



The Russian and Soviet Press: A Long Journey from Suppression to Freedom via Suppression and Glasnost

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THE RUSSIAN AND SOVIET PRESS:

**A Long Journey From
Suppression to Freedom via
Suppression and Glasnost**

By Alexander Merkushev

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The Joan Shorenstein Barone Center

PRESS • POLITICS



• PUBLIC POLICY •

Harvard University
John F. Kennedy School of Government

INTRODUCTION

I met Alexander Merkushev at a Moscow dinner party hosted by Ann Blackman of *Time* and Michael Putzel of the Associated Press in October, 1989. At the time, Merkushev was Editor of the English language service of Tass, the official Soviet news agency. He spoke with fluency and a quiet self-confidence but without the bravado of other young Soviet journalists, many of whom, in their sudden embrace of glasnost, went from one extreme to the other, discarding their recent allegiance to the socialist system and espousing a stylish denunciation of everything from Stalinism to a planned economy with an enthusiasm they mistook for wisdom.

Over caviar and vodka, late into the night, we discussed the wonder of Gorbachev and perestroika and the problems of moving a stagnant society into the uncharted vibrancy of the 1990s. The practice of journalism, naturally, occupied a large part of our discussion. Questions arose; many of them were left unanswered. Has fear vanished from the newsroom? How far could journalists go in criticizing the Soviet system? Gorbachev? Communism? The Party? Lenin? "Freedom of the Press?"—did Soviet journalists even begin to understand the concept?

At one point, I asked Merkushev: "Let us say that when you get to your desk tomorrow morning, you find a message from your boss. 'Comrade,' it says, 'from now on, you forget about glasnost and return to the old way of doing business. Whatever the Party says, you do.' Would you, Sasha?" Merkushev is prematurely balding, and when he's pondering a question, the crease lines run unevenly from his forehead to his scalp. "Yes," he responded, "I think I'd do what the Party said." He then went on to explain his responsibilities to family and friends, father and mother. The honesty and directness of his response, uncharacteristically sober for a young reporter, especially in the still heady days of glasnost, impressed me, and when I returned to Cambridge and thought about the next group of Fellows at the Shorenstein Barone Center, the name of Merkushev popped into my mind. A letter of invitation was soon in the mail, and his acceptance followed in quick order.

Merkushev spent the fall semester of the '90-'91 academic year at the Center, enriching our lives immeasurably with his warmth, charm and seriousness, especially in all of our discussions about freedom of the press. His paper speaks for

itself. It deserves a wide readership, not because Merkushev is one of Russia's top journalists, the big name whose views command attention, but rather because he represents a new generation of Soviet journalist who is beginning to grapple with such concepts as truth, responsibility, candor, courage, all within the broader framework of a society struggling to move from dictatorship to democracy. It is an incredibly difficult journey—one that may never be finished, despite heroic efforts by thousands, even millions, of Merkushevs.

As we sat down for our farewell lunch, I recalled the question I had posed to Sasha in Moscow. Would his answer be the same? Would he still bow before the Party? Sasha's eyes crinkled in a way reminiscent of a character out of Chekhov, a tear, a certain sadness, lurking behind the smile. "No," he said, "if my boss asked me to return to the old days, I wouldn't. I couldn't. Too much has happened." He paused. "You see, I now know what freedom is." Before Sasha returned to Moscow, he told me that he and his friends were going to try to set up a free and independent news agency. "You know, like the AP." I wished him well.

Marvin Kalb
Edward R. Murrow Professor
Director, Joan Shorenstein Barone
Center on the Press,
Politics and Public Policy
Harvard University

THE RUSSIAN AND SOVIET PRESS: A LONG JOURNEY FROM SUPPRESSION TO FREEDOM VIA SUPPRESSION AND GLASNOST

"Freedom of the press must be combined with free representation of the country, and if there is no representation of public opinion, but is only government, then I cannot imagine freedom of the press."

A.S. Suvorin, member of His Majesty's Special Conference for Drawing Up New Press Regulations, 1905

As fate would have it, the Russians had to make their way towards democratic liberties and press freedom twice: first within the framework of czarist Russia and then repeating the entire path within the Communist structure of the Soviet Union. In both cases, their travail produced but partial success: basically a compromise between what the authorities were willing to allow and what the subjects were demanding to obtain.

