

Demetri Kofinas: 00:00 Today's episode of Hidden Forces is made possible by listeners like you. For more information about this week's episode or for easy access to related programming, visit our website at hiddenforces.io and subscribe to our free email list. If you listen to the show on your Apple Podcast app, remember, you can give us a review. Each review helps more people find the show and join our amazing community. And with that, please enjoy this week's episode.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:48 What's up, everybody? Today's episode of Hidden Forces was recorded on Monday, May 25th, which means that neither Thomas Rid or I had a chance to comment on the protests and riots that have ensued since the death of George Floyd. That said, the subject of this conversation—disinformation and political warfare—is highly relevant to the situation we all find ourselves in today. If we take a step back and we look at any one of the many news stories that dominate our attention, what do they all have in common? They're all stories. That's obvious, you might say. It's a tautology. I know it is, but it's also a profound realization when you stop to think about it.

Demetri Kofinas: 01:29 Stories are by definition delivered to us secondhand. Their sourcing is curated by media organizations and social media platforms whose biases, incentives, and exigencies often put them in an imperfect alignment with the truth. The situation has only become more complicated today. The disintermediation of the media industry, the elimination of gatekeepers, and the proliferation of highly sophisticated third party ad platforms has led to a radical reorganization of the media environment, and with it, a profound increase in misinformation.

Demetri Kofinas: 02:19 It's within this new environment that a very old practice has found a new home. The art of disinformation and political warfare, what the Soviet's dubbed active measures, represents one of the most urgent threats facing Western societies today. And I say Western, but I should really say open, liberal, and democratic societies which rely on a vibrant and free marketplace of information from which to source ideas, validate facts, and challenge arguments. You're going to learn today that active measures are a form of systematic deception. They're adversarial, and they're meant to change our behavior.

Demetri Kofinas: 03:01 And in some cases, elicit a very specific response. They exploit existing contradictions and drive divisions where they already exist, and they are active, which means we are often interacting with them and we don't even know it. Most importantly, active measures require our active participation in the story making process. Without our credulity, they are powerless, and it is our credulity, in fact, our tenuous relationship to the truth, that makes these measures so powerful. In the first half of this conversation, we focus on historical examples of active measures.

Demetri Kofinas: 03:43 Things like the 1959 Christmas Day swastika campaign, the AIDS hoax, the neutron bomb, and nuclear winter, perhaps the ultimate example of a KGB active measure that completely alarmed Western countries with science that no one in Moscow ever believed was true. In the second half, we spend our time on conspiracy theories, including a conversation about claims of Russian interference in the 2016 election and how our hysterical reaction to those interferences were themselves a perfect example of how active measures operate in practice.

Demetri Kofinas: 04:22 For those of you who remain interested in this topic after today's conversation, I highly recommend you check out my guest's book. The research that went into "Active Measures" is mind-boggling, and Thomas did an amazing job of making so much of that primary source material available online, for free, and I've incorporated some of it into the rundown to this week's episode, which is available to subscribers, along with the transcript and part two to our conversation at patreon.com/hiddenforces.

Demetri Kofinas: 04:57 And with that, please enjoy this week's episode with my guest Thomas Rid. Thomas Rid, welcome to Hidden Forces.

Thomas Rid: 05:11 Thank you. Thanks for having me.

Demetri Kofinas: 05:13 How are you?

Thomas Rid: 05:14 I'm very well. Yeah, I'm very well. Just settling in here in my home studio, which I've built for this purpose.

Demetri Kofinas: 05:20 Really? When did you build the studio?

Thomas Rid: 05:23 Oh, you know, when the pandemic hit and my book was coming out, I thought, I really need to invest in some hardware.

Demetri Kofinas: 05:29 That was smart of you. You'd be surprised at how many people haven't considered to do that, or they don't even think it's important.

Thomas Rid: 05:37 My work is a little techy. I went to this one tech conference obviously online and some people shared pictures of their setups at home. And I saw that some people would hook up their DSLR cameras, the Canons and Nikons, as a webcam, which is really cool.

Demetri Kofinas: 05:56 That's great. We have a whole system in place too for our guests to help them set up a sound system or a sound solution because I hate crappy audio, as I've talked about. But I know you have limited time today, so I actually want to get right into this conversation because your book is one that I looked very much forward to reading. Every so often I'll go through Amazon and look at upcoming books, and yours was one of those books that I eyed. And it's about a subject that I find so interesting.

