

12-13-1996

# The Need for a United States Government Capacity to Analyze and Counter Foreign Perception Management Operations: Part II

Todd Levanthal

*United States Information Agency, tleventh@usia.gov*

Editor

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp>

 Part of the [Applied Behavior Analysis Commons](#), [Cognition and Perception Commons](#), [International Relations Commons](#), [Other Political Science Commons](#), and the [Other Psychology Commons](#)

## Recommended Citation

Levanthal, Todd and Editor (1996) "The Need for a United States Government Capacity to Analyze and Counter Foreign Perception Management Operations: Part II," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 6 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol1/iss6/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Bulletin of Political Psychology by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact [commons@erau.edu](mailto:commons@erau.edu).

## International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Title: The Need for a United States Government Capacity to Analyze and Counter Foreign Perception Management Operations: Part II

Author: Todd Levanthal

Volume: 1

Issue: 6

Date: 1996-12-13

Keywords: Perception management

(IBPP Note: This is the second part of a three-part series by Mr. Todd Levanthal who from January 1987 to May 1996 was Program Officer for Countering Disinformation at the United States Information Agency (USIA.) The series reflects only his personal opinions, not those of USIA or the United States Government (USG.) It is presented with only the most minor editing but with extensive commentary by IBPP. The series also reflects IBPP's deep commitment to foster deliberation and--when appropriate--change in science, policy, programs, and informed opinion.)

### The 1991 Gulf War and Afterwards

Iraq has conducted professional disinformation and perception management (PM) campaigns during its initial invasion of Kuwait--through Operation DESERT SHIELD and DESERT STORM--to the present. During DESERT SHIELD and DESERT STORM, Iraq aimed crude disinformation campaigns at "the Arab street." These consisted of claims that (1) Americans were throwing beer cans on the Prophet's tomb and constructing hundreds of churches in Saudi Arabia, (2) Israeli planes were taking part in the Coalition war, and (3) disaffected Muslim Coalition troops were rebelling against arrogant American leadership. There also were many other fabricated claims that greatly resonated with target audiences.

For Western audiences, Saddam Hussein played on the theme of "civilian casualties," using Cable Network News (CNN) and reporter Peter Arnett as his conduit to beam images of civil suffering into living rooms worldwide. The Iraqis placed aircraft on ancient ziggurats to encourage damage to archaeological sites and, in one case, deliberately damaged a mosque in Basra to make it appear as if Coalition bombing had inflicted the damage. The Iraqis also portrayed damage to civilian sites dating from the Iran-Iraq war as if it were caused by Coalition bombing and claimed that a bombed biological warfare site was a "baby milk" factory.

In one adroit PM operation, the Iraqis used Suha Turayhi, a mid-level official at the Iraqi foreign ministry, as a supposed random passerby at a site where CNN was filming damage to civilian areas. She appeared, casually dressed, and spoke to the camera, in fluent English and with great passion, about the "criminal" bombing of Iraq and past American injustices against the "Red Indians" and others. She also reportedly appeared on French television, speaking fluent French.

The Iraqis even produced a half-hour film, which contained false footage of US pilots whom had allegedly been captured--before any actually had been. The elaborate hoax was not shown in the West, where it would have been quickly exposed, but in Mauritania, and perhaps in other countries. Today Iraqi propaganda continues to focus on the civilian suffering caused by United Nations (UN) sanctions, even though these sanctions allow food and humanitarian aid to be delivered to Iraq. There is great continuity with Iraqi propaganda and disinformation themes during DESERT SHIELD and DESERT STORM.

(IBPP Comment: Several modal attitudes of US citizens are easily exploitable by even crude purveyors of PM operations. (1) Belief in the Golden Mean often induces people to split the difference of any

## International Bulletin of Political Psychology

disagreement--no matter how extreme one of the differing positions might be. (2) Beliefs that politicians can't be trusted often induce people to discount any opinion of politicians, regardless of who the politicians are and what the various opinions may be. (3) Belief that in a war information is controlled and often purposely distorted or skewed again induces many people to discount allegations, counter-allegations, or both. A classic psychological text on judgment under uncertainty--which is what may characterize the lives of all people at least some of the time-- is Kahneman, D., Slovic, P., & Tversky, A. (1982.) *Judgment under uncertainty: Heuristics and biases*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.)

### The Continued PM Operations of the Russian Government

All evidence of which I am aware indicates that, far from fading away, the Russian government's intelligence services have continued the PM activities they inherited from their predecessor, the KGB. This development has gone largely unnoticed, however, for two main reasons.

First and foremost, such activities by the Russian intelligence services are no longer being analyzed in a systematic way within the USG, to the best of my knowledge. One cannot hope to understand what one does not examine.

