

On the eve of Michigan primary

Another corporate media smear against Bernie Sanders

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Continuing the corporate media attacks on Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders, the *New York Times* published a front-page report Friday highlighting a Sanders visit to the Soviet Union in 1988 to establish a “sister city” connection between Burlington, Vermont, where he was mayor, and Yaroslavl, an industrial city on the Volga River.

The headline of the article conveys the impression that Sanders was the gullible tool of nefarious Soviet manipulation: “As Bernie Sanders Pushed for Closer Ties, Soviet Union Spotted Opportunity.”

The actual content of the article entirely fails to substantiate the lurid implications of the headline, however. The “opportunity” was nothing more than the promotion of peaceful exchanges of visits by officials, sports teams and ordinary citizens, which was supported by both the Reagan administration and its Soviet counterparts under Mikhail Gorbachev.

The *Times* article comes only two weeks after a similarly sensationalized and unsubstantiated report in the *Washington Post*, declaring that US intelligence agencies had concluded that the Russian government was intervening into the US elections in support of Sanders.

The *Post* article was published on the eve of the Nevada primary, in a transparent effort to sabotage the Sanders campaign. The *Times* article has a similar purpose: it comes only four days before the March 10 primaries in six states, the largest of them Michigan, where the Democratic Party and the corporate media aim to give Sanders a death blow, defeating him in a major industrial state where he won an upset victory over Hillary Clinton in 2016.

The Democratic leadership seeks to follow up its

success on “Super Tuesday,” March 3, where former Vice President Joe Biden won 10 of the 14 primaries to take a narrow lead in delegates to the Democratic national convention. They hope that beating Sanders on “mini-Tuesday,” March 10, would effectively clinch the nomination for Biden.

The former vice president is expected to win the primaries in Mississippi and Missouri, while Sanders is expected to win the primary in Washington state—conducted entirely by mail—and the caucuses in North Dakota, which he won in 2016, as well as the primary in Idaho.

The biggest prize of the day, Michigan with 125 delegates, is believed to be a close contest, but virtually the entire state Democratic Party has swung behind Biden over the past week. This shift was led by Governor Gretchen Whitmer, chosen to give the response to President Trump’s State of the Union address earlier this year, who had said she would remain neutral until after the primary, only to announce Thursday her endorsement of Biden.

Whitmer was followed by Representative Elissa Slotkin, one of the 40 Democrats newly elected in 2018 in districts previously held by Republicans, who had also pledged neutrality. Slotkin is a former CIA agent who served in top national security positions under both George W. Bush and Barack Obama, in Iraq and Washington.

That is the context in which the *Times* has chosen to drop its political stink bomb, suggesting, with McCarthyite innuendo but zero evidence, that Sanders was aligned politically with Moscow during the Cold War.

First elected mayor of Burlington, Vermont in 1980,

Sanders was well-known for criticizing the foreign policy of the Reagan administration, visiting Nicaragua on several occasions and opposing the US invasion of the Caribbean island of Grenada in 1983. By the end of that decade, however, rapprochement with the Soviet Union was Washington's policy, taking advantage of the pro-capitalist program of Gorbachev, the last president of the USSR, who was working deliberately to destroy whatever remained of the achievements of the 1917 Russian Revolution.

The diplomatic overtures to Moscow included encouraging the sister city program, which featured city-to-city exchanges to soften the harshness of the Cold War confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. Dozens of cities were involved, with Burlington being one of the smallest and most insignificant—Dianne Feinstein, as mayor of San Francisco, sponsored a similar program with Leningrad (now St. Petersburg).

The article is written in the breathless tones of a major political exposé, noting that the *Times* “examined 89 pages of letters, telegrams and internal Soviet government documents revealing in far greater detail the extent of Mr. Sanders’s personal effort to establish ties between his city and a country many Americans then still considered an enemy ...”

The article claims that these documents “show how the Kremlin viewed these sister city relationships as vehicles to sway American public opinion about the Soviet Union.” No doubt one could similarly cite documents showing that the US government viewed such programs “as vehicles to sway Soviet public opinion about America.” Nor is it a surprise that such programs were carefully monitored by US and Soviet foreign policy and intelligence agencies in the context of the Cold War.

The Sanders campaign responded defensively to the *Times*' front-page report. “Mayor Sanders was proud to join dozens of American cities in seeking to end the Cold War through a Sister Cities program that was encouraged by President Reagan himself,” a Sanders campaign spokesman, Mike Casca, said, noting that the cultural and business exchanges between Burlington and Yaroslavl continue to this day.

The *Times* article also cites statements that Sanders made at the time, deploring the US-Soviet arms race as a waste of money and a threat to human survival. These

did not go much beyond the platitudes of bourgeois pacifism, expressing the hope that “we are going to be able to convert the hundreds of billions of dollars that both the United States and the Soviet Union are now wasting on weapons of destruction into areas of productive human development.”

These statements are quoted now to support the argument that Sanders is out of step with the raging anti-Russia hysteria that grips the Democratic Party, and the plans for building up nuclear weapons and developing “usable” ones that both Democratic and Republican administrations have been engaged in for decades.

The author also recommends:

Democratic Party deploys Russian meddling smears against Sanders

[24 February 2020]



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