Attempts launched by pro-democracy forces to accede to freedoms, culminating in the February 1917 "bourgeois democratic" revolution, resulted in the weakening of the Russian empire that had been historically held together by the strong hand of its rulers and led to the paralysis of power in the absence of democratic traditions of government. The Bolsheviks who took advantage of the situation and seized power in November 1917 proclaimed basic liberties only to replace them later with tough controls in all spheres—political, economic, and intellectual. The democratic changes initiated by the Soviet leadership in the mid-1980s did lead to a greater freedom of expression and the acceptance of basic human rights, but they also unleashed long-suppressed nationalist, centrifugal forces that are now threatening to break up the "Soviet empire," tempting the authorities to apply force to preserve the country's unity and their own existence.

The printed word has always had a special appeal for the Russians: writers and poets have enjoyed an esteem that was envied by rulers and heroes alike. Anything that appeared in print was considered truth, and the powers that be, aware of this idiosyncrasy of their subjects, sought to control the press and literature in order to control the populace. They succeeded in doing this only partially as there have always been intrepid men of letters who defied pressures from

above and planted seeds of doubt in the minds of admirers through their novels, poems, or newspaper articles. Very often, they did that at the expense of their own freedom and even lives.

The press, as well as other institutions both in pre-revolutionary Russia and in the Soviet Union, always reflected the tug-of-war between authorities unwilling to yield powers and a public wanting to have as much freedom as they could possibly handle.

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The Beginnings of the Press and the Origins of Censorship

The history of the press in Russia is full of examples of high-level interference in its work, attempts to suppress information or present it in a way favorable for the rulers. The following brief journey through time will also illustrate the struggle for a free press in both imperial and Soviet Russia.

Under Czar Alexei, 1629-1676, extracts from foreign papers were carried by several manuscript periodicals to keep the authorities informed about international developments. The information was uniformly outdated and inaccurate, causing the Muscovite state embarrassment more than once for addressing letters to heads of state who had died, and more generally for demonstrating great ignorance in then-current political matters. Nevertheless the information in these courants was considered to be of state importance and was kept from the public eye.¹

The first Russian newspaper for the general public was born out of an ukaz, or a decree, issued by Peter I on December 16, 1702. Peter, who reigned from 1689 to 1725, was aware of the highly restricted circulation of information on late developments and was quite concerned about the status of education in Russia. His idea was to launch a periodical that would provide the people with information about important events of the day. Appearing with unheard-of

dispatch, the first issue of the new periodical, *Vedomosti*, came forth on January 2, 1703.

Much of the *Vedomosti's* information came from German newspapers, particularly the *Hamburger Relation Courier* and *Nordischer Mercurius*.² As a rule, these papers were received within three weeks after publication and were examined either by Peter himself or by the secretary of his cabinet, Makarov. Whatever seemed interesting was quickly translated into Russian and sent to the typesetters. The general weakness of political and intellectual interests in society then and the greatly restricted ideological outlook of the paper—the glorification of the Northern War and the Czar's armies being the principal theme—restrained its growth and had an adverse effect on its influence. Thus it was that not social need but the ukazes of the czar kept the paper alive while it served much the same function as had the 17th century manuscript courants, which were circulated among the Russian rulers' immediate coterie.

The establishment of private publications in the 1750s was a significant event in the history of Russian periodicals, for until then all periodicals had been governmental organs.³

Catherine II initiated an upsurge of publishing activity by starting her own periodical and then allowing other private citizens to do the same. But the reign of Catherine (1762-1796) marked not only the emergence of private publishing, but also the beginnings of censorship in Russia, the empress herself being the prime censor. She had before her the nearly 400-year-long example of western state controls over private presses plus Russia's long-established paternalism towards the printed word.

European monarchs and jurists had, in controlling the printed word, provided useful concepts: seditious libel, prior censorship, licensing—all of which Catherine and her successors defined and applied as they saw fit. Only later did these administrative measures begin to give way.⁴

In 1804, Alexander I introduced a liberal statute on censorship. But when revolutionaries tried to overthrow his brother who succeeded him to the throne in 1825 (the Decembrist revolt), the new czar, Nicholas I, introduced a far more stringent code. The French traveler, the Marquis de Custine, caught the spirit of the times when he wrote of Russia in 1839:

"Up to now, I believed that man could no more do without truth for the spirit than air and sun for the body; my journey to Russia disabuses me. Here to lie is to protect the social order; to speak the truth is to destroy the state."⁵

The year 1865 marked a watershed in government-press relations because it created entirely new conditions for publishing. The word "press" ceased to mean an enterprise dominated by the government wherein every word was assumed to have official approval; and because the courts began to spell out in more detail the new relationship, writers, editors, publishers, and lawyers were able to improve even more rapidly the position of the press in Russian society in the second half of the 19th century.⁶

Kobeko Commission: Freedom of the Press Proclaimed in Russia

Bowing to revolutionary agitation and general discontent of the population, the czarist government established in 1904 a commission to write a new press law. Known formally as "His Majesty's Special Conference for Drawing Up New Press Regulations," the group was more popularly referred to as the "Kobeko Commission" due to the fact that its chairman was D.F. Kobeko.