Demetri Kofinas: 06:25 Before we get into it, and the book is Active Measures, as I mentioned in the introduction, give us a little bit about your background for those who aren't familiar with your work.

Thomas Rid: 06:34 Yeah. I'm a professor. I teach at Johns Hopkins University in Washington, D.C., and my work is at the intersection between computer security and political science. So, I'm a political scientist by training, but did a fair amount of technical training as well. So, it's cybersecurity and intelligence history, what I do.

Demetri Kofinas: 06:56 So you've actually written three other books or four other books? Four other books.

Thomas Rid: 07:00 Yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: 07:01 Yeah. One of them might be your PhD thesis, the one on War and Media Operations.

Thomas Rid: 07:05 That's right.

Demetri Kofinas: 07:06 But there's also a really interesting book that you've written on the history of cybernetics, which I know a little bit about from having studied information theory, but that's fascinating. What got you into writing a book about cybernetics?

Thomas Rid: 07:17 I got this question a lot about where this term cyber comes from, and sort of the standard response was it comes from science fiction from William Gibson's book Neuromancer, which I found a little too... It was intellectually shallow as a response. And of course, if you start looking and trace the history of the term as well as the thinking behind the early internet really, then you end up with a history of cybernetics in the 1940s. So, I went back and told that story.

Demetri Kofinas: 07:52 So how does your current book, Active Measures, fit in the progression of your previous works? What led you to write it?

Thomas Rid: 07:59 So when the 2016 election interference started to happen, the Russian interference in the US general election, when it became public in June 2016, I was in the middle of investigating down in the technical weeds a Russian espionage campaign that started in late 1996 known as Moonlight Maze to people studying this kind of thing. The history of cyber operations is different from other histories in the sense that usually when you go further back in time, you see more details. The archives open.

Thomas Rid: 08:40 But in computer network intrusions, the opposite is true because the digital forensics disappear when you go back in time, and there are no archives open yet. So, I wanted to change that. And I've successfully tracked down an old commander control machine that was used by these early Russian operators in the 1990s in London, and I was doing an in-depth analysis with colleagues on the malware that we found, the old malware, and the old sort of hacking behavior. And when I was in the middle of doing that, the election interference hit. So, I was like, I had this puzzle that I suddenly confronted.

Thomas Rid: 09:22 I clearly was able to understand some of the technical forensics and the evidence there was very strong. It was clear, we're looking at a Russian disinformation operation literally from day one, but the history I didn't understand. So, I thought, okay, I just have to understand the history of what is going on. So, I started right there.

Demetri Kofinas: 09:43 Well, the title of the book is very interesting. Some people may not know what active measures are, so we probably might want to begin with a definition, but the subtitle is The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare, which almost feels to be self-negating in a way. Maybe you can tell our listeners, those who don't know what active measures are, what are active measures and why did you choose this as the title of the book?

Thomas Rid: 10:07 Yeah. Active measures is a term of art that emerged in the Eastern Bloc and Soviet intelligence community in the 1960s and throughout the entire Cold War

was how they refer to disinformation operations. And it's actually quite a helpful term because it asks two questions right there. The first is how do these measures become active and how do you measure them.

