

The Russians are tweeting! The Russians are tweeting!

By Will Morrow
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Did you recently take part in a demonstration against police violence in the United States? If so, you may be the latest dupe of Russian president Vladimir Putin and his army of tweeters.

This is the implication of a March 15 report by the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, which claims that Russian-linked Twitter accounts were “stoking the flames of racial division” in August 2016 as hundreds of youth in Milwaukee, Wisconsin engaged in angry protests against the fatal shooting of 23-year-old Sylville Smith by a police officer.

The article has been trumpeted by Democratic and Republican politicians alike as the latest evidence that Russian “hacking” was responsible for the election of Donald Trump in 2016. Based on their hysterical statements, all taken from the same CIA talking points, one would think that the otherwise placid state of Wisconsin had fallen under virtual Russian control.

Former US attorney general under the Obama administration, Eric Holder, while on a campaign visit in the state capital Madison on March 16, claimed that the discovery of less than three dozen tweets by accounts linked to Russia posted in August 2016 “really shows the sophistication” of Russian efforts to “influence racial tension in a state in our nation to have an electoral effect.”

Holder ominously suggested “looking into people in the county who might have possibly helped” the Russians, and called for Congressional hearings and an investigation by the FBI.

A spokeswoman for Republican governor Scott Walker stated that it was “outrageous that any foreign interests would try to cause disruption in our communities and [we] hope the federal government will spend time looking into this interference.”

Democratic Senator Tammy Baldwin declared that

Putin “directed an attack on our democracy” and called for federal legislation to provide states with cybersecurity grants. Democratic State Senator for Milwaukee LaTonya Johnson tweeted that “we were trying to help keep peace in the community...while these fools [Russia] were sowing seeds of racism and hatred.” She claimed that “we’re still vulnerable to these tactics.”

“These are enemies of the United States who are trying to sow dissension in our country and on the streets of Milwaukee,” Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett exclaimed.

The *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* utilized a database of thousands of tweets, collected by NBC News, originally published by accounts identified by Twitter in January as being somehow connected to Russia.

The *Journal Sentinel* report claims that on August 14, 2016, in the midst of three days of protests in Milwaukee, fake Russian Twitter accounts published 32 tweets using the hashtag #Milwaukee. The most prominently cited offender is a fake account intended to impersonate the Republican Party in the state of Tennessee named “Tennessee_GOP.”

The report does not indicate why a supposedly “sophisticated” plot to sow tensions “on the streets of Milwaukee” would use as its vehicle a Twitter account impersonating the branch of a major party in another state, nor provide any proof that anyone in Wisconsin actually read any of the automated tweets. Instead, it simply reports that the tweets were retweeted more than 5,000 times.

According to the report itself, though contradicting its premise that the tweets were intended to promote the election of Donald Trump, the Russian-linked accounts “presented themselves as grassroots opponents or supporters of movements like Black Lives Matter,”

both “defending police and criticizing them.”

More than 100 mainly young people took part in spontaneous demonstrations on the evening of August 13 in the neighborhood of Sherman Park, following the killing of Smith by 24-year-old police officer Dominique Heaggan-Brown. Both the officer and the victim were African American. While Smith had been carrying a gun, he had already thrown it away when Heaggan-Brown fired a fatal shot through the young man’s heart. In the ensuing unrest triggered by the killing, a handful of businesses were looted and several cop cars were set on fire.

Governor Walker responded by mobilizing the National Guard, a section of the military, and placing them on standby in case the police were unable to put down the protests, which continued for a further two days. Heaggan-Brown was charged but later acquitted in the killing.

The residents of Milwaukee did not need Russian bots to “sow dissension.” The real roots of the eruption of social anger on the streets of Milwaukee are to be found in the catastrophic social crisis which wracks the city and the systematic violence and abuse committed by police against workers and youth.

Milwaukee, once known as the “Machine Shop of the World” because of its high concentration of manufacturing jobs, is today the second poorest big city in America after Detroit, littered with abandoned lots and disused factory buildings. The city’s poverty rate in 2014 was 29 percent, and 42 percent for those aged 18 or under. The neighbourhood of Sherman Park where the killing took place has a poverty rate of 43 percent.

The attempt to present the Milwaukee protests as a product of Russian interference should be taken as a serious political warning about the authoritarian character of the Democrats’ anti-Russia campaign.

The *Journal Sentinel* report is part of a broader campaign to present every manifestation of social and political opposition in the United States, including mass demonstrations against police violence, as the product of Russian interference, rather than stemming from the untenable levels of social inequality, in which three Americans hold the same amount of wealth as half the American population, more than 25 years of unending war, and the brutality and violence of American society, where more than 1,000 people are

killed every year by police.

With this bogus anti-Russia campaign the media, Democratic Party and intelligence agencies are attempting to create the conditions for the censorship of social media and the labelling of all forms of political opposition and dissent as the work of “foreign agents,” thereby justifying their immediate suppression by the state.

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