

Strategic Culture

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Psychoanalysing NATO: Gaslighting



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NOTE: Because "NATO" these days is little more than a box of spare parts out of which Washington assembles "coalitions of the willing", it's easier for me to write "NATO" than "Washington plus/minus these or those minions".

Home Secretary Sajid Javid has called on Russia to explain "exactly what has gone on" after two people were exposed to the Novichok nerve agent in Wiltshire. (BBC)

The Russian state could put this wrong right. They could tell us what happened. What they did. And fill in some of the significant gaps that we are trying to pursue. We have said they can come and tell us what happened. I'm waiting for the phone call from the Russian state. The offer is there. They are the ones who could fill in all the clues to keep people safe. (UK security minister Ben Wallace)

Leaving aside their egregious flouting of the elemental principle of English justice, note that they're uttering this logical idiom: *Russia must have done it because it hasn't proved it didn't*. Note also, in Javid's speech, the amusing suggestion that Russia keeps changing its story; but to fit into the official British story "novichok" must be an instantly lethal slow acting poison which dissipates quickly but lasts for months.

This is an attempt to manipulate our perception of reality. In a previous essay I discussed NATO's projection of its own actions onto Russia. In this piece I want to discuss another psychological manipulation – *gaslighting*.

The expression comes from the movie Gaslight in which the villain manipulates her reality to convince his wife that she is insane. Doubt the official Skripal story and it is you – you "Russian troll" – who is imagining things. Only Russian trolls would question Litvinenko's deathbed accusation written in perfect English handed to us by a Berezovskiy flunky; or the shutdown of MH17; or the invasion of Ukraine; or the cyber

attack on Estonia. Only a Russian troll would observe that the fabulously expensive NATO intelligence agencies apparently get their information from Bellingcat. Argumentum ad trollem is everywhere: [count the troll accusations here](#) or admire the [clever anticipatory use of the technique there](#).

This is classic gaslighting – I'm telling the truth, *you're* the crazy one.

We may illustrate the eleven signs of "gaslighting" given in [Psychiatry Today](#) by [Stephanie A. Sarkis](#) with recent events.

They tell blatant lies.

The Skripals were poisoned by an incredibly deadly nerve agent that left them with no visible symptoms for hours but not so deadly that it killed them; at least not at Easter; nor the policeman; a nerve agent that could only have been made in Russia although its recipe was published in the [open media](#); that poison having been administered on a doorknob that each had to have touched at the exact same minute that no one else touched; a nerve agent so deadly that they only bothered to clean up the sites 51 days later. And so on: a different story every day. But your mind must be controlled by Putin if you smell a falsehood at any point. And, now we have it all over again: [apparently the fiendishly clever Russian assassins smeared the doorknob and then, rather than getting out of town ASAP, sauntered over into a park to toss the container](#). (Remember the fiendishly clever Russian assassins who spread polonium everywhere?)

And, speaking of proven, long term, repeating liars: remember when accusing the [British government of complicity in torture renditions was a conspiracy theory](#)? Well, it turns out [the conspiracy was by the other side](#). "Conspiracy Theorist" is the perfect gaslighting accusation, by the way: you're the crazy one.

They deny they ever said something, even though you have proof.

The Skripal case gives a perfect illustration: here's the [UK Foreign Secretary saying Porton Down told him it was Russian \("absolutely categorical"\)](#) And here's the UK Foreign Office disappearing the statement: [We never said Porton Down confirmed the origin](#). It's rare to get such a quick exposure of a lie, so it's useful to have this example. Here is [an obvious fake from Bellingcat](#). [Already the Douma story is being re-polished now that the OPCW has said no organophosphates](#).

Most of the time it takes years to reveal the lie: gaslighters know the details will be forgotten while the impression remains. [64 years later we learn the "conspiracy theorists" were right about the CIA/UK involvement in the Iran coup](#). It's rather amazing how many people still believe the proven liars this time around.

They use what is near and dear to you as ammunition.

Russians cheat at the sports you follow, scatter nerve agents and radioactive material in places you could be in, sneak into the voting booth with you, blow up airplanes you might be on and tear up the "very fabric of our democracy." Your favourite actor tells you "we are at war with Russia".

And the children! The boy on the beach. The boy in the ambulance. Bana from Aleppo. Miraculous recoveries. Dramatic rescues with camera. Dead children speaking. And finally, the little girl, Trump and the Time cover.

If it's a child, they're gaslighting you.

They wear you down over time.

Skripal story fading? How about a CW attack in Syria? No? Back to MH17: same story with one new obviously suspicious detail. Pussy Riot is forgotten and Pavlenskiy an embarrassment, but "Russian bear in Moscow World Cup parade video sparks PETA outrage"! This is what is known as a Gish Gallop: the gaslighter makes 47 assertions, while you're thinking about the first, he makes 20 more: in former times it was recognised by the the folk saying that "a fool can ask more questions than ten wise men can answer". But the fools quickly come up with more: dead dogs in Russia: without tuk-tuks, with tuk-tuks; your choice.

You are worn down by ten new fake outrages every month: all expressed in simplistic terms. How much context is stuffed into this imbecilic headline? The Plot Against Europe: Putin, Hungary and Russia's New Iron Curtain. How many thousand words, how many hours to discuss it intelligently? Too late! Time for "Trump and Putin's Too-Friendly Summit" (NYT 28 June). Forget that! "Sexism at Russia World Cup the worst in history as female fans and broadcasters are harassed". (Telegraph 30 June). Gone! "We already gave Syria to Putin, so what's left for Trump to say?" (WaPo 5 July) Stop wondering! "Amesbury poisoning: Here's what we know about the novichok victims" (Sky News 6 July). No! Trumputin again! "Will Trump Be Meeting With His Counterpart — Or His Handler?" (NY Mag 8 July). Gish Gallop. The sheer volume of easily-made accusations forces two conclusions: they're right and you're wrong (smoke: fire) or, more simply, eventually you – you crazy one! – give up.