- Demetri Kofinas:** 10:35 I think most people are familiar with the idea of disinformation, and one of the things that I came to realize when reading the book is that active measures or disinformation in practice, and this is again a term that's not... I don't know if you just mentioned this, but it's a term that's no longer in use. But this is not really necessarily about creating false information. You had this great interview you did over three hours I think with Ladislav Bittman, who was a Czech intelligence officer. He described it as systemic deception.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 11:06 He also described it as sticking a pin into the ass of an elephant or something like that. Again, this idea of systematic deception with either a specific goal or a general objective to impair the enemy by exacerbating existing contradictions within the society. Can you elaborate on that a little bit?
- Thomas Rid:** 11:29 Yeah. So, the early idea that was developed in these operations... And this really dates back a century, but became articulated in these bureaucracies, as you just pointed out in the 1950s and '60s. Disinformation is not about just forgeries and producing fake documents. It's about tapping into existing fears, into existing prejudices of the target, whatever the target is, it can be a society, it can be only one individual or an organization, and then gently exacerbating those concerns or nudging them along into a specific direction where you want them.
- Thomas Rid:** 12:08 And sometimes you may decide as an offender, as an operator to use completely accurate information. Sometimes you will introduce some forgeries along the way in order to achieve that effect. But the goal always is to exacerbate something that already exists. I think this is a point that Bittman in that interview that I think you listened to comes back to again and again.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 12:34 Well, there are some great examples both in Europe with I'm thinking specifically of the Christmas Day 1959 swastika campaign to exacerbate existing tensions in the German public and in Europe around the Nazi past and antisemitism, and also in the United States with America's history of racism and how that's been used consistently. And I wonder, to even broaden the debate, are examples things like the Tea Party movement, Black Lives Matter, Me Too, things like these?
- Demetri Kofinas:** 13:08 Not that these themselves were operations, but that within these what could be entirely organic movements in their genesis are active operations by foreign intelligence agencies like the GRU or the former KGB or other countries that seek the destabilize in this case the United States?
- Thomas Rid:** 13:33 So let's stick for a moment with the example that you just brought up, the Christmas 1959 antisemitic campaign, because it's easier. In my experience, it's easier to talk about distant examples where you'll see a similar dynamic with a little more emotional detachment. As soon as we talk about the present, the risk is that people immediately will...
- Demetri Kofinas:** 13:54 Which is also what makes them so fertile as well.

Thomas Rid: 13:57 Exactly.

Demetri Kofinas: 13:58 Exactly.

Thomas Rid: 13:59 So the 1959 antisemitic campaign where a KGB operation smeared and gobbled swastikas in Jews altar, synagogues and graves and cemeteries across Europe, even in the United States, that operation, of course, tapped into existing antisemitic sentiments in Germany and elsewhere because it was a real problem. I mean, the Holocaust was only 14 years in the past, so that precisely was what made the operation so powerful. Not that it invented something new, but that it tapped into an existing trauma. And it's no coincidence in my mind, although I'm obviously...

Thomas Rid: 14:40 I don't know for a fact, but I don't think it's a coincidence that the engineer, the mastermind behind that operation was an Armenian officer who I think understood the value or rather the effect of trauma from his own history. So even today when somebody on Twitter mentions that campaign from 1959, because it hasn't been fully exposed as a campaign until today, I mean, I'm collecting all the evidence that accumulated over the years in the book, even today people would react on Twitter by saying, "Well, obviously Germans would react that way. I am German."

Thomas Rid: 15:12 They would say, "Oh well, obviously, Germany had an antisemitic problem. They didn't need KGB for that," which is precisely the point.

Demetri Kofinas: 15:21 What do you mean it's precisely the point? Can you elaborate on that?

Thomas Rid: 15:24 Well, the point is Germany was deeply traumatized by the Holocaust and, of course, still had existing neo-Nazis, leftover Nazis, actual Nazis in the 1950s and '60s. Some of them in positions of power still. And the KGB understood that pouring oil into this fire would only lead to another explosion of outrage, and it did. So, the notion that Germany has an existing problem there and doesn't need outside help, that is the raw material for a successful operation.

Demetri Kofinas: 16:04 In your mentioning of Ivanovich Agayants, I think his name was, the Armenian, and his understanding of the sensitivity of the issue of antisemitism and how it could be wielded effectively in a disinformation or active measures campaign, I think about just how artistic many of these campaigns have been, the ones in your book. This isn't something that can be easily taught, and the people behind these types of operations are extremely creative people. Can you speak a little bit to that, to what kind of person or what kind of organization is required to be effective in these types of campaigns of active measures?

Thomas Rid: 16:47 Yeah. That is something that I found just fascinating because active measures, if you like at the development forgeries and of getting under the skin into the subculture of your adversary, this is a skillset that is required to be good at this, that runs counter to a military mindset. And bear in mind that many of the organizations executing disinformation operations have a military culture. For example, Stasi, a foreign intelligence HVA who was really good at this, they had an internal rank system and military training.

