⁵¹

Left unchecked, these messages and campaigns can alienate the United States from its allies and breed distrust among Americans and their government, media institutions, and each other. To be considered successful, Russia's methodical use of propaganda and disinformation does not need to cause the crumbling of America like that of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) at the conclusion of the Cold War, it only needs to trigger enough dissension within the country to undermine the West's ability to take action against the Kremlin if and when it decides to pursue aggressive foreign policy objectives.⁵²

Kremlin Trolls in Cyberspace: Reinventing Reality and Reinforcing Russian Narratives

Russia's overt propaganda campaigns are reinforced and spread to the far corners of cyberspace by the pervasive actions of "trolls" (paid social-media users) and "bots" (automated software that collects and/or spreads information online), which leverage social media and news agencies "to plant, disseminate and lend credibility to disinformation."⁵³ With the proliferation of mass media and instantaneous communication, the Kremlin understands the 21st century key battlegrounds for influence are in virtual communities:

In the information age, digital media are becoming the main – and for a growing number of young people, the only – channel for political information and communication. They are the primary space for political activities, where citizens receive political information, shape their political views and beliefs, and have the opportunity to influence the processes related to functioning of power.⁵⁴

Through testing and experimenting, the Russian government learned impacting mass consciousness online required human capital. They enlisted writers, graphic artists, and social media experts to engage in direct dialogue with people on the internet. Known as “Cyber troops,” a phrase coined by the Oxford Internet Institute, these hired personnel use the interconnectedness of social media to reshape reality and manipulate public opinion.⁵⁵

In late 2013, the world was introduced to the Internet Research Agency (IRA) in St. Petersburg, Russia. What began as a modest venture with only enough employees to fill two offices bloomed into a full-fledged enterprise flooding four floors with “social media specialists,” “internet operators,” and “content managers.”⁵⁶ Regardless of the job title, the work was straight forward, pay was generous, and all one had to do was click, like, share, comment, and post information on the topics of the day. IRA employees were required to wash, rinse, and repeat the same ideas on the assigned topic on six bogus Facebook accounts, ten Twitter accounts, and scores of online discussion boards.⁵⁷ The mandated subjects ranged from promoting Russian policies to commercial technology, like the YotaPhone smartphone, and deriding Western and Ukrainian leaders. To help these fake social media accounts appear genuine, political comments were interspersed between posts about cooking, art, and travel. “Our job was to write in a pro-government way, to interpret all events in a way that glorifies the [Russian] government's politics and Putin personally,” said former IRA employee Lyudmila Savchuk.⁵⁸ Hundreds of people work 12-hour shifts day and night to maintain fake social media

accounts; they share posts, memes, and videos promoting the Kremlin's interests in domestic and foreign policy. For 45,000 rubles (roughly \$800 a month), people like Lyudmila “weaved propaganda seamlessly into what appeared to be the nonpolitical musings of an everyday person.”⁵⁹

Russia is home to multiple organizations like the IRA that employ hundreds of people to conduct influence operations on behalf of the Kremlin. Known as “Putin’s Troll Empire,” “The Russian Troll Factory,” or “Kremlin Troll Army,” these cyber troops consistently update their playbook and alter their tactics depending on audience and environment.⁶⁰ Their aim is not persuasion, although they welcome converts; rather, they seek to silence Russian critics, distract audiences with enticing, dramatic stories, and pollute the internet with so much nonsense that it obscures any truth.⁶¹ The troll armies descend into cyberspace using specific interaction techniques ranging from verbal abuse, to confusion with disinformation, and refined argument.⁶² The NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence conducted a study on Russia’s paid social-media users engaging in cyber information operations as a tool of hybrid warfare. The research sought to understand pro-Russian troll tactics and their success on influencing public opinion. The study identified five types of Kremlin trolls: 1) Blame the US conspiracy troll, 2) Bikini troll, 3) Aggressive troll, 4) Wikipedia troll, and 5) Attachment/message troll.⁶³ The trolls are Putin’s foot soldiers in the information war and their goal is to make truth a casualty.