Their actions do not match their words.

They bomb hospitals on purpose, we bomb them by accident. Discussed further here but the essence of the point is that

it would be physically impossible for Russia to be more destructive than NATO is.

If you want a single word to summarize American war-making in this last decade and a half, I would suggest rubble.

They throw in positive reinforcement to confuse you.

There are direct rewards of course: cue Udo Ulfkotte; many benefits to swimming with the stream; swimming the other way, not so many. It's only after they retire that British generals question the story, the cynic observes. German generals too. Maybe even US generals.

But for the rest of us, NATO bathes us in gush: "NATO's Enduring Mission – Defending Values, Together". *Together*, our values: we – you and I – have the good values. NATO loves to praise itself "the Alliance also contributes to peace and stability through crisis management operations and partnerships." Remember Libya? "A model intervention" said the NATO GenSek of the time. Here is the view on the ground. Most of the "migrants" tearing Europe apart are fleeing the destruction of NATO's wars. NATO backs (plus/minus minions) the intervention in Mali, a country destabilised by its destruction of Libya. Cue the positive reinforcement: "Projecting Stability: an agenda for action". In NATOland the gaslight burns bright: "Nato chief: Vladimir Putin 'weaponising' refugee crisis to 'break' Europe". NATO keeps pouring butterscotch sauce on the rubble: "NATO is based on some core values – democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty" (25 June).

All I can say, over and over again, is *Libya*. NATO destroyed Libya, weird as it was, killed Qaddafi, weird as he was, and smugly congratulated itself: "NATO's Victory in Libya: The Right Way to Run an Intervention". Ubi solitudinum faciunt pacem appellant. But should that thought occur to you, you're part of "Russia's secret plan to destroy EU and NATO".

They know confusion weakens people.

Remember PropOrNot? Sites that do not agree with the Establishment are Russian bots! Authenticated experts! 100% reliable! The WaPo published the list; when under attack even from proponents of the Putindunnit hysteria, it feebly backtracked: it "does not itself vouch for the validity". Vermont power grid hack? WaPo fell for that one too. Confusion from the endless Gish Gallop about Putin: in December 2015 I compiled a number: Aspergers, psychopath, slouching and on and on and on.

You may be confused but the gaslighter isn't: Russia's to blame for whatever-it-was!

They project.

NATO projects all the time and this headline from the NYT is classic: "Russia's Military Drills Near NATO Border Raise Fears of Aggression". I discuss NATO's projection here.

They try to align people against you.

NATO exerts a continual pressure for unanimity. Again, the Skripal story is a good example: London accused Russia and, "in solidarity", Russian diplomats were expelled all over the world. Allies took its word for it. Now the doubts: in Germany especially. Sanctions must be imposed on Russia because we must be in solidarity with

Kiev. "Solidarity" on migrants. "Solidarity" is perhaps the greatest virtue in NATOLand. We will hear more pleas for solidarity as NATO dies: when mere "solidarity" is the only reason left; there's no reason left.

They tell you or others that you are crazy.

It also must be said that when elected officials — including members of Congress — and media platforms amplify propaganda disseminated by Russian trolls, they are aiding the Russians in their efforts.

The goal is to undermine democracy. So you want America to look unstable and Americans not to trust each other.

How Russian Trolls Won American Hearts and Minds

An "existential threat posed by digitally accelerated disinformation". So no forgiveness to you, crazy Putin trolls. And don't dare doubt that American democracy is so feeble that it can be directed by a few Facebook ads. Never forget that NATO's opponents are crazy: Putin is a "madman"; Qaddafi was "crazy"; Saddam Hussein "insane"; Milosevic "rabid". Only crazy people would defend crazy people.

They tell you everyone else is a liar.

Honest people don't have to tell you they're trustworthy, and neither, once upon a time, did the BBC. The Atlantic Council smoothly moves from "Why Is the Kremlin So Fixated on Phantom Fascists?" in May 2017 to "Ukraine's Got a Real Problem with Far-Right Violence (And No, RT Didn't Write This Headline)" in June 2018. But it still calls Russia the liar: "Why the Kremlin's Lies Stick" (May 2018). The Atlantic Council hopes you're dumb enough not to notice that Russia hasn't changed its line but the gaslighters have. (Remember O'Brien and two plus two?)

Russian Federation is not the USSR.

I said it the last time: the USSR did lots of things in its time – influencing, fiddling elections, fake news, gaslighting and so on. But, in those days the Communist Party was the "leading and guiding force" but today it's the opposition. Things have changed in Moscow, but NATO rolls on.

Some hope, though.

While many people are still taken in by the gaslighters, there are hopeful signs. Once upon a time Internet versions of the mass media allowed comments. Gradually, one by one, they shut down their comments sections because of "trolls", "fake news" and offended "standards" but really because of disagreement. Perhaps the most famous case is that of the Guardian: an entire website, has been created by people whose

comments were rejected because they violated "community standards". I always read the comments in the Daily Mail, especially the best rated, and on the Skripal stories, the comments are very sceptical indeed of the official story. For example.

This is rather encouraging: for gaslighting really to work, the gaslighter either has to be in such a position of power that he can completely control the victim's surroundings or in such a position of authority that the victim cannot imagine doubting what he says. Those days are gone.

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Also by this author

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Patrick Armstrong was an analyst in the Canadian Department of National Defence specialising in the USSR/Russia from 1984 and a Counsellor in the Canadian Embassy in Moscow in 1993-1996. He retired in 2008 and has been writing on Russia and related subjects on the Net ever since.



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