- Thomas Rid:** 17:27 The question is really how do these organizations that value discipline, orderly conduct, and also an intelligence collection traditionally values very factual reporting and careful language of estimative probabilities. All this runs counter to a culture of forging and running disinformation operations. So, it appears that they internally needed to find people who had a high risk appetite, as well as the almost artistic...
- Thomas Rid:** 18:03 The mindset of a creative writer who really has to study his or her subject first, and then understand how a specific culture works, and then start writing and sort of penetrating it, and ultimately publishing something under false pretenses that has a corrosive effect.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 18:22 There are many contemporary questions to explore in this conversation, but before we do that, I think it might be helpful to actually go through some historical examples, because in fact, the book is a history of disinformation. And actually, that kind of raises the larger question, which is how do you write a history of disinformation? How do you go about researching a book like this and feeling confident that you're not actually contributing to advancing a body of misinformation or to perpetuating an active measure?
- Thomas Rid:** 18:52 Yeah, that's a super tough question, and of course, also a fascinating one for an author. How do you write a book about disinformation without disinformation in it? And what I did is two things that I just would point out. One is I'm showing my work. You just quoted from this interview that you heard with Bittman, which you can find in my end notes. You can literally pull down the entire interview and listen to it. You can find many primary source documents that I work with from various intelligence archives in the end notes. The full document there as well.
- Thomas Rid:** 19:27 So everybody can check the source documents. I had to work with the best source documents available and also be very open about the limitations of some of the firsthand accounts that we have in memoirs from defectors, for example, because some are less reliable than others. And then the other thing I did is I sometimes included... I made it part of the story how I discovered the story and sometimes explicit highlight sometimes in the text, but mostly in the end notes the limitations of certain pieces of evidence that we have.
- Thomas Rid:** 20:02 So for example, I described the story of how Der Spiegel, the news weekly in Germany, reported out the story that NSA, the National Security Agency, spied on Angela Merkel's cellphone. And there were doubts around that story and some doubts remain, although it appears to be factually correct. And I decided that I wanted to tell the story of how Der Spiegel reported it and what the limitations were. So, it's a bit of a convoluted way of telling a story sometimes, but I think it's necessary to...
- Demetri Kofinas:** 20:36 Can you tell our listeners who may not be familiar with this what you're referring to?
- Thomas Rid:** 20:40 Yeah. So relatively early after the Snowden leaks, the story broke that the NSA, the American spy agency, eavesdropped on the phone of the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, mobile phone. And it became a huge point of contention between Obama and Merkel and for German-American relations.

Der Spiegel, the German magazine, reported out the story, broke the story, but they never quoted Snowden as a source. So, there remained that question, where does the story come from? How did they get their hands on the story?

- Thomas Rid:** 21:18 Nobody contested the voracity of the story, but the question was, why now and how did they find it if it's not from Snowden? So, the suspicion arose in the intelligence community in the US and elsewhere that this could be an active measure, a true one. Accurate information was given to this newspaper, but nevertheless, an active measure. Now, we don't have actually strong evidence that it is an active measure, but the fact that some influential believed it might have been one is something that I made part of the story, which I think is... And why? Because it shows the corrosive effect of active measures.
- Thomas Rid:** 21:59 If we can't explain something, then, of course, immediately we begin to doubt and potentially see foreign interference. That in itself is part of the history of disinformation.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 22:11 How does that relate to the accusations of Russian hacking in the US election?
- Thomas Rid:** 22:17 Yeah. Sorry, I'm jumping back and forth between old examples and new ones.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 22:20 Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt you. I only mentioned that. We can go back to it. I only mentioned that because our reaction to that story was so integral to the effect in this of any campaign and that's why I brought it up. We can go back. I'm sorry. Go ahead.
- Thomas Rid:** 22:34 No, no. I mean, it's a great question you're raising, and indeed there's a parallel. When I wrote this book, I became at some point quite concerned that I could become ultimately what is often called a useful idiot. That's literally a technical term that you find in intelligence archives. I didn't want to become somebody, a useful idiot, who inadvertently helps an adversary achieve an objective years after the fact, if I tell a story in a way they want it to be told.
- Thomas Rid:** 23:05 And I thought to myself, okay, there are two ways I could become a useful idiot, either by understating the effect of an operation or by overstating the effect of an operation. So, when I look at 2016, the different components of the election interference, I was acutely aware that we, collective in the United States especially, tend to overstate their effectiveness, the effectiveness of the Russian interference. And I didn't want to run into that trap.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 23:34 And you think that's generally true, we tend to overstate, generally speaking?
- Thomas Rid:** 23:38 Well, of course, we have to be specific, and I am very specific in the book. Would you like me to go into some details?
- Demetri Kofinas:** 23:44 Sure. Thomas, your book is fantastic. It's full of so many incredible stories. The ones that stuck out most to me, interestingly enough, besides the swastika story, which I mentioned because it was exemplary for what we discussed earlier in terms of how it exacerbated internal contradictions or frictions, were stories were relevant to my own life that I remember, like the neutron bomb. I may not have remembered the actual campaign against the neutron bomb, I was born in 1981, but I do remember the neutron bomb. I remember that term.