The first set of trolls deals in conspiracy theories that ultimately lead to the United States being responsible for whatever disastrous issue is being discussed. This strategy pushes false stories like Ukrainian fighter jets under US direction or a NATO attack on Putin’s private plane were responsible for the destruction of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 over Eastern Ukraine in July 2014.⁶⁴ These types of conspiracies assist with crowding the conversation, blurring the facts, and

diminishing the credibility of all involved so the audience is left thinking the truth is somewhere between the different narratives. Peter Pomerantsev, senior fellow with the Legatum Institute, says conspiracy theories are a natural fit for Russia's influence campaigns because they act as "a linguistic sabotage on the infrastructure of reason."⁶⁵ Additionally, these trolls peddle older conspiracies originating from non-Russian sources such as the murder of Democratic National Committee (DNC) staffer Seth Rich, which conveniently absolved Russian hackers from being the culprits of the WikiLeaks dump of DNC emails during the 2016 US presidential election.⁶⁶ A key building block of Russian propaganda, conspiracy theory trolls share, tweet, and post lengthy texts online enabling the Kremlin to shift blame, plant seeds of distrust in democratic institutions, and further the narrative that the United States is determined to assert its dominance onto the rest of the world.

The second troll category achieves a high rate of interaction with men over the age of 45 – the "Bikini troll" is appropriately named for the social media user's use of an attractive female profile picture. The idea is straight forward: revealing photos of beautiful women catch the interest of men who then follow the profiles or at least peruse the account's previous posts.⁶⁷ The bikini troll does not overtly preach and push Russian propaganda onto its readers. Instead, it selectively poses questions and muse how examining the circumstances may lead people to see things differently. Comments, like "Surely it is not only Russia that is bad? The world doesn't work like that – maybe we should look...", eventually circle back to the "blame the US" rationale.⁶⁸ Not all bikini trolls feature scantily-clad women; some show pleasant-looking ladies who claim to be "housewives" who are interested in what's going on in the world.⁶⁹ To keep appearances of authentic social media accounts, the trolls post info and link to websites covering mundane subjects like pets and do-it-yourself home improvement projects. Then, trickling into

the thread come the posts of disenchantment with US leaders or American foreign policy. Instances include criticizing President Barack Obama for lacking respect and class when he chews and spits out gum during official engagements overseas and mentioning that America's actions in Syria support terrorists and kill children with military strikes.⁷⁰ Sprinkling negative comments and dissenting opinions against the United States in online social forums hardly seems like a grave threat to America's reputation. Yet, with time and concerted effort, these remarks amass on the Internet where they are recorded indefinitely and lie in wait for new people to discover while traversing cyberspace.

While nearly all bikini trolls bait with an enticing profile picture as they pretend to be the everyday citizen from the country being targeted for influence, there are instances of popular bikini trolls that reveal how this strategy can have a larger impact in an overt or covert manner. Anna Chapman, hailed as the most famous femme fatale of our generation, lived in New York City while working for the Russian Intelligence Service. As an alleged link in a Russian spy ring, the FBI charged her, along with nine other spies, with "failing to register as a foreign agent."⁷¹ After her arrest and deportation from the United States in 2010, Anna parlayed her looks, Russian history, and unique story into heavy news coverage and mini-celebrity status. With social media accounts on all major US platforms and Russia's version of Facebook, VK (VKontakte, meaning "In Contact"), Anna still tweets and posts pictures of herself with updates on her latest endeavors.⁷² In 2016, her social media posts began, ever so slightly, espousing Russian propaganda. She still offered fans a constant line of pinups of herself on the beach, dressed up for a night on the town, or posing with cute animals, but the photo descriptions started mirroring the messages of Vladimir Putin and Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. Notions suggesting "Turkey, the US, everybody else, is at fault," "Russia is innocent and only acts

defensively, if at all,” and “NATO, the US, the UK, the Baltic States, they are all acting aggressively and Russia is defending itself from Western aggression” appeared alongside her photos in skin-tight, midriff leather getups.⁷³ This bikini troll is real and her followers are being exposed to one-sided narratives that emphasize Russia suffering and subtle pleas for understanding Moscow’s actions on the world stage.⁷⁴ Whether or not Anna Chapman is on the Russian Intelligence Service’s payroll once again is a moot point; her current social media interactions engender male admirers while gently toeing the Kremlin’s party line.