Bowing to revolutionary agitation and general discontent of the population, the czarist government established in 1904 a commission to write a new press law.

The debate on the press also sparked off discussions about the country's political system in general. A.S. Suvorin, a member of the Kobeko Commission, summed these up by declaring that "freedom of the press must be combined with free representation of the country, and if there is no representation of public opinion, but is only government, then I cannot imagine freedom of the press."⁷

Prince V.P. Meshchersky was afraid of the bacchanalia that would undoubtedly occur were a free system to be introduced, and those who would suffer from it would not be the "rogues" but the "respectable organs of the press."⁸

Observed Prince Meshchersky: "The interests of the press are dear to me, and therefore I fear a reaction: I fear that two or three mad-caps, having entered into the press thanks to the free system, will put in danger the further existence of that freedom which we are giving to the press

by the universal abrogation of the preliminary censorship. Panic in society will result and then, as often happens in Russia, a reversal in government and some kind of restrictive supplement to the law, the dimensions of which may do damage to that which is most important—freedom of the press.”

In emancipating the press in 1905-1906 by subordinating it solely to the authority of the courts and abolishing prior censorship, Russia granted “freedom of the press” as generally understood in the 19th century in Europe. But that did not stop newspapers from being seized or editors from being harassed.

The Bolshevik, the Decree on the Press, and the Reintroduction of Censorship

Two days after seizing power on November 7, 1917, the new Bolshevik government in Russia adopted a decree on the press, banning—temporarily or permanently—press bodies that called for open resistance or disobedience to the new authorities or incited strife by distorting facts or calling for actions punishable by law. The interpretation of the decree was rather broad, leading to the closure of virtually all papers in opposition to the Bolsheviks.

No censorship in the strict sense was introduced, however. Many professional revolutionaries with the vast experience of work under restrictive rule abhorred the very idea of “red censorship.” The decree made it clear that “as soon as the new government is firmly established, all administrative controls of the press will be abolished; full freedom will be granted to the press within the framework of its responsibility before the courts, in accordance with the broadest and most progressive law.”

But it took more than 70 years to draft and adopt a new press law, while the idea of prior censorship was quickly embraced by the emerging Soviet bureaucracy.

In May 1919, the press department of the Moscow City Council obliged all periodicals in the capital to request permission from it before sending articles into print. The Council of People’s Commissars rescinded the city’s decision only to introduce pre-publication censorship nationwide two years later, on December 12, 1921. On June 6, 1922 the Russian government approved regulations on establishing the Main Department for the Affairs of Literature and Publishing, which came to be known by its Russian-language acronym Glavlit. The name stuck even though the censorship apparatus later

changed its name to the Main Board for the Protection of Military and State Secrets in the Press. Censorship is an issue that arouses emotions: its practice produces an almost instinctive opposition. For this reason, those who use it often call it something else, as did the imperial officials who changed the name of their censoring agency to “Chief Administration for Press Affairs” in 1865.⁹

Initially, Glavlit was in charge of permitting the establishment of press bodies and publishing houses, compiling lists of banned books and censoring manuscripts before publication. The chief emphasis was on non-divulgence of “military secrets,” later changed to “information not subject to being made public,” and “anti-Soviet agitation,” which came to include “works embracing hostile ideology on issues of public life, religion, economy, ethnic relations, art, etc.”

Censorship covered practically all printed materials, the only exception being secret government and party correspondence, accounting records and handwritten newspapers posted on walls.

Soon Glavlit gained the right to play a part in the appointment of chief editors and changes in editorial boards of newspapers and magazines. In the early 1930s it was assigned to decide by itself what information should be considered classified. Censorship covered practically all printed materials, the only exception being secret government and party correspondence, accounting records and handwritten newspapers posted on walls.

The situation remained unchanged until the late 1980s.

The Censorship Debate in the Late 1980s

All of the discourse about the press that started in the mid-1980s and continued until the adoption of the new press law on June 12, 1990 did not involve issues of censorship, since the very existence of censorship was a secret. During one of the debates on the press, a high-ranking Glavlit official even told journalists not to mention the word “censorship” in their account

of the meeting since "readers could think that we have censorship."¹⁰ This was very typical of life in the USSR: not mentioning things that are not nice and making believe they do not exist. Characteristically, drug addiction was one of such taboo subjects. The problem did not exist in the Soviet vocabulary and the police did not have special units to fight drug related crimes: you cannot fight something that does not exist. The scope of the problem described in the press in the late 1980s horrified the public and forced the Interior Ministry, which is in charge of police operations, to set up a special department to fight drug trafficking.