Demetri Kofinas: 24:16 I also remember nuclear winter, which is a fascinating story because it involved people like Carl Sagan as potentially useful idiots in a way, and the AIDS story. The AIDS story is fascinating. So, feel free to mention whatever you like because there are too many things for us to get through in the course of this interview.

Thomas Rid: 24:33 Yeah. The history is richer than I had anticipated myself when I started the book obviously, but let me just turn the question around to you because I think you really did your homework for this conversation. What is the story that surprised you most?

Demetri Kofinas: 24:50 What story surprised me most? Maybe the nuclear winter story, but it's a tough question. You're putting me on the spot, but maybe that story.

Thomas Rid: 24:59 Yeah, the nuclear winter story, just to tease out the gist and the morale of the story in the book, is fascinating because there's this theory that takes hold in the early 1980s that a nuclear war, global nuclear war, a major nuclear exchange between the superpowers could kick up so much debris and dust and smoke into the atmosphere that there could be a regional or potentially a winter-like scenario on the entire Northern Hemisphere, potentially even the entire planet as a result of this war, meaning temperature would drop and the entire climate would be messed up for years.

Thomas Rid: 25:39 The question is where does that theory come from? And what's fascinating about the story to me is that this is one of the examples where this theory organically emerges in the scientific community in the United States. But then at some point, the Russian nuclear scientists, climate scientists, and ultimately the Russian intelligence community want to jump on the bandwagon and want to shape the theory because it serves their interests ultimately, because it sort of makes a nuclear war appear as complete folly. And what happens is that the KGB convinces itself...

Thomas Rid: 26:19 We only have one really good source for that, but still it's still a very plausible situation that this was actually accurate. That KGB convinces itself that it successfully shaped the conversation about nuclear winter, and there is no good evidence to support that narrative. So, it's really a case of self-disinformation. KGB self-convinced itself that it was more successful than it actually was. And the story is so important because this is a pattern that we see again and again in the history of these intelligence operations.

Demetri Kofinas: 26:52 Why is that important that they convinced themselves?

Thomas Rid: 26:57 Because it shows us that running disinformation operations at scale when a large bureaucracy does it creates a blowback effect. So, let me give you another example. So, there's this mid-1960s operation, 1964, that I described in the book with a lot of archival evidence. I have all the Czech case files. It's called Operation Neptune. And Operation Neptune was playing out 19 years after the Holocaust, after the end of World War II, and the goal of the operation was very clear. We know the goal.

Thomas Rid: 27:31 The goal was let's try to do an operation to force the German Parliament, the West German Parliament, the Bundestag, into extending the statute of limitations for war crimes so that German war criminals from World War II, from

the Holocaust wouldn't get away with genocide, with war crimes. And the Czechs said, "Okay. Let's publish files, Nazi files, to restart the conversation, to pour oil into the fire of this conversation in West Germany about Nazi war crimes and put pressure on the Parliament through public outrage."