Second, Russian PM operations would logically and largely be aimed at the "near abroad" and former Soviet bloc states, which are necessarily the priority concerns of Russian foreign policy, after maintaining a generally amicable relationship with the US. However, it is difficult for us to appreciate the scope of Russian PM operations in these countries because the personalities concerned are often obscure and the issues confusing. It can be very difficult at best to disentangle truth from fiction and further to discern what inaccuracies might be due to disinformation (deliberately spread falsehoods), as opposed to misinformation (unintentional mistakes).

Moreover, these issues do not directly concern the US. It was much easier to identify disinformation when it was crude, slanderous, and anti-American-- as it was for almost the entire Soviet period. But at present, when most Russian government PM messages involve people and issues that are unfamiliar and puzzling to us, it becomes much more difficult to ascertain the existence of these operations.

If the allegations that the former Prime Minister of Poland, Joseph Olesky, was a Soviet agent are true, they demonstrate the possibilities for manipulation that the Russian intelligence services would logically have open to them after almost a half century of domination of the countries of Eastern Europe and an even longer tenure in the former Soviet republics.

A February 6, 1996 item in the Czech news service CTK stated that the Czech Security Information Service (BIS) was concerned that the SVR (Russian Federation Foreign Intelligence Service) "would publish information in the Czech Republic before the elections that might harm the image of some political parties or their leaders"-- a classic political influence technique. The report added that "the BIS allegedly estimates that about 400 Russian agents and their collaborators are active in the Czech Republic."

It is impossible for me to pass judgment on these charges, but the SVR would presumably have had many opportunities, both past and present, to recruit individuals in the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) and Eastern Europe. It is important to evaluate the possibilities this presents for influencing perceptions and events in these countries and elsewhere.

## International Bulletin of Political Psychology

In early May 1996, the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) claimed that Estonia had been secretly arming Russian criminal gangs, the Chechen resistance, and the Irish Republican Army-- allegations that the Estonian government vehemently denied. Later in the month, the Russian newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* published an article that alleged that Lithuanian officials had conspired with Chechen groups since 1992 and were now cooperating with them to smuggle drugs into Western Europe. The Lithuanian government adamantly denied the charges.

Such claims are typical of the disinformation frequently circulated in the Russian press about Chechnya. The portrayal of nationalist foes of Russia as bandits, drug dealers, criminals, and terrorists is a time-honored tradition in Russian disinformation, dating back to the 1920s or earlier.

SVR PM operations aimed at the US, as in the heyday of perestroika, appear to be conciliatory and alarmist rather than slanderous in nature, which also makes them inherently difficult to perceive. The SVR's continuing activities in this area can be gauged to some extent, however, by examining what has happened to a publication that was a known conduit for Soviet disinformation and PM operations-- *Intelligence Newsletter*.

### *Intelligence Newsletter*

This slick, \$600/year, highly regarded, Paris-based publication is widely viewed as an authoritative source on intelligence activities by journalists and intelligence aficionados around the world. It is, in all probability, a PM operation run by the SVR. *Intelligence Newsletter's* direct predecessor, *Intelligence/Parapolitics*, trafficked in crude, anti-American disinformation, including the Soviet disinformation story that AIDS had been invented in a Pentagon laboratory. *Intelligence/Parapolitics* was largely patterned after *Covert Action Information Bulletin*, which regularly published Soviet disinformation and was founded by Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) renegade Philip Agee, who has been identified publicly as a Cuban/Soviet agent.

In 1988, *Intelligence/Parapolitics* went "upscale," changing its name to *Intelligence Newsletter*, upping its subscription price from \$25/year to \$400/year, and dropping crude anti-American disinformation in favor of more sophisticated distortions. When the Soviet Union collapsed, the publication continued without missing a beat, shifting its focus to more technical topics. The publication's general tone is highly professional, but it (1) reveals a great deal more information about the activities of Western intelligence services than about the Russian services, (2) promotes a heavy reliance on open-source collection, (3) advocates restricting clandestine intelligence collection and covert action, and (4) argues that publics should have the greatest possible access to the latest cryptological technology-- because the imperatives of privacy outweigh those of intrusive states. All these arguments may be made with the purest of motives, but it is perhaps more than coincidental that, if implemented, they would result in a weakening of Western intelligence services.

There is ample reason to believe that *Intelligence Newsletter* is a sophisticated PM operation conducted by the SVR. Yet, its activities have not been analyzed in any systematic way since the end of the Cold War. The overly optimistic and incorrect assumption at that time was that it would fade away. Instead, it has shifted focus and successfully made the transition from Brezhnev's "era of stagnation" through Gorbachev's "new thinking" to the post-Soviet era. And all the while it has been under the tutelage of the same publisher who is also responsible for a series of other newsletters on the Maghreb, Africa, and the Indian Ocean. *Intelligence Newsletter* deserves close scrutiny for the lessons it can offer into current SVR PM operations.

