

THE PERSUADERS

At the Front Lines
of the Fight for
Hearts, Minds,
and Democracy

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Alfred A. Knopf · New York 2022

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THE
PERSUADERS

PROLOGUE: THE WAR ON PERSUASION

In June 2014, Aleksandra Krylova and Anna Bogacheva arrived in the United States on a clandestine mission. Krylova was a high-ranking official at the Internet Research Agency in St. Petersburg, Russia, an ostensibly private company that was known to work on behalf of Russian intelligence. Bogacheva, her road buddy, a researcher and data cruncher, was more junior. Their trip had been well planned: a transcontinental itinerary, SIM cards, burner phones, cameras, visas obtained under the pretense of personal travel, and, just in case, evacuation plans.

The women made stops in California, Colorado, Illinois, Louisiana, Michigan, Nevada, New Mexico, New York, and Texas, according to a federal indictment issued years later. Beyond that, their activities are not well known, though their mission is: to gather evidence of conditions in the United States for a project to destabilize its political system and society, using the rather improbable weapon of millions of social media posts.

In their long-simmering conflict with the United States, high officials in Russia, like their American counterparts, have a range of tools of sabotage available to them. Many are regularly put to use. But in recent years, the project Krylova and Bogacheva worked on was a marquee effort and a standout success, and that was telling. The investment in the project seemed to reflect a calculation by a highly capable foreign intelligence service that, of all the vulnerabilities of modern American society, the particular civic attitude that the project

sought to inflame, writing other people off—assuming they would never change their minds or ways, dismissing them as hopelessly mired in identities they couldn't escape, viewing those who thought differently as needing to be resisted rather than won over, refusing to engage in the work of persuasion—was an Achilles' heel. That attitude had a hundred causes and a thousand expressions and could be found everywhere you looked, taking different guises on the left and the right, showing up among regular citizens and in the marble corridors of power.

Americans didn't exactly need outside help to see each other in these ways. If anything, the culture of the write-off had become a rare point of commonality across otherwise irreconcilable factions. Nevertheless, half a world away, in 2013, in St. Petersburg, the Internet Research Agency, or IRA, was founded, and it would soon begin down the road of amplifying Americans' growing culture of mutual dismissal. It was set up as an industrial troll farm, where workers were paid to write blog posts, comments on news sites, and social media messages. Late in the summer of 2013, a job posting appeared online. "Internet operators wanted!" it read, according to the independent newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*. "Task: posting comments at profile sites in the Internet, writing thematic posts, blogs, social networks." Plus: "PAYMENT'S EVERY WEEK AND FREE MEALS!"

The initial focus of the agency was swaying Western public opinion about Russia's military intervention in Ukraine in 2014. But that same year, the agency launched a new department called the Translator Project. Its bailiwick was to foment political unrest in Russia's great adversary, the United States. Krylova and Bogacheva embarked on their travels that year to aid the project, conducting their off-line field work for use online.

Though the women's expedition had some of the glamour of traditional espionage, with the throwaway phones and escape scenarios, the bulk of the IRA's work was more mundane. Hundreds of workers toiled in twelve-hour shifts at the IRA offices on 55 Savushkina Street. They received detailed instructions about the messages they were expected to promote. Each worker had to manage multiple fake accounts and produce message after message on each one—reportedly three posts a day if Facebook was their medium, and fifty posts a day

on Twitter. Managers obsessed over metrics like number of posts, page views, likes, retweets. The office was organized into groups including the Bloggers and Commentators Office, Rapid Response Department, CEO Department, Creative Department, and Social Network Specialists Department.

Like any workplace, the agency had its discontents. A worker might be fined for arriving late or even for leaving the office one minute early. There were also complaints about the cutbacks. At first, according to workers interviewed by local media outlets, there had been a relaxation room with sofas. One day, the sofas were gone. There had been paper towels in the bathroom. One day, there was a sign to use fewer of them. Then they were gone, replaced by an electric dryer that left much to be desired. Someone told a reporter of a clogged toilet bowl covered with tape for two weeks. Agency employees who spoke to the press generally said they were working there for the money, not out of ardor for Vladimir Putin.

One worker painted this picture of one of the bosses: "Oleg was a funny man. Just imagine, a guy with a belly walks around in a denim shirt hanging out, fiddling with the keys to his car like a taxi driver, and saying, 'If a person knows how to write, he will write about anything.'" He wanted the troll farm to be a place where true artists of discourse toxification could unleash their talent.

