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The New York Times slanders left-wing opposition to Biden as “Russian propaganda”

The American intelligence agencies are at it again, instigating anti-Russian propaganda in the US media with reckless and entirely unsubstantiated claims that Moscow is intervening in the 2020 presidential election. As in previous such campaigns, going back to the 2016 elections, the leading role in the McCarthyite chorus is played by the *New York Times*.

A front-page article in Wednesday's print edition of the *Times* carries the headline, “Facebook and Twitter Warn of Russian Meddling.” The article which follows makes it clear that the source of these allegations is not the two social media giants, but rather the FBI, which was itself acting on behalf of the intelligence apparatus as a whole. The *Times* adds, “Two people familiar with the matter said the influence operation was first detected by American intelligence agencies, including the National Security Agency.”

The article is written in the heavy-handed style typical of these slightly revised handouts from the CIA: ominous assertion is piled upon ominous assertion, without any evidence or even attribution. Thus, “Some American officials are worried about a broad effort by Russian intelligence to use fringe websites, spread conspiracy theories and sow division in the United States.” And again, “Russian intelligence agencies have used allies and operatives to place articles, including disinformation, into various fringe websites.”

The nature of the “influence operation” is remarkably slight. It supposedly consists of a news site called Peacedata, which has published critical commentaries on US and world events from a standpoint to the left of the Democratic Party, including criticism of the Biden-Harris presidential ticket. The site went live in October 2019, reprinting articles first posted elsewhere, and only began publishing new English-language content in March 2020.

The site allegedly solicited written contributions and paid small sums for articles, hiring American freelancers who were themselves genuinely opposed to supporting Biden for the Democratic presidential nomination because of his long right-wing record. Peacedata even used a public job board for its hiring, certainly unusual tradecraft if the publication was a project of the Russian secret police.

According to the *Times* account, the Russians were “in the earliest stages of building an audience for the fake news site on Facebook. The group had created 13 fake accounts and two pages dedicated to promoting Peacedata, according to Facebook. The pages were followed by 14,000 people.”

This paragraph is worth considering since it entirely demolishes the suggestion that the US intelligence agencies, Facebook and its security consultant Graphika have uncovered a major threat to American democracy, one so significant that it must be highlighted on the front page of the *New York Times*.

According to a detailed report by Graphika, Peacedata published a total of 500 items in English in about nine months, of which 25 concerned the US elections. Pages promoting the site had a total of 14,000 followers. How could this represent a significant factor in a country where 150 million people are expected to cast ballots in 2020?

And what about the timing? It is only 60 days until the US presidential election. The first ballots for early and absentee voting are about to be mailed out. Yet the alleged Russian propaganda operation is only “in the earliest stages of building an audience.” Were the “Russians” not in possession of a calendar? Did they perhaps think the election had been postponed to 2021?

It should also be pointed out that while the *Times* howls about this supposed threat to the US presidential election, the US government routinely intervenes on a truly massive scale in elections all over the world, promoting candidates subservient to its interests, and using all the methods in the arsenal of the CIA and State Department to rig outcomes, overthrow governments and suppress—frequently with bloodshed—those who come into conflict with Washington.

The US intelligence agencies claim, without any public substantiation, that the Peacedata site was set up by the Internet Research Agency, an organization based in St. Petersburg, the former Leningrad, which was accused of playing a similar role in the 2016 US elections. However, the Peacedata site has denied any connection with Russia and called the Facebook claims “smears and baseless accusations.”

In any event, the fact of the matter is that the site is being denounced for publishing information that is true, and reflects the views held by large sections of the US population.

Four years ago, the claim was that the Internet Research Agency had encouraged pro-Trump and anti-Clinton sentiment through Facebook advertising, going so far as to organize a handful of anti-Clinton protests in the United States, attended by Americans unaware that they were being manipulated by Russia.

Even if one accepted the US intelligence agencies’ account—despite a complete absence of evidence—the suggestion that this operation had any significant impact on the election, let alone was responsible for Trump’s victory, was preposterous. The scale of this effort was tiny: by one estimate, the group spent a total of less than \$100,000 on Facebook ads, a drop in the bucket in the \$5 billion US election campaign.

While these claims of Russian interference in the US elections are preposterous on their face, there is a sinister and deeply reactionary side to the propaganda by the *Times*—echoed in the *Washington Post*, National Public Radio, the television networks, and the rest of the capitalist press.

The *Times* article is a desperate attempt to discredit and witch-hunt left-wing opposition to the Democratic Party. They are extremely fearful of any criticism from the left, under conditions where the Biden-Harris campaign is openly appealing for right-wing support, parading former Republican officials and operatives of the national-security state before the Democratic National Convention, and now seeking to compete with Trump in law-and-order denunciations of protests against police violence.

The *Times* article cited claims that in the material appearing on Peacedata, “topics ranged from racism in the United States to the environment and capitalism. Several articles argued that Mr. Biden would move the Democratic Party too far to the right.” By that standard, of course, Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren and half the other candidates for the Democratic

presidential nomination would be found guilty as well, before they decided to endorse Biden and paint him in “progressive” colors.

Ominously, the article warns, “Researchers are also concerned about homegrown disinformation campaigns ...” What, precisely, does that term comprise? Potentially, it is anyone in America who disagrees with the “facts” as presented by the military-intelligence apparatus and its mouthpieces like the *New York Times*.

The greatest absurdity is the suggestion that America would be a Garden of Eden if it were not for the Russian serpent. This is under conditions of mass protests in the streets against police killings, homicidal right-wing violence against demonstrators, a death toll from the coronavirus pandemic approaching 200,000, and nearly 30 million people thrown out of work—a massive and unprecedented social, political and economic crisis.

It was absurd to claim in 2016 that social discontent in the United States was the product of Russian “fake news.” Today, in the midst of the greatest social crisis in nearly a century, such claims are even more ludicrous.

The *Times* is making the age-old argument of every exhausted and reactionary ruling class: social protest is the product of “outside agitators.” And the logical conclusion is that these agitators must be silenced and suppressed.

In that context, it is highly significant that the report by Graphika, the security consultant for Facebook, makes several mentions of the *World Socialist Web Site*, pointing out that many of the articles published by Peacedata were actually reposted from the WWS. Such reposting is hardly unusual, as the WWS is a major source of news and commentary cited by publications all over the world.

The *Times* makes no mention of this fact, because that would violate the de facto ban on referring to the WWS in the US corporate media. It would also undercut their attempt to label Peacedata a Russian puppet, since the WWS, as the central organ of the world Trotskyist movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International, is the most consistent opponent of the right-wing capitalist government in Moscow, headed by the former Stalinist KGB agent Vladimir Putin.

It is no exaggeration to say that the arguments put forward by the *Times* and its media allies amount to the abrogation of the First Amendment. They are reviving the methods of McCarthyism, blaming Moscow for the social divisions that are exploding in the United States. Meanwhile, the Democratic Party, for which the *Times* serves as the main media voice, is engaged in a vicious assault on the democratic rights of its left-wing opponents, blocking ballot access for the Greens and the Socialist Equality Party.

For the Democratic Party, the fight against Trump is, as Obama said, an intramural scrimmage. The two factions have differences over foreign policy, which at times become heated. But they share a common class outlook. The watchword for the anti-communist bourgeois liberals, today as in the 1950s, is that the enemy is on the left.

3 September 2020