Report: Russian intel started the Seth Rich rumor to cover for DNC hack

Enlarge / Mary Rich, the mother of slain DNC staffer Seth Rich, gives a press conference in Bloomingdale on August 1, 2016. SVR agents jumped on Seth Rich's death as an opportunity to launch a disinformation campaign, according to a new report.
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Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR, or Sluzhba Vneshney Razvedki Rossiyskoy Federatsii), the successor to the Soviet KGB's First Chief Directorate, is the keeper of the KGB's legacy of "active measures." The group engages in political warfare using subversive operations to weaken the United States and links between NATO allies. And according to a new report from Yahoo News' Michael Isikoff, the SVR played a particularly underhanded role in activities leading up to the 2016 US presidential election in order to create a counter-narrative to the exposure of other Russian intelligence agencies' hacking operations at the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC). The SVR wanted to spin a conspiracy theory about the death of DNC staffer Seth Rich—a conspiracy theory that promoted Rich as the source of DNC and Clinton campaign emails published by Guccifer 2.0 and WikiLeaks.

This fabricated narrative had Rich being killed not in a botched robbery, as Washington DC police had found, but by a hit squad hired by Hillary Clinton as retribution for leaking campaign emails to WikiLeaks. This conspiracy theory was planted through various websites and later promoted by InfoWars' Alex Jones and other "alt-right" media outlets. Ultimately, it was even promoted within the Trump administration as investigations by the Justice Department into the DNC and Clinton email hacks went forward.

Julian Assange suggested that Rich was a source—and was killed as a result—in an interview with Dutch television. He made those suggestions even though he knew that WikiLeaks had received the emails after Rich was killed. Assange's suggestion spurred additional speculation, which was also fueled by posts from a Twitter account: @TEN_GOP, a fake Tennessee Republican account. @TEN_GOP was one of several accounts run by the Internet Research Agency, the organization in St. Petersburg that ran the Russian social media disinformation campaign leading up to, and in the wake of, the 2016 presidential elections.

Former Assistant US Attorney Deborah Sines, who was in charge of the investigation into the Rich murder case until she retired in 2018, told Isikoff that she had seen copies of two SVR intelligence reports about Seth Rich that had been intercepted by US intelligence agencies. The reports contained fake "intelligence bulletins" claiming that Rich had thought he was meeting with the FBI but instead was met by a team of Clinton-hired assassins. The bulletin was planted on Whatdoesitmean.com—a site used to host a number of Russian disinformation campaigns.

Sines said that the motivation of the campaign was obvious: "If Seth is the leaker to WikiLeaks, it doesn't have anything to do with the Russians. So of course Russia's interest in doing this is incredibly transparent."

At the time SVR circulated the conspiracy, Trump supporters, including former advisor Steve Bannon, continued to push the story with media outlets. “Huge story … he was a Bernie guy … it was a contract kill, obviously,” Bannon said of Rich in a March 17, 2017 text message to a CBS “60 Minutes” producer that was later seen by Yahoo News.

In May of 2017, Fox News reported a claim that an FBI forensics report had shown Rich was in communication with WikiLeaks before he died—a story promoted on Sean Hannity’s program by Jay Sekulow, an attorney for Trump. Sines told Isikoff that the story was a “complete fabrication.” And an FBI spokesperson told Yahoo that the FBI had never even opened an investigation into Rich’s murder, let alone looked at his laptop. Rich’s death was considered a Washington Metro Police matter. (Fox News was ultimately forced to retract the story.)

There are components of the newly illuminated Rich disinformation campaign that mirror a Soviet campaign to lay blame for the AIDS crisis on the US military—a campaign run out of the SVR’s predecessor organization called Operation INFEKTION. That campaign used a 1983 story planted in an Indian newspaper as a leverage point to spread that conspiracy theory. Today, the rise of social media has made these types of operations a lot less complicated.

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