Not everyone who passed through the agency's doors found it so amusing. Lyudmila Savchuk, a Russian journalist who said she took a job at the IRA to expose it, later recalled, "One can remain sane in the factory for two months maximum." One of the stresses was the constant toggling among online avatars and their views and voices. But there was also a larger dread: "The realization that you can invent any fact, then watch it absolutely synchronized with the media outlets as one massive information outflow and spread worldwide—that absolutely breaks your psyche."

Savchuk was not overselling the agency's reach. In the years ahead, its posts would attract 76 million engagements on Facebook and 183 million likes on Instagram, and it would send more than 10 million tweets. Some posts were outright disinformation; others sought to whip up anger at the truth.

Krylova and Bogacheva's trip, and the larger Internet Research

Agency project it served, would eventually become public knowledge. At first, an oversimple, if seductive, story line grew up around it: the Russian mission was a plot to plant Donald Trump in the White House. "Yes, Russian Trolls Helped Elect Trump," read the headline on a Michelle Goldberg column in *The New York Times*. The subtitle of *Cyberwar*, by Kathleen Hall Jamieson, director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania, was "How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President." Aiding Trump was indeed among the IRA's documented objectives, and this fact gave rise to a widespread public perception that electing Trump was the focus of the mission. Some even believed that Trump himself was a Russian agent.

For many rattled by the 2016 presidential election, the idea was tempting. "For Americans and for American journalists and very politicized Americans in particular, the story of Russian interference was a really damaging crutch for the imagination," the Russian American writer Masha Gessen told me not long ago. "It was something that allowed us to think about Trump as somebody from outer space, or at least from Russia, as a kind of alien body, but also an alien body from which we're somehow miraculously going to be liberated." It was easier to think of the country's problems as being of foreign provenance, an act of war that could be answered by doing something to some electrical grid.

In time, however, a more careful, sobering analysis emerged: the Russian mission, far from dropping something on America from outer space, had been to fertilize behaviors already flourishing on American soil. "The IRA's goals are to further widen existing divisions in the American public and decrease our faith and trust in institutions that help maintain a strong democracy," Darren Linvill and Patrick Warren, scholars at Clemson University who became leading analysts of Russia's campaign, have written. "The IRA has used Trump—and many other politicians—as vehicles to further these twin goals, but it is not about Trump himself." An analysis given to U.S. Senate investigators portrayed similar goals: "to undermine citizens' trust in government, exploit societal fractures, create distrust in the information environment, blur the lines between reality and fiction, undermine

trust among communities, and erode confidence in the democratic process."

When I began to read the Russian posts myself, I saw even more clearly how the troll farm had gone about this work. It had done more than fan the flames of anger and division. It had encouraged the view, already on the rise, and not without roots in reality, that the basic activity of democratic life, the changing of minds, had become futile work, which in turn fed the feeling that vital political pursuits—of solidarity across difference, of multiracial coalitions, of united fronts against authoritarianism—and other endeavors to create the conditions for meaningful change were doomed. The troll farm wanted Americans to regard each other as immovable, brainwashed, of bad faith, not worth energy, disloyal, repulsive. "The IRA knows that in political warfare disgust is a much more powerful tool than anger," Linvill and Warren have written. "Anger drives people to the polls; disgust drives countries apart."

In 2018, I published a book about how the super-rich corrode democracy by hoarding wealth, buying political influence, and using the guise of do-gooding to cast themselves as the solution to the very problems they continue to cause. The book made a case for meaningful structural change through the organs of democracy and against billionaire pseudo-change.

That work led to my interest in people working to deliver this meaningful change through electoral politics—in activism, community organizing, and campaigning. As I began to follow their work, I sensed they were up against more than just the powerful forces I had chronicled. They also confronted, within their own spaces, the challenge of a pessimistic and factional political culture that threatened their great ambitions. Their work—for racial justice, for a humane economy, for planetary sustainability—required attracting more people to a given cause today than believed in it yesterday. But the reigning culture often discouraged the work of changing minds and sometimes isolated those who pursued it.

It seemed significant that this ginning up of differences and fatalism

that I saw activists, organizers, and political figures contending with was the very habit seized on by the Russians.

Crystal Johnson is an actual person. She is a real-estate agent. I spoke to her once on the phone. When I explained that I was looking into how her identity had been stolen and weaponized by Russian intelligence, she hung up and stopped answering my calls.

