

From Smear Campaigns to Subversive Warfare: A Historical and Modern Analysis of Character Assassination, Propaganda, and Political Violence

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Modern Slavery Wars, Cowdrey Research Continued

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Introduction

Character assassination, smear campaigning, and propaganda have been consistent features of political and military conflict throughout modern history. These tactics serve not only to discredit opponents but also to destabilize societies, fracture loyalties, and impose control. During the twentieth century, particularly in World War II, governments and military organizations across the Axis and Allied powers employed targeted propaganda and subversive narratives to weaken enemy morale and consolidate their own legitimacy. Sexual violence, humiliation, and the weaponization of shame emerged as forms of both physical and symbolic character assassination, with long-lasting consequences for victims.

As warfare shifted from conventional battlefields to ideological and psychological fronts, strategies of disinformation and scandal continued into the Cold War, later resurfacing in the era of modern politics. The parallels between historical and contemporary examples reveal continuity in the use of smear tactics, whether against individuals, political candidates, or entire populations. Recent scholarship, including the ongoing research of D. Cowdrey, emphasizes that such methods constitute not only political strategies but also crimes of exploitation, creating enduring harm that stretches across generations.

World War II and Character Assassination

During World War II, the deliberate manipulation of narratives was central to the conduct of war. In Nazi Germany, Joseph Goebbels' Ministry of Propaganda employed radio, film, and print to demonize enemies both within and outside of the Reich (Kershaw, 2008). Character assassination was directed not only at political figures but entire ethnic and religious groups, with Jewish communities portrayed as corrupt, impure, and threatening to German survival. Such propaganda facilitated genocide by framing mass violence as an act of national purification.

The Soviet Union likewise weaponized disinformation to suppress dissent and undermine external adversaries. Leaders such as Leon Trotsky were targeted through fabricated charges and manipulated confessions in show trials, transforming political opponents into symbols of treachery (Fitzpatrick, 2015). On the battlefield, Soviet propaganda presented the Red Army as liberators, while the mass sexual violence committed against German civilians in 1945 belied this narrative. Historians estimate that more than two million German women were raped during the Soviet advance, an atrocity that has increasingly been recognized as both a war crime and a form of political terror (Beevor, 2002).

In Britain, the Political Warfare Executive pioneered black propaganda operations, using forged radio broadcasts and counterfeit documents to sow discord among Axis soldiers (Cruickshank, 1977). These efforts relied less on sexual violence and more on

psychological manipulation, spreading rumors of infidelity among German soldiers' families or questioning Hitler's judgment. Such tactics eroded morale by weaponizing shame and mistrust, mirroring the strategies used in both German and Soviet campaigns.

A crucial but often overlooked dimension of these wartime tactics was the lasting humiliation borne by victims of sexual violence. In Germany and elsewhere, women who suffered rape were not recognized as survivors of war crimes but were instead stigmatized as dishonored. This double victimization—first through violence and then through social ostracization—exemplifies how sexual assault functions as a form of character assassination, erasing victims' voices while reshaping their identities through imposed shame (Grossmann, 1995).

These dynamics reveal that character assassination in World War II extended beyond battlefield propaganda into the intimate lives of civilians, with devastating generational consequences. As D. Cowdrey's ongoing research emphasizes, such historical examples serve as precursors to contemporary forms of political smear campaigning and subversive warfare, where the silencing of victims and the manipulation of compassion are central strategies in destabilizing societies.

Shame, Humiliation, and Purity Culture in Wartime and Beyond

Sexual violence and public scandal in wartime do not only target individuals physically but also serve as deliberate strategies of humiliation. In World War II, the mass rape of German women by advancing Soviet troops exemplified this form of warfare: it was not merely about physical domination, but about erasing dignity, disrupting community structures, and marking victims as permanently "dishonored" (Beevor, 2002). Survivors often faced lifelong stigma from their own families and societies, a secondary victimization rooted in cultural norms of shame and purity.

This dynamic reflects a broader phenomenon: the use of shame as a political and social weapon. By rendering victims "impure," perpetrators reinforced narratives of conquest and superiority, while simultaneously silencing survivors through social ostracization. In many cases, women subjected to sexual violence during wartime were unable to speak openly, as doing so risked further dishonor or even accusations of complicity. As historian Atina Grossmann (1995) argues, the imposed silence following mass rape in 1945 Germany illustrates how sexual violence serves as both an act of war and a long-term form of character assassination.

