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Joe Cheravitch

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ABSTRACT

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ABSTRACT

From disinformation to cyberattacks, Chinese and Russian military units' digital operations have gained increasing international attention over roughly the past decade. Less studied are some of these units' historical antecedents, the military-political directorates of the Soviet military and Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) of the 20th century. The political officers, or commissars, who staffed these directorates played a large role in shaping the development of psychological warfare beyond the Cold War and into the information age. This article summarizes this history and demonstrates its relevance to modern PLA and Russian military psychological warfare.

KEYWORDS:

China Russia psychological warfare information warfare propaganda covert influence psychological operations

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Introduction

Throughout the past decade, several military intelligence services have been implicated in digital operations to influence political processes, demoralize enemy troops on the battlefield, and exacerbate socio-political tension abroad. The most notorious example remains Russian military intelligence's (GRU) campaign to influence the 2016 US presidential election. In December 2023, Taiwan's intelligence service claimed that Base 311, a Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) unit tasked with psychological warfare, would 'sway public opinion via news outlets and social media' ahead of Taiwan's most recent elections.¹ Rapid advances in information communications technology distinguish contemporary cyber-enabled influence campaigns from the leaflets and loudspeakers used in psychological warfare in the previous century. Nevertheless, elements of the past are apparent in contemporary PLA and GRU digital activities. Both, for example, reorganized much of their capabilities in the mid-2010s, pairing the inheritors of Cold War-era psychological warfare with hackers and finally integrating the technical and psychological aspects of modern conflict that officers had long discussed. Additionally, the idea of 'disintegrating' a conventionally superior adversary is as much a motivation behind modern psychological warfare as it was for the early Soviet state and Mao Zedong's peripatetic revolutionary government during the 1930s.² For instance, in describing the PLA's contemporary approach to psychological warfare, Elsa Kania claimed, 'The PLA's Three Warfares is not merely an abstract concept, but rather reflects a systematic approach to "disintegrating enemy forces" that has deep historical antecedents and continued relevance'.³

This article compares the history of the Chinese PLA and Soviet militaries' psychological warfare with the current doctrine and operations that characterize the activity of their descendant organizations. Military organizations are the focus of the article, though non-military actors conducting foreign propaganda are occasionally raised to illustrate the divisions of labor surrounding this work. Their history continues to influence how the GRU and PLA approach their current offensive cyber and online influence operations in

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