Johnson was an occasional Twitter user given to a combination of real-estate insights and inspirational quotations.

"Resale homes sales R up," she wrote back in 2012. "As we learned from the recent bubble that burst, a healthy housing market puts many pairs of hands to work."

"Good morning!" she wrote on another occasion. "There is so much we have to be thankful for. Be Blessed and continue being a blessing to others."

Heracitus, the ancient Greek philosopher, made a cameo: "The content of your character is your choice. Day by day, what you choose, what you think and what you do is who you become." And, as night follows day, the corporate philosopher Henry Ford: "Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success."

There was, naturally, some selling as well: "Interest Rates are on the move: the biggest jumps in months, home prices are on the rise, it's a great time to own a home. Contact me now."

These tweets came from an account with the handle @CrystalSellsLA. Its profile photo shows a Black woman in her thirties or forties, with short blond hair. Crystal is smiling widely in the photo, dressed crisply in a black blazer and white shirt. She looks like someone you would trust to find you a home.

In February 2012, a Twitter account with the handle @CrystalJohnson began to tweet, and it tweeted precisely what @CrystalSellsLA was tweeting. It mimicked all the tweets mentioned above, to a similarly small audience. It had at the most eleven followers before it took a fateful turn. Someone was digitally cloning Crystal Johnson, without apparent purpose.

On the first day of 2013, the real Crystal Johnson wished the world Happy New Year, as did her clone. It would be the end of its mim-

icry, though. From then on, the clone account of @CrystalJohnson unhitched itself and began its career as one of the most influential accounts operated by the Internet Research Agency's troll farm.

More than a thousand days passed with silence from the copycat account of @CrystalJohnson. Then came the second week in December 2015, a tense one. Trump, still a relatively new presidential candidate, had, during a rally in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, proposed "a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country's representatives can figure out what the hell is going on." That drew the first real suggestions from mainstream political observers that his campaign was more than a curiosity or a carnival, that its overt appeals to bigotry recalled the beginnings of some of the most dangerous movements in history.

In the midst of these conversations, on December 10, the @CrystalJohnson clone was back in action. "#BlackLivesMatter," the account declared around the middle of the day. @CrystalJohnson would tweet twelve times that day, a major increase in frequency relative to the actual Crystal, and in this noticeably different vein.

"KKK was terrorizing us decades before #ISIS appeared," it thundered. "But in America #KKK still is legal!"

Crystal also weighed in on a television remake of *The Wiz*, a play first staged in 1974 in Baltimore as a remix of *The Wizard of Oz*, with an all-Black cast. "So white people see #racism in an all black cast but not when black people are victims of #policebrutality?"

And, with the Muslim ban in the news, @CrystalJohnson tweeted: "It's a lie! Muslims will never support Trump!"

A new and different Crystal Johnson had emerged, this one, it seems, run out of St. Petersburg, uninterested in real-estate advice or inspirational offerings, instead offering takes about America's deep-rooted racial injustices. It was a modest, lonely effort at first: on that first day, @CrystalJohnson received only a handful of likes and appears to have acquired a single follower.

But over the next two years, Crystal1 would write another eight thousand tweets and would garner more than fifty-six thousand followers in the process, putting her in the top 1 percent of Twitter users globally. But even that measure underplayed the triumph that Crystal1 represented. By the vital sign of "retweet count"—the num-

ber of times other users passed a tweet by someone else on to their own followers—Crystal1 was the second-ranking Twitter user in the entire, sprawling Russian effort, with some 3,752,129 total repostings, including by other bots and by legions of actual Americans. And, among the millions of tweets the Russians attempted in their effort to undermine American democracy, Crystal1 had four of the top ten, including the top spot, with this tweet: “Daily reminder that the most educated First Lady in American history is a black woman with two Ivy League degrees from Harvard and Princeton.”

Linville and Warren, the Clemson scholars, had put me on to Crystal1 as an exemplar of the IRA’s left-leaning trolls. But they also recommended that I look into the tweets of another top performer for the Translator Project, the tenth most retweeted account out of thousands—a right-leaning troll named Jenna Abrams.