The rhetoric of "purification" was central to Nazi ideology. The Holocaust was not framed simply as extermination, but as a project of racial cleansing meant to restore the supposed purity of the German Volk. Genocide thus became an ultimate extension of

purity culture: entire populations were marked as irredeemably impure and subject to eradication. This logic has echoed across other genocides, including Rwanda in 1994 and Bosnia in the 1990s, where systematic sexual violence against women was deployed to desecrate communal identities (Allen, 1996).

Femicide—the targeted killing of women because of their gender—similarly intersects with purity culture and political violence. In wartime and postwar contexts, women’s bodies are often treated as symbolic carriers of cultural or national identity. By attacking them, aggressors not only inflict individual harm but also attempt to erase or dishonor entire communities. The silencing of victims, through shame or murder, ensures that these crimes are minimized or forgotten, which compounds the injustice.

Purity culture also manifests in political and social movements outside of armed conflict. In Cold War America, campaigns against alleged “immorality” often targeted women, LGBTQ individuals, and other marginalized groups as threats to national integrity. The “Lavender Scare” of the 1950s, for instance, purged government employees suspected of homosexuality, casting them as security risks because of their supposed vulnerability to blackmail (Johnson, 2004). Such policies reveal how purity narratives, rooted in shame and exclusion, can become formalized into statecraft.

The continuity between wartime sexual violence, genocide, hate crimes, and purity culture suggests that these practices are not aberrations but recurring strategies of power. They weaponize social stigma, collective shame, and bodily vulnerability to undermine both individuals and communities. D. Cowdrey’s ongoing research highlights how these historical patterns remain active in contemporary politics, where purity culture and scandal narratives are used to discredit candidates, silence survivors of assault, and foster division in democratic societies. By “unfurling the colors of war,” this work situates the politics of shame and humiliation within the broader continuum of subversive warfare, linking the atrocities of the past with the strategies of the present.

Cold War and Post-War Character Assassination

Following the devastation of World War II, the Cold War emerged as a period defined by ideological competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. While direct military confrontation was limited, propaganda, disinformation, and character assassination became crucial weapons in the global struggle for influence.

In the United States, the early Cold War was marked by McCarthyism—a campaign led by Senator Joseph McCarthy in the early 1950s that sought to expose alleged communists in government, the military, and cultural institutions. Many individuals were accused on the basis of little or no evidence, leading to ruined careers and reputations. Character

assassination in this context was institutionalized: allegations of disloyalty or ideological impurity were enough to ostracize individuals, even absent proof (Schrecker, 1998). The Red Scare thus illustrates how fear, suspicion, and shame could be weaponized to silence dissent.

Parallel to the Red Scare was the Lavender Scare, in which LGBTQ individuals were systematically targeted and expelled from government service on the grounds that their sexuality rendered them vulnerable to blackmail (Johnson, 2004). This intersection of purity culture and state policy reinforced social stigma, framing sexual identity not only as immoral but also as a national security threat. Like wartime sexual violence, these purges inflicted a “double victimhood”: individuals were marginalized both for their identity and for the shame imposed upon them by society.

The Soviet Union, for its part, continued to deploy show trials and fabricated narratives as tools of character assassination. Dissidents, intellectuals, and writers who challenged state authority were accused of treason, espionage, or immorality. The power of disinformation was also projected internationally. A striking example is Operation INFEKTION, a KGB disinformation campaign in the 1980s that spread the false claim that the United States had invented the HIV/AIDS virus as a bioweapon (Boghardt, 2009). Such operations were designed to weaken trust in American institutions abroad while amplifying divisions at home.

Character assassination during the Cold War was not limited to propaganda or purges. Political leaders and reformers were sometimes eliminated physically, through assassination. The murders of U.S. President John F. Kennedy in 1963 and civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968 revealed the volatility of American politics during this period. In each case, their legacies were contested through narratives that sought to undermine their credibility, even posthumously. Here, character assassination operated both as rhetorical violence and as literal political violence.