- Thomas Rid:** 28:09 So they ran this operation that involved dropping Nazi files into a lake and have them discovered by the press. You laughed?
- Demetri Kofinas:** 28:18 Yeah, no. It was a funny story. It was a very funny story. Bittman talked about this one as well in your interview, I think.
- Thomas Rid:** 28:24 Only briefly, yeah. It's an insane story. It's one of the most cinematic stories. I also have like 300 pictures or 500 pictures of the story in the released...
- Demetri Kofinas:** 28:34 I think you also published an article on the internet with this story, and there are some pictures as well, which I included in the rundown.
- Thomas Rid:** 28:41 Yeah, thank you for this, in Wire Magazine. It turned out nice. They included many of the pictures or a few. But the takeaway point here is the assessment that they did internally. So, the Czechs... The Germans end up extending the statute of limitations. This actually happens a few months after the operation concludes. And the Czechs write a memo to KGB in Moscow and KGB responds, essentially slapping them on the back saying, "Great. You did it successfully. The Germans changed their law. Well done." But I can tell you as a German historian, that's just not what happened.
- Thomas Rid:** 29:21 Every family in Germany, almost every family, people had this conversation with their parents and grandparents. What did you do in the war? People were coming to terms with the Holocaust. I mean, the word Holocaust itself got established a little later as a major term that everybody knows today. The notion that the small Czechoslovak operation, this was like pouring a bucket of water on a moving glacier. But if you only look at the bucket of water, you think you actually moved the glacier with it. So that is basically what the Czechs and KGB did. They were kidding themselves.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 29:57 So let's actually go back to nuclear winter because I think we got slightly sidetracked or I sidetracked us, because it is. You probably hit the nail on the head. It probably was the most interesting or surprising story for me. Maybe not the one that resonated the most with my contemporary experiences. That might have been the AIDS campaign, but the nuclear winter was what was the most surprising. So, I'm not sure where we left off exactly, but can you continue on that one?
- Thomas Rid:** 30:24 Yeah. The nuclear winter story is that you had this organically emerging theory of nuclear weapons potentially causing climactic change on a major planetary proportion scale, and KGB then trying to shape the story and make it more extreme, and then convincing themselves they were successful and internally claiming credit for the nuclear winter story. So that's why I mentioned the Nazi documents in the '60s. It's the same logic. It's an agency taking credit for something that happens almost completely without their own influence.

Thomas Rid: 31:08 That really relates back to what we already talked about in the Bittman interview. If you're affecting something that is already existing, an existing fear, an existing theory, an existing narrative, if you're running an active measure to affect that existing thing, then, of course, the question is how do you measure it? How do you measure your own effect on something that was already happening? And the answer is it's very hard to measure. You don't have a measurement device, as Bittman said in the interview.

Thomas Rid: 31:40 And because you don't have a measurement device, you create this temptation for a bureaucracy to simply claim that they had success because they can. I mean, because you can't measure success, you also can't really just say there's no effect. That's the mirror image. It's just vague by definition. So that is the great temptation I think, and it's within that temptation that we are discussing the 2016 election interference.

Demetri Kofinas: 32:11 Disinformation itself feels a lot like yanking on the threads of a sweater or of a tapestry of an image that's woven into fabric, but active measures are simultaneously the rethreading of that fabric. And it feels like it gets to a place where it's hard to distinguish between the active measure, as you say, and the truth. And this kind of brings us to a larger question, which is that when you engage with this material enough, you begin to really question the nature of truth itself. And for the most part, the book is really not...

Demetri Kofinas: 32:50 It's not an intellectual reflection as much as it is a reflection through the recounting of all these different stories and the research you did, but you did mention this a bit towards the end. How important or how prominently does this dilemma feature in your view?

Thomas Rid: 33:07 Yeah. That's, of course, the toughest question. We change our relationship to objective facts to the truth. I mean, I had this experience when I was writing the book that I would go through archival material of active measures, like yearly plans from Stasi or the Czechs or mostly the Bulgarians, actually, Bulgarian intelligence, state security, and they would discuss their annual plans with KGB. And many of these operations I didn't know about. And there were books that were mentioned, so I would google the book. Go to AbeBooks and there it was. And then I would buy the book.

Thomas Rid: 33:48 And then I had it in the mail, and nobody had seen this book as a forgery before. Some of these books were like reviewed in high profile... I mean, one of them was reviewed in The Guardian and in The Washington Post, and it was a KGB operation. I mean, it was an unpleasant sort of weird experience to again and again find these forgeries that hadn't been discovered as such. But of course, the...

Demetri Kofinas: 34:13 Is that the book you're referring to actually was reviewed? It was reviewed by The Times or one of the major publications?

Thomas Rid: 34:19 Yeah. So, there was a fake memoir of a Chilean General who got assassinated by Pinochet.

Demetri Kofinas: 34:25 Right. And similarly, isn't the same thing the case for The Protocols of the Elders of Zion? A similar story in the sense that it was originally a product of misinformation?

Thomas Rid: 34:35 I mean, The Protocols of the Elders of Zion are just made up obviously, but I'm not talking about that in the book. I just want to make that clear. It's not part of...

Demetri Kofinas: 34:46 Maybe it was an interview that I heard, but I mean, it was just another example in my mind of... The reason I brought up The Protocols is because it's still active, right? In a sense, right? It's still something that is actively believed and discussed.

Thomas Rid: 34:58 Yeah, of course. I mean, there are many examples like that. There are still people out there who believe AIDS is an engineered bio weapon.