Jenna had a different set of preoccupations. Two months into tweeting, with more than six thousand followers already in her camp, she wrote, “Everyone has a beard now and I wonder, is that #beard trend connected with #ISIS or just a coincidence?” In a few words, her imagined audience’s contempt for city-dwelling, skinny-jeans-wearing, beard-sporting hipsters was married to its fear of terrorism. The tweet suggested a shadowy nexus of difference: not only were your fellow citizens unlike you; they might be in cahoots with jihadists.

On another occasion, she sought to meld liberal pro-choice attitudes with the aversion to war: “Liberals are brave enough to kill unborn children, but not brave enough to kill our enemies #LiberalLogic.” She also tried to frame protest and the measure of accountability it could bring as dependency: “#TamirRice’s family to receive \$6 million from Cleveland. That’s the new era of welfare for the Black people.” And she took a swipe at the chorus of arguments in the culture about the systemic nature of racism and sexism and at the “social justice warriors” who make them: “A tip for SJWs: not all things’re about sexism or racism, things can be just things, stop turning everything into an argument for equal rights.”

The trolls covered and amplified a range of ideological topics. The analysis provided to the U.S. Senate identified “a roster” of social issues that the Russians sought to make even more salient in the public conversation:

- Black culture/community issues
- Police brutality/Black Lives Matter
- Pro-police/Blue Lives Matter
- Anti-refugee/immigration & border issues
- Texas culture
- Southern culture (Confederate history)
- Separatist movements
- Muslim issues
- LGBT issues
- Meme culture/Red Pill
- Gun rights/2nd Amendment
- Pro-Trump/Anti-Clinton
- Pro-Bernie or Stein/Anti-Clinton
- Patriotism/Tea Party
- Religious rights
- Native American issues
- Veterans Issues
- Local News/Journalism/Media

But what seemed even more significant than the subject matter was *how* the trolls chose to talk about these issues. Over and over, they used the discussion of these topic areas to suggest to Americans a certain way of looking at each other: as alien, menacing, and, therefore, unchangeable.

Crystal1’s tweets shared news stories that implied, not incorrectly, the endemic nature of racism. But this very real problem was often framed as a lurid and sensationalized story. “Awful! White people used Black Babies as Alligator Bait,” she wrote. On another occasion, Crystal1 tweeted about the very real unwillingness of many white people to acknowledge the realities of racism, but framed that skepticism in terms that made it seem essentially unalterable: “White people can see aliens, Bigfoot, the Loch Ness monster but can’t see racism, oppression or white privilege.” While Crystal1 identified real problems, there was a clear sense of dissuasion from the idea that anything could be done to change the minds of *people like that*.

In a different way, Jenna also turned political disagreements into conflicts over identity, in tweets such as “New study confirmed: Men

who are physically strong are more likely to take a right-wing stance, while weaker men support the welfare state." Here, the politics of redistribution was turned into something more: a difference in virility. Men who supported the state's responsibility to help others were weak, flawed in their very being, not merely their politics. In another tweet, Jenna framed support for a candidate as an outgrowth of a laziness that fundamentally separated you from them. "How do you starve Bernie Sanders' supporters?" she asked. "Just put their food stamps under their work boots."

The trolls' tweets imbued existing political disagreements with a sense of physical disgust that made engaging with these other identities impossible. "What a time to be alive! Glitter armpits is a thing now. Congratulations. #FeminismIsAwful," Jenna tweeted one day. The tweet didn't rebut any feminist contention, didn't challenge any feminist logic, but attempted simply to plant a bodily image that might gross out a certain kind of reader. Crystall's tweets also framed political anger or outrage in terms of disgust. "'Hail Trump' video sickens me! It's simply disgusting to see pure fascism!" she wrote—again, not wrongly in sentiment, but presented in a way that did not exactly encourage the work of political persuasion.

The troll farm's efforts to frame Americans of differing views as being foreign Others seemed designed to make people wonder if their fellow citizens were really even their fellow citizens. "Does #Mississippi Gov. follow ISIS example?" Crystall asked, casting a domestic political figure as taking inspiration from terrorists. Meanwhile, Jenna tweeted that President Obama was "risking the lives of Americans to bring his sunnis in," casting the first Black president as someone who wasn't simply a leader with a different political philosophy from hers but someone commanding an army of Muslim Others. She also felt that a certain presidential candidate had views in common with Saddam Hussein and that "Osama bin Laden's letter looks more like a Bernie Sanders speech." A domestic difference about economic philosophy was thereby twisted into a physical threat to your life.

Again and again, in one way or another, the IRA posts were sending the same message: These people are not to be trusted. They will never change. They are who they are. And who they are is a risk to your being.