As democratic processes were unfolding in the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, the press took its future into its own hands. Hundreds of samizdat newspapers and magazines hit improvised sidewalk newsstands, their political affiliations ranging from "left of the left-wing" to ultra-right, from Marxist to monarchist. The spread of new technology, including desk-top publishing and photocopy machines, and the weakening of central controls in virtually all areas of public life dramatically changed the press scene. Television increased the share of live programs; journalists at established government news organizations felt the need to express themselves more freely in the freer atmosphere that was reigning in the country. Under these conditions, the existence of prior censorship was becoming increasingly irrelevant, although highly placed censors themselves strongly disagreed. Glavlit chairman V.A. Boldyrev argued that "Preliminary control is more effective and less 'painful' in what concerns the protection of state secrets in the press."¹¹

The Utilitarian Approach after Glasnost

In one of his first public speeches as General Secretary of the Soviet Communist party in 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev employed the term *glasnost*, broadly interpreted as openness, candor or publicity, stating that "the more informed people are, the more consciously they will act, the more actively they will support the party, its plans, and its fundamental goals."

For Gorbachev, *glasnost* was a tool to help streamline the political system, reorganize the economy, and fight such negative phenomena as widespread corruption, inefficient management, and overall inertia of the populace.

As Professor Timothy Colton of Toronto University wrote, "Gorbachev's emphasis was

less on the right to know than on the utility of an informed citizenry to the regime."¹²

This utilitarian approach, a fluctuating policy adopted (or abandoned) in the interests of the state, differs from the concept of the right to know as a fundamental, inviolable principle. Because of this, no one—either in the Soviet Union or abroad—initially believed that *glasnost* and greater freedom were ends in themselves. Gorbachev appeared simply to be using liberalization to inspire workers and intellectuals to fight against the party and state bureaucrats who opposed his reforms.¹³

Some outside observers greeted the Gorbachev innovations with the hope that the Soviet Union would allow a greater measure of freedom, including less restricted emigration and more attention to human rights. But most dismissed them as wishful thinking. Professor Hermann Frederick Eilts of Boston University wrote in a book published as recently as 1989, that "*Glasnost* and *perestroika* represent at best a process that will take years to show any meaningful Gestalt, although obstacles and slowdowns will be manifest.... Generally speaking, the Soviet system is not one of abrupt shifts in course, but rather one of imperceptible dialectical fusion. This often makes substantive change apparent only long after a corner has been turned."¹⁴

"The major objective of *glasnost* is to win sympathy and support, both inside and outside the Soviet Union, for the country's new economic policy," observed Ladislav Bittman, Director of the Disinformation Documentation Center and Associate Professor of Journalism at Boston University.¹⁵

According to an opinion poll conducted among journalists and party functionaries in charge of mass media bodies in Central Russia by the Moscow Higher Party School in 1988, *glasnost* had a long way to go before becoming a norm of life. Forty-two percent of respondents understood *glasnost* as the right of all citizens to know about everything that takes place in the country, and 34 percent viewed it as the legally endorsed system of free information. The opinion as to when this would happen was divided more or less equally among those who thought that this process would be completed by 1995, by the end of the century, and even between the years 2025 or 2050. All three groups linked the evolution of *glasnost* with a favorable international situation and the further unfolding of overall democratic processes in Soviet society.

The corner seemed to be very far away.

The Press Initiative in Stretching the Limits of Glasnost

It was the press itself that was to cross the t's and dot the i's in its crusade for greater freedom, often acting against stereotypes supported by its own representatives. Epitomizing and upholding these traditional views, Valentin Zorin, a senior Soviet political commentator, said in a television discussion about glasnost that "Self-criticism is used by enemy propaganda to cause harm to our country, for open slander against socialism."

But the majority of journalists were only too eager to respond to Gorbachev's calls for greater candor in reporting shortcomings and exposing corrupt officials. Stories were run in newspapers and magazines, depicting "servants of the people" living in luxury, while "the masters of the land" were eking out a miserable existence, slaving on cotton plantations and in coal pits.