## International Bulletin of Political Psychology

### Kazakh Nuclear Weapons

A fascinating Soviet/Russian disinformation campaign, which has gone virtually unnoticed, occurred during 1991 and 1992. It holds interesting lessons for the future.

By at least early 1991, the Soviets had initiated a disinformation campaign that claimed that if the USSR disintegrated, the Kazakhs might sell some of their nuclear weapons to Iran, and in fact, this might have already occurred. A French journalist heard this allegation from Sergei Blagovolin, head of the military department of IMEMO (the Institute of the World Economy and Politics) in early 1991. How a Soviet non-governmental official would be privy to what would have been a state secret of the highest importance--if it had been true--was not explained.

On December 27, 1991, just days after the USSR was dissolved, this claim surfaced in the media in a flowery version in *Al Watan al-'Arabia*, a newspaper with close links to Iraq and published in Paris. It was now alleged that Kazakhstan had sold three nuclear warheads to Iran.

On January 6, 1992, *Pravda* picked up the story, ensuring its wide recirculation in the West. In the next several months, the claim appeared in *Stern* in Germany, *US News and World Report*, and other mainstream publications, some of which sourced the claim to a non-existent "U.S. intelligence report."

On April 30, 1992, on the eve of the visit of the Kazakh president Nursultan Nazarbayev to the US, a sensational article in *The European* newspaper claimed that the SVR had sent a report to the CIA detailing how Iran had obtained "at least" two nuclear warheads from Kazakhstan. The article added that the SVR document "has been shown to *The European*." The senior writer of the article had previously written for *Bulletin d'Information sur l'Intervention Clandestine (BIIC)*, the Paris-based cousin of *Covert Action Information Bulletin*. And BIIC's English-language supplement was *Intelligence/Parapolitics*, as previously discussed, the direct predecessor of *Intelligence Newsletter*.

In fact, the State Department stated the next day that no such SVR document existed. Russian officials also denied the existence of such a report and characterized *The European's* story as a "multipurpose active measure by Western special services."

After the Kazakhs agreed in May 1992 to give up the nuclear weapons they had inherited after the dissolution of the USSR, the Kazakh nuclear weapons claim quietly disappeared, its purpose apparently having been served.

Despite Russian denials and attempts to point the finger at the West, the evidence indicates that the campaign was a Soviet-initiated and subsequently Russian-run disinformation campaign. The exquisite timing of (1) *The European* article, (2) its author's ties with former Soviet disinformation publications, (3) the initial Soviet floating of the theme in early 1991, (4) the quick Russian pickup in 1992, and (5) its similarity to the Soviet claim during 1990 and 1991 that the breakup of the USSR would lead to "15 nuclear republics"--which was one of the most popular Soviet active measures themes of the time--point to Russian sponsorship of the campaign. The SVR most likely fed the claim to the Iraqis in order to ensure a non-Russian surfacing.

Interestingly, the Russians further fanned the flames of concern about nuclear proliferation during the summer of 1992, when the SVR released its first-ever analytical report devoted to this topic. A

## International Bulletin of Political Psychology

subsequent SVR analytical report in 1993 dealt with the possibility that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization might extend membership to East European and Baltic countries. The SVR opined that this would be counterproductive from the West's point of view because it would strengthen the hand of the hardliners in Russia, an active measures theme that dates back to Stalin's time, if not earlier. Then in 1994, the SVR released an analytical report suggesting, in essence, that the West should acquiesce in the reintegration of the Russian empire. The possibility should be entertained that these SVR analytical reports were not actual documents which had been declassified, but rather deliberate attempts to influence Western policy by concocting reports that allegedly represented SVR views.

(IBPP Commentary: As the political world continues to become more globalized, PM operations which seem to only indirectly involve the primary target, as described in this article by Mr. Leventhal, will become more and more valuable. Two recent psychological works elucidating substrates of PM and political persuasion are Pratkanis, A. R., & Turner, M. E. (1996.) Persuasion and democracy: Strategies for increasing deliberation participation and enacting social change. *Journal of Social Issues*, 52, 187-205; Searing, D.D. (1995.) The psychology of political authority: A causal mechanism of political learning through persuasion and manipulation. *Political Psychology*, 16, 677-696. \*\*\* Part III will cover PM lessons for USG policymakers. (Mr. Leventhal welcomes your comments, criticisms, and inquiries and can be reached at [tleventh@usia.gov](mailto:tleventh@usia.gov)) (Keyword: Perception management.)