

The Founding Father of Fake News

During the Cold War, Communist spy Lawrence Martin-Bittman spread disinformation and false facts throughout the Soviet bloc and beyond.

BY SHARON MCDONNELL

Lawrence Martin-Bittman's job was to create fake news by any means possible.

As a master of disinformation for the Czech Communist Party in the 1950s and '60s, planting false news reports, committing forgery and engaging in "dirty tricks" were all a part of his Cold War arsenal—straight from the pages of a spy thriller.

Martin-Bittman died in 2018 at age 87, a retired Boston University journalism professor. But in an era of so-called "fake news," both real and imagined, the life of this former Communist spy and propaganda maven is especially illuminating.

As a professor in his later life, Martin-Bittman taught students how to recognize lies and bias in the news in classes on misinformation and international news-gathering organizations. Under his real name Ladislav Bittman, he authored 11 books on the subject. Among them are *The Deception Game* and *The KGB and Soviet Disinformation: An Insider's View*, and in 1986 he founded and served as director of BU's Program for the Study of Disinformation. Called one of the "great experts of the Communist bloc, the Soviet bloc, on disinformation" by retired CIA senior official F. Mark Wyatt, Martin-Bittman also explained Soviet disinformation techniques in a film for the U.S. Information Agency, testified before Congress and gave speeches at



Martin-Bittman in later life, standing in front of some of his original artwork in Rockport, Mass.

the Department of State.

Martin-Bittman found his adopted homeland naïve. "It was too hard for Americans, especially journalists and scholars, to accept that deliberately false stories could be planted in our news media," he once told *The Boston Globe*, asserting that Americans struggled to recognize and acknowledge "the systematic use of deliberately dictated information to manipulate an adversary's decision-making elites."

MAKING A MANIPULATOR

At age 15, Martin-Bittman joined the Communist Party. In 1954 he started

working for the Czech intelligence service after earning a degree in journalism and international law from Prague's Charles University. A decade later Martin-Bittman was named deputy commander of the service's disinformation division. Operations took him to Germany and Austria. As press attaché at Vienna's Czech Embassy he worked with Communist spies as well as journalists in Western Europe to present false facts and gather information in order to poison the relationship between the U.S. and Western European nations.

In one specific scheme, he helped

stir up anti-American sentiment in Indonesia. In 1964, by blackmailing an Indonesian ambassador caught in a compromising situation with female agents, Czech intelligence (with support from the KGB) was able to feed the Indonesian president forged documents and false reports about a supposed CIA plot to assassinate him and for U.S. and British troops to invade his country. In *The KGB and Soviet Disinformation*, Martin-Bittman wrote that the operation succeeded beyond his wildest dreams. The Indonesian President raged against the U.S. in speeches, Indonesian press (in the pay of Czech and Soviet intelligence) inflamed the public and Radio Moscow repeated the charges to listeners. Enraged mobs attacked U.S. offices in Jakarta, and any hope of American influence in the region was lost.

Another scheme that same year, dubbed Operation Neptune, was designed to embarrass and erode trust in West Germany by planting false “Nazi” documents. After learning that a TV documentary crew was planning to bring up identified objects from the bottom of a lake near Prague, Czech intelligence planted chests stuffed with blank documents in the water. Pretending to be a government official, Martin-Bittman took the film crew to the lake (he was an expert diver). The chests were fished out and given to Czech intelligence personnel to “examine them for explosives.” They then replaced the blank papers with false evidence that ex-Nazis were employed as spies for West Germany.

Those are just two examples of Martin-Bittman’s ingenuity. Czech intelligence also plucked the signa-

tures of American diplomats off of their Christmas cards and affixed them to false documents, and even established a brothel with help from the KGB to catch German politicians.

DESTINED FOR DEFECTION

The invasion of Czechoslovakia by Hitler’s Germany in 1939 had initially tilted the country toward the Soviet Union. Feeling betrayed by Western countries, supposed allies who didn’t step in to defend them, Czechs came to regard the Soviets as the ally to rely on. But it took a second invasion to change the course of his life.

He was horrified by the Soviets’ 1968 incursion into Czechoslovakia, which ended the liberal reforms of the nascent Prague Spring. Martin-Bittman felt he had spent 14 years working for—and 22 years believing in—the wrong side. He and his wife fled to the U.S., an action that resulted in a death sentence from Czech authorities for treason. After a year of debriefing in Washington, D.C., the couple moved to Massachusetts. Casting about for work, the ex-spy opened an art shop and tried being a roofing salesman. Both endeavors fell flat.

Through the art shop, Martin-Bittman met the chairman of BU’s journalism department, David Manning White, who hired him as a lecturer in 1972 after hearing his extraordinary story. White had one condition: that the former Communist teach a class on the history and principles of American journalism. Martin-Bittman freely admitted he knew nothing about the topic. But, as research was his strength, the ex-spy enthusiastically plunged forward. “It was like getting a brain mas-

sage,” he joked to “Silver Mines,” a public-access TV series that profiled the rich lives of local seniors. “I was two lectures ahead of my students.”

After Communism toppled in one Soviet Bloc country after another in the early 1990s, the new Czech Republic lifted Martin-Bittman’s death sentence in 1994. That meant he could visit his homeland for the first time in a quarter-century. In response, he threw a party.

LESSONS FROM A LIFE OF LIES

Think about all the damage Martin-Bittman and his cohorts managed to cause before the internet existed. Today’s online world makes it even easier to disseminate disinformation. As a reader, it’s important to approach headlines and text with a healthy sense of skepticism and an eye toward bias, considering the source publishing (and providing) a news item and looking for objective sources. Similarly, for writers, blogs and social media offer platforms by which opinion can be framed as fact. No matter the venue, the onus is on us to make sure the information we present is thoroughly reported and truthful.

In today’s fast-paced world of fake news, not every story on Facebook holds up to scrutiny. “Facts” aren’t always what they seem. In the hands of those with an agenda, they can be molded to suit a mission, and dangerous indeed.

Sharon McDonnell (sharonmcdonnell.contently.com) is a freelance travel and culture writer, author and writing consultant in San Francisco.