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The Soviet press started carrying health, economic, and other vital statistics, marking a shift of policy away from the concealment of figures showing Soviet performance lagging behind other countries. The infant mortality rate, long a taboo subject not only for the press but also for physicians themselves, was revealed for the first time. This disclosure, as well as the publication of the previously classified information about life expectancy of Soviet citizens, sent shock waves throughout the nation. The press compared the indicators to those of other countries to find out that the Soviet Union was at the bottom of the list, somewhere between Honduras and Barbados. The work of the Health Ministry has ever since been under close scrutiny of the public and the press.

True, the "glasnost" process was not welcomed by entrenched bureaucrats and even many members of the general public. The former feared losing their own positions and privileges, the latter feared hearing so much "bad news" after years of the comforting and dosed flow of mostly "good news." Had it not been for the terrible national tragedy, which was the Chernobyl nuclear power plant accident in April 1986, the opposition to glasnost on the part of

government and party bureaucrats would have probably forced the press to adopt a "more responsible attitude" and "spare the feelings of the people."

Coverage of the Chernobyl Accident as a Breakthrough for Soviet Journalism

By the time of the Chernobyl accident, the press was ready to cover it as fully as possible. The initial delay in the publication of vital information about the disaster was largely due to the unwillingness of government agencies and officials in nuclear-related fields to provide information and their attempts to belittle the magnitude of the nuclear accident and cover up their own incompetence.

The explosion at Unit 4 of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant occurred in the early hours of April 26, 1986. This was Saturday and many officials as well as journalists were away from their desks for the weekend. Journalists at TASS learned that something was wrong from Reuters and AP stories reporting increased levels of radiation in Scandinavia. Messages were immediately sent to Kiev, the city closest to Chernobyl with a TASS bureau, to determine whether a Soviet nuclear facility had anything to do with the reported rise in radioactivity in Scandinavia. Moscow-based journalists tried to get in touch with specialists or officials in the Soviet capital. Those who might have known something were unavailable, others said they did not know anything. The first dispatches from TASS correspondents in the Ukraine confirmed the accident but failed to give any information as to its magnitude—Ukrainian officials were just as reticent. The TASS World News Service moved a one-paragraph story Monday night—it took all of Monday to have it authorized at the highest level of government. That was followed by a chronicle of nuclear power plant accidents over the past several years, including the one at Three Mile Island in the United States, to emphasize the "normality" of the situation. For several days the press managed to print only one brief communiqué per day, all provided by TASS and authorized at the highest level.

But the circumstances surrounding the accident, and the interest, fear and rumors it provoked, caused other media outlets, including television, to attempt to cover it from their own perspective. TV coverage was especially revealing since it provided the visual image of nonsensical men wearing white gowns and gas masks, and the sight of the still smoldering

reactor, even though the commentators' words were more comforting than realistic.

With time, more emphasis was placed on the incompetence of plant managers and designers, and on attempts by local and later central health officials to cover up the consequences of the accident. The Chernobyl accident and the press coverage of clean-up operations alerted public opinion in the country to the dangers of nuclear power. People around operating power plants and areas where their construction was planned started forming independent environmentalist groups. As journalists engaged in true investigative reporting and uncovered facts relating to other incidents involving nuclear facilities, even military ones, the environmentalist movement grew so strong that the government had to close a number of nuclear power plants, and to abandon the construction of many nuclear facilities. Recently it announced the termination of the production of military-grade plutonium. In the latter case, international as well as domestic factors were at work.

TV coverage was especially revealing since it provided the visual image of no-nonsense men wearing white gowns and gas masks, and the sight of the still smoldering reactor, even though the commentators' words were more comforting than realistic.

Public pressure, brought about by extensive press reports and the growing public awareness of the dangers of nuclear testing, compelled the Soviet Defense Ministry to consider closing its biggest nuclear test site in Semipalatinsk, Kazakhstan. And the popularly elected parliament in that Central Asian republic recently banned nuclear tests on its territory altogether, causing the military establishment to move testing to the Arctic island of Novaya Zemlya. The underground nuclear test in Novaya Zemlya on October 24, 1990 generated immense controversy around the issue of nuclear testing and sparked protests by inhabitants in Northern Russia.

Chernobyl presented a real challenge to journalists in that it required personal courage not just to visit contaminated regions, but also to write about shortcomings, many of which

were direct products of the country's social and economic system.