As tempting as it may be to view the Russian operatives as instigators, to witness these moves is to witness a mission of amplification. They saw the othering and writing off from a distance, recognized the potential, and exploited it. In between gripping about the paper towel situation and the missing sofas, the trolls' creators dashed off dozens of tweets a day—often thoughtlessly, often full of mistakes, often copying and pasting words found on the internet. Their talent was not inventiveness but rather the faithfulness of their mimicry. For in America in recent years, this fatalism has been on the rise and the hope of persuasion in free fall.

The ascendant political culture, confrontational and sensational and dismissive, has many causes: the inflammatory incentives of social media, the cynical manipulations of billionaire-owned, divide-and-conquer news outlets; the growing confidence and voice of once-marginalized groups; the very real material crises that beg for solutions and continue to remain unsolved; the frustration with how little milder, kinder, more civil, more hopeful politics has delivered; the sense that, absent a politics of us and them, the them will continue to pillage the us. For these and other reasons, many Americans have grown alienated from an idea at the heart of democratic theory: that you change things by changing minds—by persuading.

This challenge to persuasion has taken myriad forms. Social movements that need to grow to win have often seemed to devote more energy to keeping people out than pulling people in. Political campaigns frequently receive advice to focus on mobilizing sympathetic voters more than winning over skeptics. People have watched as tens of millions of their loved ones mentally disappear into online rabbit holes and cults, but little organized effort is made to bring them back or protect future victims. Leaders who attempt outreach have been attacked by their own as sellouts, chided for centering those who would never ally with them anyway over those who have long had their back, if not their attention.

The tendency to write off is rooted in the assumption that differences of identity are unbridgeable, that people are too invested in their privileges and interests to change, that the failure to achieve change in

the past predicts failure in the future, that people and their opinions are monolithic and strong rather than complicated and fragile, and therefore the purpose of politics is to protect yourself from Others and galvanize your own instead of trying to reach across.

In the change-making circles I had begun to follow, the political culture of the write-off had made itself strongly felt. It had helped to open an ever-widening, seemingly unsustainable gap between the ambitions for structural, material change and the utter pessimism about individual people changing. How could social transformation come to pass when so many, even those most thirsting to change things, had written off the very possibility of changing people's minds?

The stakes of this writing off were high: some of the most dangerous and antidemocratic movements of our time had managed, in spite of those features, to make their causes appear welcoming and make newcomers feel at home, whereas some of the most righteous, inclusive, and just movements gave many the feeling of being inaccessible, intractable, and alienating.

I became drawn to a group of activists, organizers, politicians, educators, and others in these change-making circles who dissented from the great write-off and were seeking another way. They were a diverse set of people, but what they shared was a desire for real, far-reaching, system-level change and the realization of the promise of democracy. But, unlike many in their own circles and movements, they wanted another thing, too: to reinvigorate the idea of persuasion. These persuaders found themselves up against outright antidemocratic forces as well as an inflamed political culture, including among their allies, that made it harder to win others over and build and keep coalitions.

This book is about their quest, in a time of great crises, for a politics fierce and unapologetic enough truly to change things *and* smart and expansive enough to change the minds to get there.

"THE WAKING AMONG THE WOKE"

Linda Sarsour

So the story," the activist Linda Sarsour began, "is an old lady from Hawaii, a retired lawyer, posted, 'I think we need to march on Washington.'"

It was the evening of November 8, 2016, and Donald Trump was emerging as the president-elect of the United States. Millions were in the first hours of a shock that would last for days. Among the anguished was Teresa Shook, the retired lawyer in Hawaii, who suggested the idea of a march on Washington, to protest the incoming president and all he represented, and went to bed. Sarsour, who lives on the other side of the country, in Brooklyn, continued the story of how she came to be associated with Shook's proposal for a march: "She wakes up viral. She's a little old lady; she probably gets six likes usually. All of a sudden she wakes up, it's like . . ." Shook had gotten ten thousand RSVPs. In parallel, a woman named Bob Bland, a fashion designer, had posted a similar idea. "Somebody connected the two," Sarsour told me, "and said, 'Why are two white ladies doing two separate things? Why don't you make this together?' And so they did. And the event was called Million Women's March originally."

It was shortly thereafter that Sarsour saw the post about the now-merged event and, with some incredulity, the name. Her reflex was, "I'm not going."