Across both the U.S. and the Soviet Union, the Cold War demonstrated how smear tactics, scandal narratives, and the politics of shame could be elevated into tools of global competition. By framing opponents as disloyal, impure, or dangerous, states consolidated control while marginalizing dissenting voices. These methods foreshadow the strategies of contemporary politics, where scandal and disinformation remain central to campaigns of subversion.

As D. Cowdrey’s research suggests, the Cold War entrenched a culture in which truth itself became malleable, weaponized through propaganda and disinformation. This “war of narratives” blurred the line between character assassination and ideological warfare, a legacy that continues to shape the tactics of modern politics and media.

Modern Politics, Scandals, and Exploitation

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, character assassination has increasingly operated through media-driven scandals, particularly involving sexuality. In the United States, President Bill Clinton's impeachment in 1998 following revelations of an extramarital affair with Monica Lewinsky exemplified how sexual scandal can eclipse political discourse. The scandal became a global media spectacle, illustrating how humiliation and shame could be deployed to weaken political figures regardless of their policy achievements (Bennett & Serrin, 2005).

The twenty-first century has further amplified such dynamics through the rise of digital technologies and social media. Allegations of sexual misconduct, whether substantiated or not, spread rapidly and can permanently damage reputations. While exposing genuine abuse is crucial for accountability, the politicization of scandal often transforms such revelations into weapons of convenience, overshadowing substantive policy debates.

One particularly insidious form of modern character assassination is non-consensual pornography, often referred to as revenge porn. This practice, in which explicit images or videos are distributed without consent, is frequently used to shame, silence, or discredit individuals. Scholars argue that such practices reflect a digital extension of wartime sexual humiliation, weaponizing intimacy and sexuality to inflict both personal and political harm (Citron & Franks, 2014).

Within activist and LGBTQ arenas, these dynamics become especially complex. On one hand, LGBTQ movements have long faced smear campaigns rooted in narratives of sexual "deviance" and impurity. On the other, members of these communities are often at greater risk of being targeted through forced trafficking, coerced pornography, or revenge filming, due to preexisting stigmatization and vulnerability. The intersection of activism, visibility, and exploitation has made this political arena one of the most contested—and, in many respects, the most vulnerable—in the contemporary landscape of character assassination.

Internationally, the exploitation of activists and marginalized individuals through trafficking networks, coerced pornography, and online humiliation campaigns demonstrates the convergence of organized crime and political subversion. Groups ranging from cartels to digital mafias profit from these practices while also destabilizing democratic movements by discrediting their leaders and fracturing communities. As with WWII propaganda or Cold War disinformation, the underlying tactic remains the same: humiliation and shame are leveraged as tools of political warfare.

D. Cowdrey's research underscores that the contemporary prevalence of revenge filming and forced trafficking cannot be separated from historical precedents of sexual violence

and propaganda. Both past and present reveal how sexuality, intimacy, and identity become weapons in struggles for power. By situating these practices within a continuum of subversive warfare, her work highlights the urgent need for international accountability and protections for vulnerable communities.

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Organized Crime, Trafficking, and Subversive Networks

Modern character assassination and subversive operations are often supported or amplified by organized crime networks. Cartels, mafias, and transnational criminal organizations exploit social, political, and technological vulnerabilities to undermine societies. These groups engage in activities ranging from drug trafficking and human

trafficking to coercion of political actors, creating both economic and social instability (Shelley, 2014).

Forced labor, sex trafficking, and coerced pornography often intersect with activist and political arenas, exploiting vulnerable populations for financial gain and political leverage. The same dynamics are observed internationally, where activists, journalists, and marginalized communities are targeted to silence dissent, instill fear, or discredit movements. The overlap between criminal networks and subversive political agendas demonstrates that character assassination is rarely confined to personal rivalries—it can be embedded within systemic exploitation that spans multiple sectors of society (Bales, 2012).

Foreign Influence and Political Subversion

In contemporary American politics, foreign influence operations have increasingly employed the tactics of smear, scandal, and character assassination. Digital platforms allow state and non-state actors to amplify disinformation campaigns, targeting both candidates and the electorate. Notable examples include Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, where social media campaigns sought to exacerbate political polarization and delegitimize candidates (Rid, 2020).