After Chernobyl, no natural or man-made calamity seemed too scary. The press became filled with accounts of air crashes and train wrecks, hijack attempts and street violence. This behavior of the press displeased many a Soviet citizen who often complained that "under Brezhnev, we did not have so many accidents." Many linked the country's predicament—economic and ethnic—to the operation of the press, accusing it not only of being unpatriotic and exaggerating problems but also of stirring up trouble and leading the Soviet Union to disaster. Thus twisting the correlation between cause and effect, Yegor Ligachev, a retired Politburo member, observed in an interview with *U.S. News and World Report*, "One reason for the current gloom in the country is that from morning till night, negative things from the past are being dumped on the people. Our cultural figures lately have published more things that aren't true, that are anti-Soviet, than our enemies in the West managed to do in 70 years." ¹⁶

Gorbachev's Broadening of the Notion of Glasnost to Embrace Freedom of Speech, and the Reaction of the Censors

The year 1988, dubbed the "Year of Glasnost," saw the keenest debate on the role of the press and the emergence of the first draft law on the media, prepared very much in the old fashion by party and government officials with an aim to restrict the freedom of expression and regulate down to the minutest detail the operation of all mass media bodies. The draft was severely criticized in the press and at public rallies and quietly passed away.

As practice changed the content of glasnost and stretched its limits, Gorbachev went on record to give a new definition of his brainchild. In an interview with *Newsweek* and the *Washington Post* in May 1988, he said:

"Glasnost and freedom of speech are, of course, interrelated but not identical notions... Freedom of speech is an indispensable condition of glasnost, but glasnost is a broader term. We understand it not only as the right of each citizen openly to express his opinion on all social and political issues, but also as the commitment of the ruling party and all bodies of government and management to observe the principle of openness in decision making, be responsible for their actions, react by deeds to criticism, and take into account the advice and recommenda-

tions offered by work collectives, public organizations, and individual citizens. In glasnost, as we understand it, the emphasis is on the creation of conditions enabling citizens to take a real part in discussing all affairs of the country and in elaborating and adopting decisions that affect the interests of society, and to exercise control over the fulfillment of these decisions." 17

By that time this was the most revolutionary definition of glasnost by the Soviet leader. Paradoxically, the interview itself stirred a lot of controversy about the degree of freedom of speech and the press allowed in the Soviet Union at that time. Indeed, the text of the *Newsweek-Washington Post* interview, the questions as well as the answers, was altered at the party Central Committee before its publication in the USSR, ostensibly to "shorten" it. The deletion of the name of Gorbachev's reputed archrival of that time, Yegor Ligachev, from the Soviet version of a *Newsweek-Washington Post* question about the splits in the leadership was the most revealing instance of selective editing of the interview.

Anything that might have embarrassed Gorbachev before his Soviet audience was left on the cutting-room floor, including the reference to Gorbachev's personal telephone call to dissident academician Andrei Sakharov, asking him "to return to his patriotic work" and effectively ending his internal exile in Gorky.

Incidentally, the above definition of glasnost failed to appear in full in the *Newsweek* issue. Nor was it the only instance when the Soviet leader's words were censored in his own country.

At one point in an improvised street discussion with citizens during a trip to a provincial town, he called on the press "to play the part of the opposition for lack of other political parties in the USSR." This remark, shown live on television, was subsequently deleted from all otherwise full television accounts of his statements and never appeared in print.

A Leningrad College Teacher Threatens Glasnost

The year 1988 marked the watershed between the glasnost that was allowed, encouraged or tolerated by authorities and the glasnost that no longer needed any assistance from "above" to exist and develop on its own. In fact, that year nearly saw the end of glasnost, and had it not been for reform-minded politicians like Alexander Yakovlev, then a Politburo member, or maybe even Gorbachev himself, the Soviet

press would not enjoy the freedom it finally acquired in 1990.

On March 13, 1988, one day before Gorbachev was to leave on a trip to Yugoslavia, the influential newspaper *Sovetskaya Rossiya* published a letter to the editor from Leningrad chemistry lecturer Nina Andreyeva which became known as the "manifesto of conservative forces." The article attacked glasnost and came out in support of Stalin's repressive policies because they advanced the cause of socialism. Written from the Stalinist perspective and combining Russian nationalism and Marxism, the letter advocated viewing events in their "class" context.

The year 1988 marked the watershed between the glasnost that was allowed, encouraged or tolerated by authorities and the glasnost that no longer needed any assistance from "above" to exist and develop on its own.

Many Soviet citizens and especially journalists who had been used to signals of this kind showing them how to "behave properly" viewed Andreyeva's letter as an end of both glasnost and perestroika. It was clear that the publication of the letter had received strong support from the party leadership. In addition, acting on "recommendations" from the party Central Committee, TASS circulated the text of the article to provincial newspapers for reprint, an action that later incurred on its journalists the wrath of many of their more liberal colleagues.

