

Intelligence in Public Media

Subversion: The Strategic Weaponization of Narratives

Andreas Krieg (Georgetown University Press, 2023), 240 pages.

Reviewed by JR Seeger

In *Subversion*, Andreas Krieg offers a discussion of the importance of what he calls “weaponized narratives.” He supports his discussion with three case studies focused on key US adversaries and a country that most Americans would see as an ally (or at the very least a neutral). In all three cases, he walks the reader through a discussion of the importance of influence operations in today’s networked world.

Krieg is a professor at King’s College, London, and a prolific writer, including five books and multiple articles. He is also the working owner of a political risk firm in London. The book reads like a series of lectures on a single theme: the importance of strategic influence operations—what he describes as subversion—in modern warfare. Krieg provides a very specific definition of subversion for the purposes of his discussion:

Subversion is thus a twenty-first century activity that exploits vulnerabilities in the information environment to achieve strategic objectives below the threshold of war with plausible deniability and discretion. (6)

Subversion is not a new topic. In summer 1940, with Europe at war, President Roosevelt dispatched a prominent Republican lawyer—William J. Donovan, future leader of the Office of Strategic Services—to London to assess the United Kingdom’s chances against Nazi Germany.^a Donovan understood one reason for the Nazi successes in Europe was their effective use of propaganda and what he referred to as fifth-column activities in which Nazi allies worked from within the target countries.^b

The war report of the OSS noted that in 1941 Donovan argued,

The Germans were exploiting the psychological and political elements. They were making the fullest use of

threats and promises, of subversion and sabotage, and of special intelligence. They sowed dissension, confusion and despair among their victims and aggravated any lack of faith and hope.^c

Throughout the Cold War, the USSR conducted subversion operations through worldwide KGB active measures, and the United States responded in kind initially through a CIA effort known as the Office of Policy Coordination and, later in the Directorate of Operations. According to Krieg, the key difference in today’s world is the integrated nature of communications, or as he calls it, the twenty-first century “mediatization” of the information environment. By that he means the diverse, high-speed media platforms citizens and leaders use to receive and share data. This new environment means that subversion is transmitted by multiple means and, more importantly, can be transmitted to specific, targeted audiences. While another of Krieg’s books, *Surrogate Warfare*, focuses on the purely kinetic aspects of warfare, in this book Krieg argues for the centrality of subversion in modern warfare:

[S]ubversion constitutes a means of warfare that, despite its primary effect not being kinetically or physically violent, can and does generate spillover effects that should be considered physically violent. When weaponized narratives mobilize people to take action in the physical domain through protest, sabotage, or riot, then the secondary or tertiary effect of changing peoples’ will is violent. (9)



a. See JR Seeger’s review of *Need to Know: World War II and the Rise of American Intelligence*, by Nicholas Reynolds, in *Studies* 67, no. 1 (March 2023).

b. The first use of “fifth column” is usually credited to General Emilio Mola Vidal, Nationalist coup leader during the Spanish Civil War.

c. Strategic Services Unit, Office of the Assistant Secretary of War 1947, *War Report of the O.S.S.* (Walker and Co., 1976), 6–7

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The early chapters of *Subversion* focus on what the author calls the “sociopsychological” aspects of influence operations. Krieg’s discussion considers the interaction between behavior and how individuals and groups see the world. Most US social scientists would call this a discussion of culture rather than “sociopsychology.” This is a small and relatively unimportant academic distinction. In sum, Krieg views how the target audience sees the world and sees itself as central to the way an audience will respond to a message. When an adversary designs a subversive message, a successful message must operate within the “sociopsychological” environment with two specific goals in mind: to influence decisionmaking in a specific direction or to create sufficient doubt/unrest to make decisionmaking nearly impossible.

The subsequent chapters look at three different case studies: Russia, China, and the United Arab Emirates. In each, Krieg reviews subversion operations from a six-step process: orientation, identification, formulation, dissemination, verification, and implementation. Orientation is the process of determining the objective of the subversion operation. Identification and formulation address the design of the message based on both the goal and the sociopsychology of the target. Dissemination can be through different methods, but the method(s) must be consistent

with the target audience. Verification involves the techniques designed to measure of the level of influence. When the previous five steps are completed, implementation can begin.

While Krieg’s research might resonate with some intelligence practitioners, one important detail stands out. In his review of the three target countries, he found that along with a familiar effort on news media, social media, and front companies, all three states have worked hard to influence modern US and European think tanks that serve as informal but critical advisers to policymakers. This is especially the case with the UAE lobbying efforts in Washington with the goal of framing UAE’s regional policies post-9/11 as “counterterrorism” when, in fact, they were more about regional rivalries.

Subversion is essential for any member of the Intelligence Community. Krieg’s case studies are backed with extensive research, and his discussion of the specific details of how a subversion operation takes place is useful, both to those defending against adversary efforts and those who design influence operations in support of US foreign policy. While subversion is by no means a new idea in great power conflict, the complex fusion of media and modern psychology as described by Krieg makes for disturbing but important reading.



The reviewer: J.R. Seeger is a former CIA operations officer.