If Anna Chapman is the overt, known troll, then Jenna Abrams was the covert, although now exposed, troll who for three years gained notoriety for her ultra-conservative views on immigration, segregation, and political candidates. People fluent in online social networks may suspect other users as trolls if they encounter indications like alluring profile pictures, shallow social media histories, messages in broken English, and constant political posts. Jenna Abrams claimed to be an American girl who spoke her mind and believed in common sense. She ran a Twitter profile, a Medium page (website for writers to publish material), her own website, Gmail account, and GoFundMe page.⁷⁵ Her profile picture (Figure 3), as described by one of her followers, was the “sexy nerd in glasses” look.⁷⁶ At the height of her online fame, she had more than 70,000 Twitter followers and was featured in articles from major news publication across the globe, such as *USA Today*, *The Times of India*, BBC, France 24, *Buzzfeed*, *The New York Times*, Fox, CNN, Black Entertainment Television, and, of course,

Figure 3: Jenna Abrams’ blog and Twitter profile picture.



Source: Archive Today Webpage Capture.

RT and Sputnik. Abrams flew under the troll radar because she had an online history beginning in 2014 and avoided political posts during her initial year. A prolific tweeter, “Abrams’ account built up an image of a straight-talking, no-nonsense, viral-tweet-writing young American woman” who tackled everything from Kim Kardashian’s vanity to the inane issue of “manspreading” on public transportation. Abrams prided herself on being authentic, courageous, and funny.⁷⁷

None of Abrams’ supporters, critics, or the media suspected this “American blogger” was a persona created and run by the Kremlin controlled IRA. In 2016, Abrams’ accounts began using Russian-type active measures to spur the divide on issues like racism and party politics. Both her essay “Why do we need to get back to segregation?” and timely tweet in the midst of arguments over brandishing the Confederate flag launched massive debates across cyberspace. The article argued people of color have gone full circle and chosen to segregate themselves, while the 140-character Twitter post alleged the US Civil War was fought over money and not slavery.⁷⁸ As the 2016 US Presidential election heated up, so did Abrams’ indirect attacks on Hillary Clinton and “common sense” support for Donald Trump. Becoming known as “the darling of the alt-right and the scourge of political correctness in the US,” Abrams’ online interaction with multiple public figures, like former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn, comedian Roseanne Barr, and the previous US ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul, added to her credibility as a real individual expressing her own opinions.⁷⁹ For three years, Russian trolls smartly crafted an online identity that appeared to be a US citizen voicing her First Amendment rights, but in reality furthered Kremlin initiatives to polarize Americans and shape the US political landscape in favor of politicians that Moscow believed were more amenable to Russia’s interests.

The third type of troll from the NATO StratCom study is the aggressive troll, which closely resembles the classic Internet troll. Merriam-Webster defines Internet troll as “a person who intentionally antagonizes others online by posting inflammatory, irrelevant, or offensive comments or other disruptive content.”⁸⁰ While both sets of trolls are known for trying to elicit emotional responses from their targets, the Russian aggressive troll is straight forward with its bellicose comments and there is no ambiguity on the position it is defending. Unlike the traditional Internet troll, who is highly responsive and engages users to drag out any conflict, the aggressive troll is not very responsive, which is most likely because English is not its native language. But what the aggressive troll lacks in specificity it makes up for with insults, threats, and mass postings.⁸¹ Russian-disinformation expert Catherine Fitzpatrick explains how trolls hinder informed debate by using obscene dialogue to distract and discourage any real opportunities to discuss the issues. “If you show up at *The Washington Post* or *New Republic* sites, where there's an article that's critical of Russia, and you see there are 200 comments that sound like they were written by 12-year-olds, then you just don't bother to comment,” she says. “You don't participate. It's a way of just driving discussion away completely,” she adds. “Those kinds of tactics are meant to stop democratic debate, and they work.”⁸²

The synchronization of aggressive trolls’ blunt-force-trauma diatribes may drown out meaningful debate on issues critical of Russia or dissuade the average social media user from joining online discussions, but this tactic does not deter all critics. Prominent Americans like US Senator John McCain, former National Security Advisory Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster, and American actor Morgan Freeman have all been targets of Kremlin disinformation campaigns because of their hardline stances on Russia’s actions on the international stage. It is not

