The Great Soviet Computer Conspiracy

by Walter Reich

In 1951, Harvard sociologist David Riesman published an essay called "The Nylon War." In it, he suggested that the easiest way to vanquish our Soviet adversaries would be to drop consumer goods on them from airplanes.

Deluge those deprived masses with Ansco cameras and Schick shavers, and they would soon forsake their jobs at the Red October Tank Works. Shower them with Camel cigarettes and Ronson lighters, and Karl Marx would quickly fade into the recesses of collective memory.

In fact, Riesman contended, such an operation—the so-called Bar Harbor Project—had secretly been under way for several months. During the first raid, some 800 U.S. C-54s dumped 200,000 pairs of nylon hose, four million packs of cigarettes, 35,000 Toni wave kits, 20,000 yo-yos, and 10,000 wristwatches on the Russian cities of Rostov and Vladivostok.

The result, according to Riesman, was "frenzied rioting as the inhabitants scrambled for a share."

Today, three decades later, it is clear that the Soviets are belatedly retaliating with a Bar Harbor Project of their own, a nefarious scheme to corrode the United States from within. But instead of raining vodka (or caviar, or sable pelts) upon the land, they have arranged to flood America with personal computers (PCs).

It happened like this:

Back in 1976, the PC revolution was just starting. The Soviets watched with interest as small computer companies—often housed initially in the family garage—began sprouting in California. They watched with even greater interest as these makeshift workshops produced ever more advanced devices in ever smaller packages.

The Soviets experienced both humiliation and anxiety when they saw that these modest enterprises were turning out portable computers that not only rivaled in sophistication their clumsy communist counterparts but could also be mass-produced and sold at a price that most Americans could afford.

As had been so often the case in the past, humiliation and anxiety became, for the Soviets, the parents of invention. Keen tacticians in the Central Committee suddenly recognized how they could paralyze the best minds in America.

What the Soviets did when they saw the PC revolution begin was to speed it up. By the late 1970s, hundreds of computer whizzes were emerging from their garages with promising new prototypes and programs. They were all looking for backers in order to go commercial. Neither the San Francisco banks nor the Wall Street venture capitalists would give them the time of day.

Moscow proved to be more sympathetic. Using millions of dollars in hard currency from foreign sales of *Stolichnaya* vodka, the Russians, via

intermediaries in the secretive world of international finance, provided the scruffy entrepreneurs with seed money on highly favorable terms.

The rest, of course, is history. Personal computers were soon rolling off the California assembly lines and into the offices, dens, and recreation rooms of the American bourgeoisie. No one suspected a thing.

Despite its public reticence, the Kremlin's chief targets are not hard to identify. At whom, after all, has most computer advertising been aimed? For whom, primarily, have the electronic spreadsheets and multicolor graphics and data base management systems been invented?

Answer: For the cadres of capitalism. For stockbrokers, businessmen, bankers, salesmen, and retailers.

The conventional wisdom, of course, is that personal computers are *good* for capitalism. Businessmen *need* tools to track expenses, forecast sales, plan budgets, and fix prices. Don't they?

This sort of attitude plays right into Soviet hands. For the truth is that, while it may be gratifying to an executive to be able to spread out, on a single computer screen, the figures for his company's April sales, and then instantly transform those numbers into pie charts or bar graphs, it is not, in the vast majority of cases, necessary. Yet businessmen who until now worked happily with paper and pencil, and consulted their accountants but once a month, are now falling all over each other at the local Computerland to buy up the latest "peripheral" for their hardware or "windowing" aid for their software.
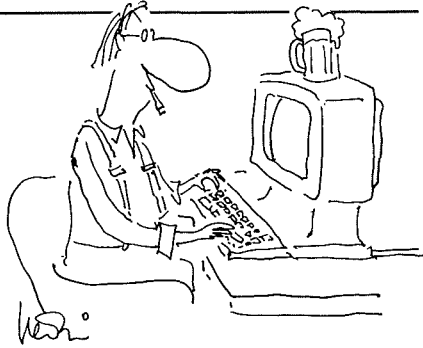
Or they are throwing out all of their "old" equipment, purchased six months earlier, and replacing it with newer systems that will allow them to tell their computers what to do by touching the screen with a finger or by maneuvering a mechanical "mouse" across the desk.

Go into the nearest office building and observe a typical capitalist, chosen at random. You will not, I wager, find him building a better mousetrap. You will instead find him manipulating his mouse. You will find him playing with his VisiCalc. You will find him using electronic mail when a telephone call would do; mastering the intricacies of dBase II; studying one of his 30 instruction manuals; or trying to recover the data he lost when the power went out.

You will find him, in short, spending 20 hours a week to do, elegantly and precisely, what he used to do, sloppily and approximately, in five. And you will find him spending the other 20 hours of his working week at his PC, doing what he never needed to do before, and still doesn't. The bottom line: 35 hours a week in wasted digital bliss.

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But businessmen are by no means the only American professional group whose talents and energies the Soviets mean to sap. Moscow has also sought to neutralize the American intelligentsia, that bewildering muster of scholars, journalists, "policy intellectuals," and other warriors in the ideological struggle for the ownership of history.

During the 1930s, the Soviets wooed Western intellectuals with a messianic ideology. Today, the chief instrument wielded by the Kremlin in its undercover campaign is the word-processing program.

Consider only one case among many, that of James Fallows. Mr. Fallows was for several years President Jimmy Carter's chief speechwriter. He wrote a widely-praised book on national defense. More recently, he published a sensitive analysis of the problems of immigration into the United States.

But now, after a couple of years of using the WordStar word-processing program on his home computer (a Victor 9000), all he is doing, it seems, is thinking about, and writing about, WordStar. In the January issue of the *Atlantic*, he devoted an entire article to his adventures and troubles with that program (of which nearly one million copies are in use). He spent weeks rearranging the letters on his keyboard. And he figured out how to get into the program itself in order to change its codes and characteristics.

There was something fetching about the article, even lucid. Yet it was the lucidity, sadly, of a brilliant mind that, though it might have contributed an endless flow of creative solutions to our national dilemmas, chose instead to explain how to "scroll more smoothly," "make space on Drive A," or "allow the cursor to move more smoothly and quickly across the screen." The Soviets must have been pleased.

Needless to say, our children offer another obvious target. American child prodigies, having rebounded from the education gap revealed in 1957 by Sputnik, have now been "gapped" again: They have abandoned higher math for higher hacking, expending their best efforts on breaking the computer codes of banks rather than the spines of books. Many children have abandoned the educational enterprise altogether, playing hookey at the screen with rented games of *Snakepit* or *Temple of Apshai*.

All in all, the great computer diversion has been an extremely clever Soviet scheme. It has now put in jeopardy our national mental capacities, already eroded by three decades of network television.

Clearly, America must retaliate massively. We must find some way of distracting and disrupting Soviet society. Unfortunately, nylon stockings and yo-yos will no longer do. More effective countermeasures are obviously in order.

Lawyers, for example; we could secretly endow, through UNESCO, 100 new Soviet law schools devoted solely to teaching the art of incessant litigation. Or have the Voice of America broadcast Monday Night Football. Or, most insidious of all, introduce *them*, by hook or by crook, to the joys of personal computing.