Demetri Kofinas: 35:04 Right. That it was developed at Fort Detrick by the US government, right?

Thomas Rid: 35:09 For example, I mean, that was a conspiracy theory that was making the rounds already before the Soviets picked it up in the early 1980s. Again, one of those examples where you have an existing organic narrative at the fringes, in the case, far-left activist circles in New York and Boston, and then it gets picked up and amplified and developed by an intelligence agency.

Demetri Kofinas: 35:34 Thomas, I mentioned to you right before we started recording that I used to do a television show on the RT Network. I ended the program before or right around the time that the war in Syria began, but before it really got crazy. And it was not a political program, but every morning we would have editorial meetings where we would have to let the director of the news department know what we were putting out there. And I remember just one distinct moment right now as you're talking where I had a very specific framing and he was questioning it. And I was like, well, what do you mean?

Demetri Kofinas: 36:13 His response was something like, how do we know? This very sort of open-ended question, how do we know? I distinctly remember on multiple occasions there was this tendency to want stories to openly question established narratives and clearly it was not with the best intentions. And there's a kind of embedded cynicism in all of that. You know what I mean?

Thomas Rid: 36:39 Yeah. I mean, absolutely. The temptation, of course, is to... I mean, it's good to ask tough open questions. I had to do this all the time, to question my beliefs when I was writing this book because it's like, okay, if I don't do that, if I don't really radically question, for example, a narrative that I convinced myself that it is accurate, then I would fall into that trap. But, of course, the trick is to always be open to new evidence, and ideology can conflict with facts in interesting ways.

Thomas Rid: 37:10 I tell that story in the book of specific forgery that the East German newspaper Neues Deutschland puts out I believe in 1957 where they described how big oil Rockefeller is influencing Eisenhower's foreign policy. And it's a forgery. They made it up. I mean, they, meaning some regime forgers for the East Germans. But the way they introduced the forgery is so fascinating. They say, "This letter

spells out in gleaming clarity how capitalism works." And for them, the forgery was even better than the truth.

- Thomas Rid:** 37:46 Obviously they don't admit that it is a forgery, but in their own mind the forgery was even better than the truth because they knew what was really going on. So, they came up with a fake letter that just spelled out what was for them a truth. It's like a painting that is depicting a landscape in the perfect light conditions or something like that, which is obviously just a painting, but really the beauty that you capture is real. And it's that type of ideological self-convincing that I think we can still see today.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 38:17 Another phrase that came up... I don't know if this is a phrase I've read anywhere, but it's something I've written, I've used in writing, and it is that these types of campaigns or efforts, they use truth in the service of lies. And they're incredibly cynical in that way. There's another instance of a story in your book, I don't remember which one it was, but where the measures were found to be false or fake, but the KGB I think it was that was perpetuating these, doubled down by basically saying, "Well, this is exactly what you would expect. I mean, it completely fits the MO.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 38:56 So what difference does it really make if it's fake or not fake? This is exactly what we all know is going on anyway."
- Thomas Rid:** 39:02 You're referring to two different quotes from far-left peace magazine in the United Kingdom that were sent a forgery by KGB or a war plan that looked like a forgery, and they said, "Well, this could be a forgery or it could be real, but it doesn't really matter. Because even if it's a forgery, the reality looks like it or something like it. So, this is really scandalous." And that is exactly what I had in mind, so thank you for bringing that up. I think any investigative journalist, any investigator in the law enforcement context, intelligence analysts, or scholars like myself, you occasionally...
- Thomas Rid:** 39:37 If you're really honest with yourself, you see that temptation in yourself. You're writing something. You're doing research, and you selectively look for something that will support your existing narrative. It's a very deep-seeded temptation that really, we all have, but it's very treacherous. And as people who are professionally sort of going after facts, we have to train ourselves to value the facts that contradict what we already think most... These are the most valuable facts, the ones that falsify our thinking, not the ones that confirm our thinking.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 40:15 Absolutely, and also that fit into existing narratives that are perpetuating themselves in the public mind. It's a lot easier to get traction in the media today when you insert a story into an existing narrative, into a preexisting framing, especially one that is, no pun intended, active, that is particularly potent in the moment. Another thing that I thought a lot about when I was reading your book was how these types of measures exploit hypocrisies in the body politic of an open society like the United States because America is not...
- Demetri Kofinas:** 40:53 The American military, American intelligence agencies are not the paragons of virtue in every way, and there are many things that our intelligence agencies do covertly that we may not... That they let's say in public would deny. And I think

this is a particular issue for an open society like the United States because these hypocrisies are more evident. They are hypocrisies. Whereas in a close authoritarian society, it isn't necessarily hypocritical to engage in these types of behaviors.