uncommon for Russian leaders and media to lash out against people who publicly condemn their country. The Kremlin troll army follows suit with coordinated defamation and belittling attacks. Senator McCain is very vocal with warnings about Russia's "neo-imperial ambitions" and active-measures "to weaken the United States, destabilize Europe, break the NATO alliance, and undermine confidence in Western values..."⁸³ Over recent years, Russia has repaid McCain's vigilance on the Kremlin's foreign policy by banning him from visiting Russia and attempting to entangle him in several conspiracy theories. Then the aggressive trolls unleash memes and posts falsely claiming McCain met with Islamic State (IS) leader Abu-Bakr Al-Bahgdady to help establish and fund IS in Syria; that Ukrainian cyber hackers discovered videos on McCain's work laptop showing IS executions were staged events; and the Arizona senator's 2017 leave of absence to deal with health issues was a well-timed excuse to lay low due to a "rising scandal" about his involvement in the alleged funding of a Russian-made dossier containing damaging information on presidential candidate Donald Trump.⁸⁴ Whenever Russia believes an individual is critical of its foreign policies, the mass-media ecosystem is used to discredit and damage his or her personal and professional life.

Always monitoring the pulse of US affairs, Russia is swift to exploit preexisting tensions to alter the outcome in its favor. On August 3, 2017, the Twitter-verse exploded with the message #FireMcMaster. The hashtag and accompanying social media posts called for President Trump to fire his National Security Advisor LtGen H.R. McMaster.⁸⁵ This online movement originated in American politics when "alt-right" or alternative right activists took aim at the lieutenant general for firing National Security Council officials who were ideologically married to the alt-right's extreme ideas, which McMaster found unhelpful for devising national security policy.⁸⁶ Despite the anti-McMaster campaign being an internal US issue, Russia jumped at the

opportunity to amplify it to oust a political player who held beliefs directly opposed to the Kremlin's interests. McMaster, at the time, was one of the few people in the White House who believed the United States should support the NATO and European Union (EU) alliances and maintain a strong Western front.⁸⁷ A website project called Hamilton 68, named after Alexander Hamilton's 68th Federalist paper which identified the need for the United States to protect itself from foreign interference, tracks in real time the actions of 600 Twitter social media accounts believed to be associated with the Russian government and used to push Kremlin messaging. With Russia being anti-EU and anti-NATO, the #FireMcMaster movement was fully supported by Russian trolls and bots and helped push the hashtag to the top of the trending topics on Twitter for three days.⁸⁸

A third example of Russian leadership, media, and aggressive trolls exercising retaliation measures to counter and discredit an opposing figure is the case with American icon Morgan Freeman. In September 2017, the Committee to Investigate Russia – a nonprofit, non-partisan resource provided “to help Americans recognize and understand the gravity of Russia’s continuing attacks on our democracy” – released a two-minute film called “War.”⁸⁹ The video features Freeman speaking directly into camera pitching a movie script that details how former KGB officer Vladimir Putin is mid-stride in exacting vengeance upon the United States for the collapse of the USSR. With one of the most distinctive voices in Hollywood, Freeman explains how Putin uses cyber warfare and social media to spread propaganda and false information “to convince people in democratic societies to distrust their media, their political processes, and even their neighbors.”⁹⁰ Freeman states this is not a movie but real life and Russia is waging a war against the United States. Within days of the video’s release, all tiers of the Kremlin’s propaganda machine responded in what appears to be a coordinated effort to discount and belittle

the American actor. Russian Foreign Ministry public affairs representative Maria Zakharova implied the video was bogus and America was laying a foundation to justify possible future actions just as in 2003 when Colin Powell spoke to the United Nations and presented evidence to build a case that Saddam Hussein had stockpiled chemical weapons.⁹¹ Russian TV personalities discussed the actor, providing commentary to explain his involvement in this “Russophobic” project. Considered theories accused Freeman of being overworked, abusing drugs, and a guest psychiatrist’s opinion that the actor’s performance smacked of “a Messianic complex resulting from playing God or the president in several films.”⁹² The aggressive trolls cleaned up with the #StopMorganLie hashtag that accompanied all sorts of tweets, such as “Morgan Freeman: War Whore,” “Morgan Freeman must be severe mentally sick,” and Morgan Freeman is a “fool” who “lies” and needs to “retire.”⁹³ The Kremlin troll army jumped at the opportunity to juxtapose Freeman’s line in the video that “For 241 years, [America’s] democracy has been a shining example to the world...” with images depicting the heinous treatment of Native Americans, African Americans, and Vietnamese villagers during the Vietnam War (Figure 4).⁹⁴

Figure 4: Twitter screenshot looking through the #StopMorganLie thread.



