Active Measures
The Russian Art of Disinformation

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KGB-manufactured lies are legendary and die hard. Take, for instance, one of the most notorious conspiracy theories regarding the Kennedy assassination. Joachim Joesten's book *Oswald: Assassin or Fall-Guy*, published in 1964, claimed that Kennedy's death was the result of a right-wing conspiracy involving the CIA—a myth famously endorsed by Oliver Stone's movie *JFK*. Today, we know that Joesten's publisher was a KGB front and the author a paid Soviet agent. Or look at the equally enduring rumor that the Pentagon developed the AIDS virus as a biological weapon at Fort Detrick, Maryland. First published on Independence Day in 1984, the tale had been planted by the KGB in an Indian newspaper and spread around the globe.

These and other Soviet "active measures" aimed to discredit the United States and "conquer world public opinion," says retired KGB Major General Oleg Kalugin, formerly deputy chief of the KGB residency in Washington, DC. The KGB even set up a special department, Service A ("A" stood for active measures) for this purpose. But while the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, active measures remain part of Moscow's foreign and domestic policy toolbox. If anything, Russia's contemporary active measures program is more aggressive than the campaign run by the old KGB. In the Soviet Union, each measure had to be approved by the all-powerful Politburo, but intelligence oversight in today's Russia is spotty at best, and the domestic security service, or FSB, operates "absolutely independently and totally unchecked," according to Alexander Litvinenko, a former FSB officer who defected to Great Britain in 2000. Kalugin agrees: "In terms of viciousness, it got even worse" after the Cold War. The "terrorist" campaign of 1999 is a case in point.

In September 1999, a string of bombings in three Russian cities destroyed several apartment houses and cost over 300 lives. The government blamed Chechen terrorists, and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin launched another war against Chechnya, in the process boosting his own popularity and cementing the elite's hold on power. However, on September 22, a resident of the city of Ryazan reported suspicious activities at his apartment building to the police who discovered a bomb in the basement. The next day, police officers arrested two terrorists—who promptly produced FSB identification and were released on orders from Moscow. Eventually, the FSB was forced to admit to having planted the bomb in a "training exercise," but Moscow stubbornly refused to release the records of the so-called "exercise," and the FSB's explanation has been widely contested. "It is impossible to imagine it, even in your wildest dreams," writes Litvinenko in his revealing book *Blowing up Russia*. Were the 1999 bombings acts of state-sponsored terrorism? "Unfortunately, it is credible," says Kalugin. In an eerie but perhaps telling postscript to the tragedy, the liberal journalist and parliamentarian Yuri Shchekochikhin, who was relentlessly pursuing the Ryazan story, apparently died of poisoning in 2003.

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Contemporary active measures are not confined to Russian soil. In fact, the recent controversy over cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammad may well have been choreographed by the SVR, Russia's foreign intelligence service. The evidence is circumstantial but compelling. For one, Kalugin says, the KGB has a history of using Danish journalists to plant disinformation in the Western press. And Flemming Rose, the *Jyllands Posten* cultural editor who commissioned the cartoons in 2005, happened to serve for several years as a correspondent in Moscow where, Kalugin observes, he published a spate of obviously government-sponsored, anti-Chechen articles. According to Litvinenko and journalist Adlan Beno, Rose also happens to be married to the daughter of an ex-KGB officer. This does not *per se* make Rose a Russian agent, of course, but Russian intelligence may well have availed itself of this "in-house" connection to influence the Danish journalist. "This guy may have been used," Kalugin says.

As the cartoon controversy spread across the globe, scores of brand new Danish flags turned up mysteriously all over the Middle East just in time to be set ablaze by enraged demonstrators at internationally televised protests. Predictably, Muslim anger quickly turned toward the West at large. "Some obscure Danish newspaper [prints these cartoons], and all the sudden across the Western world, everybody knows what's it all about. Who organized it? Who ignited the process?" asks Kalugin, identifying a top suspect himself: The SVR. It wouldn't have been the first active measure of this kind. When a Jewish militant went on a rampage at Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem in 1981, the KGB planned to stage an anti-American Muslim rally in New Delhi, says Kalugin. At 5,000 rupees, the proposed operation was ridiculously cheap

Kalugin is not alone in suspecting Moscow's hand behind the recent cartoon controversy. Says Peter Earnest, a former senior CIA clandestine service officer who served in the Middle East: "As a way of fueling anti-western feelings among Muslims, publishing of cartoons ridiculing the Prophet Mohammad in an obscure Danish journal was a no-brainer, if it was done deliberately, particularly if you are prepared to use resources elsewhere to keep the controversy alive and pulsating." And what's in it for Moscow? The Kremlin seeks to compromise and undermine the United States and "make Russia look [like] an alternative" international partner to Middle Eastern nations, says Kalugin. Emphasizing the continuity between Soviet and Russian active measures, he concludes: "It's a tradition, it's not something new. That's important to see the past projected onto the present—and the future."