- Demetri Kofinas:** 41:21 So I wonder what you think of that, and maybe the Snowden revelations are a good example to perhaps explore in an attempt to try and understand how this actually works in practice.
- Thomas Rid:** 41:33 Yeah. When I started mentioning publicly the election interference in 2016, I was on the record as one of the first calling it out as what it was. Of course, I got a lot of push back, and among the push back was the argument that, well, aren't we doing just the same thing? Isn't CIA doing the same type of operations that they are doing? So, let's not kid ourselves and just blame the Russians. So, I wanted to be in a position to tackle that argument with the facts, and therefore, decided to look at some early CIA operations.
- Thomas Rid:** 42:08 That's why political warfare is in the title, by the way, because CIA called it political warfare. That's in term of art in the 1950s.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 42:15 So most of these measures were developed and deployed in Germany, between East and West Germany, correct? In the early days.
- Thomas Rid:** 42:23 Yeah. I just put particular emphasis on Berlin because I wanted to tell that story, but there are others as well, but Berlin was the hotspot.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 42:30 So please continue.
- Thomas Rid:** 42:32 If you look what CIA did in the 1950s, you'll see that they were really aggressive, quite good at what they did. Putting out a lot of forged information under false pretenses. But then when you move into the '60s, at some point they become a little more reluctant. They wine down their most aggressive operations in Berlin. Why exactly is really difficult to say, but they do. That we can clearly see in the archives. And they become more concerned also about factually correct information.
- Thomas Rid:** 43:04 And this is in documents and memos that were never designed to be or never written to be published so they're not deceiving us. Read the memos and you get a sense that they're actually trying to put stories out there that are accurate. They do a memoir. CIA publishes a memoir of a defector. Not defector, of a spy, Oleg Penkovsky, a GRU colonel at the time. And he gets executed in Moscow and then CIA publishes the debriefings as a memoir, but obviously nobody mentioned that this is a CIA book. But they take great care to be as accurate as they possibly can be on the content side.
- Thomas Rid:** 43:41 And that's a fascinating little shift that's going on there. As the Soviets and the East Germans and the Czechoslovaks are escalating in the mid '60s, the CIA appears to deescalate the forgery and deception game.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 43:56 So Thomas, I'm going to move the second part of our conversation into the overtime where I want to explore further the role of journalism in active measures and what journalists can take away from this conversation, how they

can get better at recognizing such types of campaigns, what to do in the event that they're past let's say credible information that they can verify, but that which they also know is being fed to them or they suspect is being fed to them by a malicious actor.

- Demetri Kofinas:** 44:30 I do want to talk more about the Russian hack in 2016, also the email leak is a great example of using something that is true for the purposes of foreign intelligence, but with an eye also on the future. I know obviously it's all speculation, but this is so important. We live in such a divided time in the US. For regular listeners, you know the drill.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 44:53 If you're new to the program or if you haven't subscribed yet to our audiophile, autodidact, or super nerd tiers, head over to patreon.com/hiddenforces or scroll down to the summary section of this week's episode and click on the link that sends you to the Hidden Forces Patreon page, where you can continue to listen to my conversation with Thomas, including getting access to the transcript, rundown, and notes to today's conversation. I hope you guys will join us. Thomas, stick around. We're going to move the second of our conversation into the overtime.
- Thomas Rid:** 45:29 Sure. Sounds good.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 45:31 Today's episode of Hidden Forces was recorded in New York City. For more information about this week's episode or if you want easy access to related programming, visit our website at hiddenforces.io and subscribe to our free email list. If you want access to overtime segments, episode transcripts, and show rundowns full of links and detailed information related to each and every episode, check out our premium subscription available through the Hidden Forces website or through our Patreon page at patreon.com/hiddenforces. Today's episode was produced by me and edited by Stylianos Nicolaou.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 46:12 For more episodes, you can check out our website at hiddenforces.io. Join the conversation at Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram @HiddenForcesPod or send me an email at dk@hiddenforces.io. As always, thanks for listening. We'll see you next week.