Source: Twitter.

Different tweets using the #StopMorganLie mention Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Iraq, and Libya to underscore the United States’ form of democracy is war and destruction.⁹⁵

The fourth set of Russian troll tactics are called Wikipedia trolls. They simply post information pulled from another source like Wikipedia, history websites, or an online almanac to add validity to their points. The information is normally true, but it is devoid of any context.⁹⁶ For example, when the US government issues a statement like “The Iranian regime is the world’s leading state sponsor of terror,” a Wikipedia troll could respond on social media forums with a factual list, from a reputable website, of the 39 wars and conflicts the United States has been involved with in the 20th century.⁹⁷ Avoiding emotion, this troll usually posts a single comment alluding to US hypocrisy, e.g., “America should check its own history of causing terror over the last century before it calls out another country,” and then presents the selective facts to back up the claim. Without all the amplifying information of why America entered those conflicts, who it was fighting, the reasons for the conflict, and what level of warfare took place, the Wikipedia troll hopes to lure its audience into drawing incorrect conclusions.⁹⁸

Similar to the Wikipedia troll tactic, the final troll examined is called the Attachment troll. Its message is short and includes a link or attachment that urges audiences to follow it. These links lead to additional information and should not be confused with a traditional Internet troll who leaves links to inappropriate content or “virus-program pages” in an attempt to annoy and aggravate users.⁹⁹ Most often, attachment trolls push Russian produced content, such as clips of news broadcasts, YouTube videos made by “real people” on location, or professionally produced articles and blogs. The troll seeks to educate the audience. The NATO study found the detection of Wikipedia and Attachment trolls are more difficult because their “human content,” or actual message, is minimized in favor of pushing more structured, thought-out content. Thus, people with lower education levels have a higher chance of being influenced by these final two tactics because the information pushed contains elements of truth.¹⁰⁰

Moscow's cyber troops use these five trolling tactics to shift blame, engender sympathy, attack critics, present facts, and influence audiences. The trolls engage in a variety of ways, from the obvious to the unsuspecting. While they toe the party line and may indoctrinate the unwitting, the true value of Putin's trolls is their ability to trash the information environment with gobs of disinformation and nonsense. This renders conversations based on facts almost impossible. Moscow is not just waging "an information war, but an actual war on information" itself.¹⁰¹ When information is, or even perceived to be, tainted, manipulated, or obscured, people lose trust and confidence in the institutions involved. Russia does not benefit from the American people trusting or distrusting the Kremlin; Russia could benefit from any strife induced from the American people not trusting their own government.

Conclusion: True Lies

From the beginning of the Cold War to today, Russia's use of propaganda and disinformation to subvert the West is well documented by the US government, academia, and the media. Recently, a CNN reporter examined a Soviet disinformation campaign from 1959 to compare the tactics used by the Russians in the late '50s to those used during the 2016 US elections. Michael Weiss found the goals in both cases were to agitate communities, cause protests, and diminish people's faith in Western values, but Moscow updated its disinformation methods to exploit current technology and communication trends to extend the reach and increase the number of targets exposed to the ruse. Describing the success of these deception operations, the author mentions a line from English poet William Blake's *Auguries of Innocence* – "A Truth that's told with bad intent, beats all the lies you can invent."¹⁰² Incorporating slivers of truth into false narratives increases their plausibility and is a strong tactic; it was mastered by the Soviets and is currently a strategy employed by the Kremlin.

In comparison, there are fewer sources examining how Russia spreads countless lies, without regard to the truth, to foul the information space. *New York Times* reporter Adrian Chen has covered Putin's Troll Army since 2015. In his interviews with Russian journalists and activists, he was informed that the trolls' main goal "was not to brainwash readers, but to overwhelm social media with a flood of fake content, seeding doubt and paranoia, and destroying the possibility of using the Internet as a democratic space."¹⁰³ This strategy is also used by RT and Sputnik. Free from the shackles of facts, there is an unlimited supply of compelling stories consisting of fabricated accounts, dramatic soundbites, and outlandish narratives. When Russia's deputy minister of communication was confronted about state-run media presenting completely false news coverage, his response included no denial of the accusation and a simple statement about the public responding to the presentation, style, and content of the material with increased ratings.¹⁰⁴ With a license to lie, continual attempts to redefine reality, and proclamations that all news networks produce biased coverage, Russia is simultaneously furthering its narratives, crowding the information environment with distractions and junk, and damaging public trust in the media to report unvarnished facts. Democracies are weakened when truth cannot be sorted from fiction.

