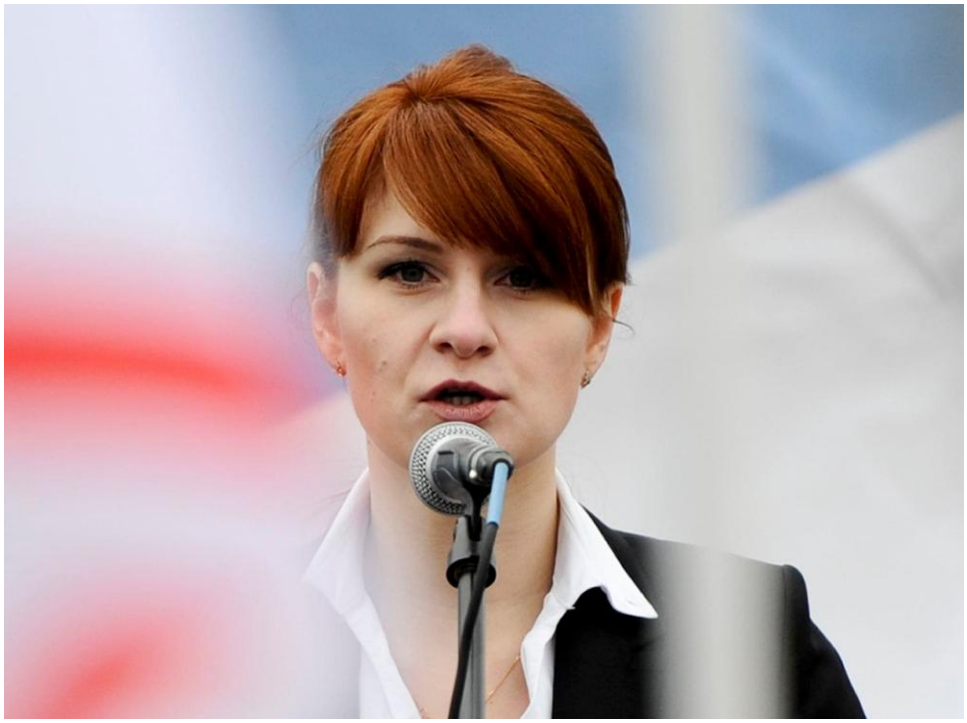
The Washington Post
July 29, 2018

Butina is just the tip of the iceberg



Maria Butina in April 2013. (AP)

by Anne Applebaum

By day, he ran a travel agency. Off hours, Jacob Golos worked for the Soviet Union. Unlike some of his fictional successors, he did not pretend to be a native. But from the time of its founding in 1927 until his death in 1943 , Golos did use the agency — "World Tourists" — as a front for his real activities: funding and enabling the activities of the American Communist Party.

Though he also engaged in activities that were closer to what we usually think of as espionage — recruiting insiders, obtaining documents — much of Golos's work was more properly defined as political subversion. Golos maintained a huge network inside the Communist Party USA,

managed its money transfers from Moscow, seduced an American who became his assistant, used the travel agency to process fake passports and kept in close touch with the party boss, Earl Browder — the grandfather, of course, of Bill. Eventually the FBI grew suspicious. Browder was arrested for passport fraud, and Golos was arrested, fined and closely watched. The U.S.S.R.'s security services changed their tactics and moved on.

With a brief hiatus in the 1990s, they never stopped. Last week, U.S. authorities arrested and charged a 29-year-old Russian whom they allege to be a modern agent of political subversion. Unlike Golos, Maria Butina, who has pleaded not guilty, didn't run a company. Instead, prosecutors say, she posed as the leader of a Russian pro-gun organization, a group that was no more authentic than Golos's travel agency: There is no right to bear arms in Russia, and under this regime there never will be. According to court papers, Butina nevertheless convinced some naive members of the National Rifle Association that she was a genuine activist. In doing so, she gained access to their world.

The similarities between Golos and the case against Butina are striking: They were both seeking to assist political movements they believed to be pro-Kremlin (the Communist Party of the 1930s; the pro-gun wing of the Republican Party of the 2010s). They were both backed by Kremlin money, diverted through cutouts (the Communist International, in the former instance; a couple of Russian oligarchs, allegedly, in the latter).

They were also both parts of larger, international operations. Golos was a player in the Soviet Union's long-term effort to promote an international revolution. But Butina, even if considering only her role as an open, pro-Kremlin activist, also has many counterparts, agents of influence who are openly agitating for Russian interests, now on the far-right edge of Western politics instead of the far-left. Gianluca Savoini, the leader of the enigmatic Lombardy-Russia Cultural Association, seems to perform a similar role in Italian politics, even showing up recently as a member of an official Italian government delegation to Moscow. Bela Kovacs , a Hungarian member of the European Parliament, is on trial in Budapest on a charge of spying on European Union institutions on behalf of Russia.

Along with many others, they too are part of a long-term project, though it's not a proletarian revolution. Instead, it's a kleptocratic coup d'état: The modern Kremlin project seeks to undermine Western democracies, break up the E.U. and NATO, and put corrupt relationships rather than the rule of law at the center of international commerce.

Precisely because the analogy is so exact, it's worth remembering why Golos and his network failed. In large part, it was because the center-left — especially the anti-Soviet wing of the American trade union movement — rejected Soviet-style communism in the United States. It's also because, in the 1940s and 1950s, the American political establishment, Democratic and Republican, unified around the need to defeat Soviet-style communism in Europe. And it's because, even in the depths of the Depression, the majority of Americans were never beguiled by the appeal of authoritarianism.

It's not at all clear that we are in the same situation now. A wing of the Republican Party is preparing to double down and support the Russian autocracy, which it believes, mistakenly, is

“Christian.” While the Pentagon and parts of the bureaucracy — the State Department, the FBI — certainly understand the need to push back in Europe, the White House certainly does not. Which side the Republican Party will end up on is anybody’s guess. Authoritarian tactics, from pressure on the media to pressure on the courts, clearly appeal to the party’s base.

This matters because Butina is at most the tip of the iceberg, one of the sillier, more junior players in a broader game. Far more important are Russian oligarchs bearing bribes or Russian hackers probing vulnerabilities in our political system as well as our electrical grid. To push back against them, as well as their equivalents from the rest of the autocratic world, we will need not only to catch the odd agent but also to make our political funding systems more transparent, to write new laws banning shell companies and money laundering, and to end the manipulation of social media. It took more than a generation for Americans to reject the temptations of communist authoritarianism; it will take more than a generation before we have defeated kleptocratic authoritarianism too — if we still can.

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