Glasnost and perestroika hung in the balance for three weeks until *Pravda* published an editorial excoriating conservatives for engineering the letter's publication and warning that the "revolutionary principles of perestroika" would carry on. The *Pravda* editorial was reportedly written by Alexander Yakovlev, a man often described as Gorbachev's alter ego and a driving force behind perestroika.

The fact that a single article could paralyze political discourse in the country for so long illustrates how thin the layer of reform was and how little would have been needed to turn the country back to the days before Gorbachev. It also shows that without assistance from above, the press was not yet able to overcome the decades-long habit of doing whatever it was told. True, the

editors of many provincial newspapers refused to reprint Andreyeva's letter, many at the expense of their own careers. But those were isolated instances, the exceptions confirming the rule.

The fact that a single article could paralyze political discourse... illustrates how thin the layer of reform was and how little would have been needed to turn the country back to the days before Gorbachev.

The incident was extensively investigated later on, during the period when the press felt free to examine and analyze its own shortcomings as well as failings of the system. The article turned out to be a genuine letter by the obscure college lecturer turned politician. Contrary to widely held views that "Nina Andreyeva" stood for a high-ranking party official, probably Ligachev himself (even *Pravda* used quotation marks around the words "letter to the editor"), Andreyeva was a real person who wrote the article all by herself and submitted its shorter versions to several central newspapers, including *Pravda*, for possible publication. The chief editor of *Sovietskaya Rossiya*, himself a devout conservative, apparently liked the idea and sent the abridged version for approval to the No. 2 man in the Politburo and chief of the party's ideological work. Ligachev reportedly read the article and found it quite suitable for publication in the paper, an organ of the party Central Committee. He was later quoted as saying that the short version of Andreyeva's article was not critical of Gorbachev's policies of perestroika and glasnost and that he did not mean to organize resistance to reform in the Soviet Union. Whether these reports are true or not, we will soon learn from Ligachev's own memoirs that he has gone to write in his hometown in Siberia upon retirement from the party Politburo in 1990.

Behaving in a way characteristic of relations within the party hierarchy, *Pravda*, the main organ of the Central Committee, castigated *Sovietskaya Rossiya* for its lack of "responsibility for articles and publications." While not rejecting debates, discussions, and polemics altogether, the *Pravda* editorial pointed out, "We need disputes that help to advance perestroika and lead to the consolidation of forces, to cohe-

sion around perestroika, and not to disunity. We will firmly and steadily follow the revolutionary principles of perestroika: more glasnost, more democracy, more socialism." ¹⁸

The anti-Andreyeva editorial encouraged the press to write with even greater boldness and marked the acme of *Pravda's* role as the flagship of the Soviet press. Never again would *Pravda's* pages be used as a vehicle for revolutionary, innovative ideas. On the contrary, despite changes in the management, *Pravda's* editorial policy has begun to become increasingly conservative and anti-reformist. The year 1988 also saw the beginning of the decline of the Communist party as well as its principal publication as first demands were voiced to remove the constitutional article enshrining the party's "leading role" in society.

Yet the party had to make one more important step in 1988, a step that indisputably led to a greater freedom of the press and one more step towards its own undoing.

The National Party Conference as a Boost to Glasnost

The All-Union party conference, basically a curtailed version of a congress which is the Soviet Communist party's supreme governing body, held on June 28-July 1, 1988, adopted a resolution reaffirming that glasnost "is an indispensable condition for the expression of the democratic essence of the socialist system, its orientation towards man, and the involvement of individuals in all affairs of society and the state..." ¹⁹

The archives belonging to various government departments or organizations, such as the KGB or the Communist party, remain off-limits, however.

The resolution on glasnost was ambiguous in many respects. It called for the use of glasnost as a tool "to consolidate all social forces around ideas and principles of perestroika" and serve "the interests of the socialist plurality of views." But it also stressed the "need to remove unjustified restrictions on the use of statistical data about the socio-economic and political development of society, on the ecological situation, ... ensure accessibility of all library funds and adopt laws on the use of archive materials." ²⁰

The latter provision led to the exposure of many past and present practices, from Stalinist repressions to abuses of psychiatry to previously unreported accidents in military and space fields. State, or national, archives were opened to the public. The archives belonging to various government departments or organizations, such as the KGB or the Communist party, remain off-limits, however. The explanation is the absence of a law on archives, yet to be adopted by parliament. The true reason, however, is the fear on the part of these agencies that materials to be found by researchers will lead to fresh exposures of their practices in the distant and not so distant past.