The American people have a right to know they are targets of manipulation. Their democratic values are under attack, attempts to weaken the US government are underway, and the social and political issues that divide swaths of the country are being amplified to further splinter the nation. The Kremlin's mass-media ecosystem is very effective at spreading propaganda and masking disinformation. Russian leaders insert their narrative into the information environment, then state-backed news agencies run it through their channels, followed by cyber troops trolling the internet dispensing variations of the messages, all while

supported by automated software generating social media posts. Information circulated in this complex, self-affirming network flows both up and down this messaging food chain. Sometimes rumors are spread by the trolls, then picked up by the media, and ultimately become talking points for Russian leaders. It is important to remember Moscow does not distinguish between times of war and peace; information warfare is dispersed across the national instruments of diplomacy, economics, and military as an everyday tool to further its political agenda.¹⁰⁵ The mission of RT and Sputnik is not to solicit universal approval for the Kremlin and its policies, but to sow discord among Russia's alleged enemies.¹⁰⁶ Finally, online troll factories plot and manage several strategies to magnify and exploit rifts in the "American social fabric where it is most vulnerable, along lines of race, gender, class, and creed."¹⁰⁷ This thriving 21st century mass-media ecosystem creates environments where propaganda and disinformation blur the lines between fact and fiction and cast doubt on information sources. When the international community is unable to identify the truth, or has presented findings pushed aside as non-credible facts, Russia is emboldened to carry out its confrontational foreign policy.

In 2016, the *Oxford Dictionaries*' word of the year was "post-truth." It is an adjective that describes circumstances where "objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief."¹⁰⁸ The need for such a word points to a gradual shift in modern culture and specifically the nature of politics. If society is inching toward a post-truth age, where facts are becoming immaterial and narratives are fueled by feelings and preconceived convictions, how is truth supposed to counter disinformation and propaganda? Further complicating the notion that truth dispels lies is the fact there are so many lies to counter. In a sea of competing ideas where everyone is skeptical of tainted or biased information, truth is either lost or incapable of setting the record straight. To believe people will always know the truth

when confronted with an adaptive ecosystem of lies that creates competing alternate versions of reality is naïve and unhelpful. Russia's employment of propaganda and disinformation in massive volumes on a continuous cycle is just as dangerous as bullets and tanks. If the war on information continues unopposed, truth will become a casualty. In that scenario integrity wanes, civic duty is devalued, and democracy decays.

The question of how to halt or counter propaganda and disinformation broadcast on television and radio, printed in newspapers, published online, and steeped into the very conversations on our social networks is an important question. Leaders familiar with Russia's information operations, like former NATO Deputy Secretary General Alexander Vershbow, believe the answer is not responding with more propaganda, but "with the truth and facts." The West, with time and credibility, can set the record straight.¹⁰⁹ Other leaders such as Geoffrey Pyatt, the US ambassador to Ukraine, believe rebutting Moscow's multitude of narratives is too time consuming: "You could spend every hour of every day trying to bat down every lie, to the point where you don't achieve anything else. And that's exactly what the Kremlin wants."¹¹⁰ The two philosophies are not necessarily in opposition of one another, but they illuminate the conundrum of the situation. There is not a consensus among US leadership about the severity of this issue or how to address it. A closer look at the disparity between identifying the problem and implementing a solution can be found in the current National Security Strategy. The keystone document clearly identifies Russia's intent to use information operations and its mass-media ecosystem to subvert Western democracies, discredit the United States' world-power status, and influence public opinion around the globe. However, it also states the United States lacks a concerted plan to combat the problem:

US efforts to counter the exploitation of information by rivals have been tepid and fragmented. US efforts have lacked a sustained focus and have been hampered by the lack of properly trained professionals.¹¹¹

Russia will continue conducting information warfare against the American people. The United States must formulate and resource a whole-of-government approach to address this threat. To continue without a strategy to counter the Kremlin's information war leaves truth in the crosshairs and jeopardizes America's international reputation and domestic tranquility.

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