Foreign agents exploit vulnerabilities in both political culture and the media ecosystem. Tactics include the dissemination of sexualized scandals, fake documents, and manipulated narratives designed to incite distrust. These strategies echo historical precedents from WWII and the Cold War: they rely on exploiting shame, fear, and perceived impurity to destabilize adversaries. Cowdrey's research highlights that such subversive operations do not merely affect elections—they threaten the social cohesion of democratic societies by eroding trust in institutions.

Medical Exploitation and Organ Trafficking

Another dimension of modern subversive warfare involves medical corruption and the exploitation of vulnerable populations. Documented cases in the United States and abroad reveal the illicit trafficking of organs, often involving prisoners, marginalized populations, and immigrants (Scheper-Hughes, 2001). Such exploitation combines physical harm with social and psychological manipulation, continuing patterns of humiliation and victimization historically associated with sexual and wartime violence.

The trafficking of organs and other forms of medical exploitation underscores the systemic nature of subversive networks. By preying on vulnerability, these operations sustain cycles of profit, fear, and social destabilization. Cowdrey's analysis situates these

modern abuses within the broader historical continuum, linking contemporary crimes to past tactics of coercion, exploitation, and political manipulation.

Propaganda Today

The digital age has transformed propaganda, enabling both state and non-state actors to manipulate perceptions at unprecedented scale. Social media platforms, memes, algorithmically amplified content, and AI-driven disinformation campaigns allow character assassination to occur in real time. Modern propaganda continues to weaponize shame, sexual scandal, and identity politics, reflecting strategies that were evident in WWII and the Cold War.

The continuity of these techniques demonstrates that while tools evolve, the underlying logic remains: discredit, humiliate, and destabilize. Victims, whether individuals, communities, or entire political movements, experience the same dual harms seen in earlier conflicts—both personal and structural. Cowdrey's ongoing research emphasizes the importance of recognizing these patterns as forms of systemic warfare rather than isolated incidents.

Conclusion

From World War II to the present day, character assassination, sexualized shame, propaganda, and systemic exploitation have functioned as consistent instruments of political and social control. Historical examples of wartime sexual violence, genocide, and purity culture set the stage for modern tactics of disinformation, revenge filming, and organized criminal subversion.

The work of researchers like D. Cowdrey underscores that these practices are part of a broader continuum of subversive warfare. By connecting historical atrocities to contemporary political and social abuses, her scholarship highlights the urgent need for accountability, transparency, and protections for vulnerable populations. Recognizing the persistence of these strategies is a critical step in dismantling cycles of exploitation, reclaiming civic trust, and ensuring that shame and humiliation are no longer weaponized against individuals or communities.

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Updated Statistics and Supporting Data

Organized Crime, Trafficking, and Subversive Networks

- In the United States, the National Human Trafficking Hotline reported 2,486 incidents of human trafficking in 2023, with 2,486 involving commercial sex acts and 751 involving labor trafficking (Congress.gov, 2023).
- Globally, trafficked organs account for up to 10% of all organ transplants, generating annual profits estimated between \$840 million and \$1.7 billion (Lop.parl.ca, 2023).

Foreign Influence and Political Subversion

- A 2020 report by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security identified foreign interference in the 2020 U.S. federal elections, targeting election infrastructure and political organizations (DHS.gov, 2020).
- In 2025, investigative reporting uncovered Chinese-linked operatives supporting pro-China candidates in New York City elections, violating federal and state tax-exemption rules by engaging in political advocacy (NYPost.com, 2025; TheGuardian.com, 2025).

Medical Exploitation and Organ Trafficking

- The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime reported that trafficked organs account for up to 10% of organ transplants globally, with profits estimated between \$840 million and \$1.7 billion annually (Lop.parl.ca, 2023).
- In the United States, over 100,000 individuals are on the national organ transplant waiting list, with 13 people dying each day due to the shortage of available organs (OrganDonor.gov, 2023).

Propaganda Today

- The global digital advertising market is projected to grow from \$350 billion in 2020 to \$786.2 billion by 2026, indicating a significant increase in digital platforms that can be exploited for propaganda purposes (BoomCycle.com, 2023).
- In 2023, internet advertising revenues in the United States reached a record-high of \$225 billion, increasing by 7.3% year-over-year, highlighting the growing influence of digital media in shaping public opinion (IAB.com, 2023).

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