

The CIA's 1951 Document Comparing American and Soviet Cold War Propaganda, "Similarities" and "Resemblances"

Agency memo found 33 similarities between Voice of America and its USSR counterparts

By [Alec Shea](#)

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In 1951, as the Cold War was intensifying, the CIA decided to see how Voice of America radio broadcasts into Eastern Europe compared with Soviet efforts. In [a remarkably candid document](#), the Agency critically assessed the similarities and differences between U.S. and Soviet propaganda.

Today, [VOA claims](#) that it was founded during the Second World War to provide "Unbiased and accurate information." The CIA officers assessing VOA in 1951, though, saw the service as essentially similar to Soviet propaganda, going so far as saying that most Americans would be surprised by the similarities between the two.

The resemblances between Soviet and American propaganda are great--much greater, probably, than most Americans realize. They derive from two principles: (1) the universality of

The document proposes that similarities could be the result of opposing countries imitating the propaganda put out by their rivals, and even posits the existence of an "international propagandists culture" that tended to produce similar techniques.

The similarity is in fact so great that it may well be due to something more than the realistic and universal exigencies of propaganda; it may also be due partly to mutual imitation as between hostile propagandists. A convergence-tendency is historically demonstrable; Communist propaganda is more like ours than it was in 1934, and ours is more like that of Moscow than it was in 1949. Hitler's propaganda was much closer to the general pattern in the 1930's than it was in the 1920's. The evidence suggests that there is such a thing as an international propagandists' culture, which like all cultures tends to accept its own assumptions uncritically, without empirical test. It may well be that some of the "principles of propaganda" which are more or less implicitly taken for granted by propagandists throughout the world would be found to be false if they were subjected to experimental study. For example, it may be that both we and the Russians underestimate the propaganda values of modesty and reasonableness.

The document includes a list of 33 main similarities between Soviet and American propaganda, including the "impression of objectivity," "avoiding obvious lying on tangible facts," blurring distinctions within enemy camp," and "not dignifying opponent's position by quoting it."

1. Similarities

a. Same values invoked:

- 1) Peace, friendship
- 2) Democracy
- 3) National independence
- 4) Class justice
- 5) Economic welfare
- 6) Truthfulness
- 7) Anti-Nazism
- 8) Individual freedom (not stressed, but approved by Moscow)

b. Same propaganda principles:

- 1) Clearness
- 2) Simplicity
- 3) Factualness
- 4) Selection
- 5) Slanting
- 6) Impression of objectivity (e.g., in tone of voice)
- 7) Avoiding obvious lying on tangible facts
- 8) Distortion primarily in the intangibles (motivation, etc.)
- 9) Not attacking entrenched prejudices
- 10) Not dignifying opponent's position by quoting it
- 11) Distinguishing between rulers and people in enemy nations
- 12) Including audience with self in a larger unity
- 13) Not criticizing audience
- 14) Not grossly flattering audience
- 15) Pyramidal structure; a few broad themes and many subthemes
- 16) Blurring distinctions within enemy camp
- 17) Never (or almost never) giving credit to enemy
- 18) Never (or almost never) criticizing self or allies
- 19) Little or no means-end analysis
- 20) Conforming to policy of own government
- 21) Few, if any, facts without clear propaganda implications
- 22) Little on the atom bomb
- 23) Little specific material on military strength

However, it was in identifying where the two styles differed that the Agency saw the most strategic value.

1. Each of them raises a question as to propaganda policy. Wherever the Soviet policy or emphasis differs from ours, it may or may not be more effective than ours. An inventory of differences should provide a number of starting-points for examination of what propaganda methods are most effective.

2. The differences may be clues to the mentality of the Soviet propagandist, to his values, his beliefs, his mental limitations and vulnerabilities. These limitations and vulnerabilities were outlined in the data of the present study may serve to round out the picture and underline certain aspects of those papers.

Some of the differences that the CIA identified included "Soviet Conflict-Mindedness" ...

C. DIFFERENCES

The observed differences between VOA and Moscow propaganda can be grouped under eight main headings:

1. Soviet Conflict-Mindedness

This term means not necessarily desire for war, but a tendency to assume a state of conflict as inevitable and to see everything else in terms of it. If there is a single key word in Soviet thinking and writing it is the word "struggle." Every economic effort, every attempt at negotiation, every honest difference of opinion between blundering human beings tends to become struggle-ized as it passes through the distorting lenses of the perceptual process in the Soviet mind. The person with different views is seen as a deadly enemy, and the way to peace is seen not in a meeting of minds but in a steel-like determination to expose the enemy's deceptions, to resist his aggressions, and perhaps, by implication, to destroy him if possible.

To some extent this type of thinking is characteristic of all nations engaged in the merciless game of power-politics. It has also been accentuated in our own country during the past few years, under the double impact of the atomic bomb and the danger of Soviet aggression; and there are some who fear that we have already become "as bad as the Russians" in our conflict-mindedness. The evidence of propaganda analysis, however, suggests that we still have a long way to go before reaching that point. The specific differences are as follows:

a. Greater frequency of denunciation. In average number of denunciatory words or ideas per minute, Soviet broadcasts greatly exceed ours. They fairly bristle with words like aggressor, warmonger, monopolist, imperialist, reactionary, incendiary of war, lackey, slander, treacherous. This is perhaps partly a mere matter of style. Our broadcasts are now decidedly hard-hitting on the whole, but in a more factual-sounding way and with fewer denunciatory epithets per sentence. It may well be that our style is fully as effective in smearing the enemy as the Soviet style is. But even if it is only a difference in style, that has some significance. It is as if the Soviet propagandists, taking their version of the conflict for granted, are unaware of the fact that they may have to prove their version to an unconvinced listener, and of the fact that he may be repelled by a frequency of verbal mud-slinging out of proportion to what he now believes to be realistic.

which was directly opposed to "Greater American Fact-Mindedness"

4. American Fact-Mindedness

The Soviet assumption in general seems to be that those who are in the wrong are necessarily wrong because of inherent evil or ill will rather than because of misunderstanding. This could be merely a matter of sound propaganda policy insofar as it applies to the "rulers" of the opposing camp; the need for basic simplicity probably necessitates painting them as wholly evil and calculating in their wickedness. There is, however, a strong tendency to apply it also to the followers in the opposing camp. The idea of the Western masses being misled by their capitalist rulers does occur in Soviet propaganda, but it is remarkably rare.

[Changes in the National Defense Authorization Act](#) this year ignited fears that VOA could be marketing itself to an American audience. If it does, the American public may get a direct demonstration of exactly what the "international propagandists culture" looks like today.

[Read the complete report here.](#)

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