Public opinion polls...showed that 90 percent of the Soviet population regarded changes in the work of the press and television as the sole positive result of Gorbachev's perestroika policies.

The press was beginning to influence public opinion and even the country's politics to a degree never experienced before. By providing the full picture of Stalinist repressions, for instance, the press made the general public and emerging politicians explore the underlying causes of the country's grim history. As a result, Lenin's practices came under close scrutiny, and so did the very ideas of socialism preached by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Works by leading non-Communist philosophers were published for the first time, and the public not only discovered the existence of ideas different from those that reigned in the country for more than seventy years, but also started forming groups or movements that subscribed to those ideas, marking a change in the political situation and preparing ground for the emergence of opposition political parties. Reflecting this change of public mood, the USSR's new supreme legislative body, the Congress of People's Deputies, elected in 1989, finally deleted the constitutional article about the Communist party's "leading role" in society, effectively proclaiming a multi-party system.

Another subject that had been extensively debated in the press was the introduction of executive presidency to replace, actually, the rule of the party and its Politburo. When public pressure grew to a point when the party had to

say something, Gorbachev took the floor in parliament to flatly reject the proposal, dismissing the very idea of presidency as "alien" to our country. A few months later, however, the parliament overwhelmingly voted in favor of changing the political system and elected Gorbachev as the USSR's first president.

Struggle for Circulation and Bureaucratic Control of Subscriptions to Popular Periodicals

As articles in newspapers and magazines inflamed passions across the political spectrum, and the press began to play an increasingly important role in the daily lives of the country's citizens, the bureaucracy sharply reduced available subscription quotas, particularly for pro-reform periodicals. This was at a time when lines to buy newspapers and magazines, unlike lines near department or food stores, were the only encouraging sign of the emergence of a more informed and politically active citizenry and subscriptions to "reform" publications increased dramatically, while the circulation of conservative journals lagged behind. With the first free elections one year from then, and political rallies still largely suppressed by the authorities, the press was the only legitimate vehicle for the expression of various views on the country's past, present, and future. Emotions erupted in major cities and protests were voiced in the press and television against the drive to "conserve paper," as bureaucrats explained their action which reformers correctly interpreted as an effort to restrict democratization. Finally the authorities had to rescind the order—another victory for public opinion and the emerging free press.

The Press and Public Opinion

Public opinion polls conducted in February 1989 showed that 90 percent of the Soviet population regarded changes in the work of the press and television as the sole positive result of Gorbachev's perestroika policies. By summer, the indicator dropped somewhat due to widespread displeasure with the tendentious coverage of ethnic conflicts, miners' strikes, and activities of new public organizations and movements, as well as with the superficial criticism of Stalin and events in Soviet history.²¹

Faced with growing problems in the sphere of ethnic relations and economics, the powers that be sought to curb the flow of information available to the general public. The government-

controlled press was ordered to carry only government-approved TASS accounts of ethnic or labor conflicts. All these "dispatches" were actually written by high-ranking officials at the party Central Committee headquarters in Moscow and Gorbachev himself was said to proofread them—very much like czar Peter who personally edited the *Vedomosti* more than 200 years ago. That situation did not last long, however. Newspapers revolted, and, first, the youth daily *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, and then other periodicals, began carrying accounts written by their own correspondents on the spot. As a result, many newspapers published more information about actual developments in Azerbaijan and Armenia, the scene of fierce ethnic clashes, or in Siberia, which witnessed the emergence and consolidation of an independent workers' movement, than TASS. The government news agency was losing credibility, the morale of its journalists was low. Confronting the new challenge, TASS had to adjust to the changed conditions by sending its own correspondents to all "trouble spots" and providing more detailed and objective information about developments. Sources became more diverse, too. TASS correspondents began to interview not only Interior Ministry officials, but also representatives of local nationalist groups. This practice gradually spread to other spheres and it became not uncommon for leaders of informal or non-Communist groups to express their views through TASS wire.

Despite this new level of glasnost and boldness in the press, the readership was more radical and critical than newspapers and especially television, according to an opinion survey conducted early in 1990.²² Television was subjected to particularly strong pressure from the government which recognized the special importance of the visual image and the nationwide reach provided by television.

The Press and Economic Pressure in the Late 1980s

Newsprint, long since regarded as the "bread of culture" was, and is, in short supply. The distribution of paper reflected the domination of the departmental and party bureaucracy who continued to hold the monopoly on information and the printed word. Forty-nine percent of paper produced in the country was used to print socio-political and socio-economic journals, the overwhelming majority of which were propaganda materials piled up unsold in their hun-

dreds at all newsstands from Kaliningrad in the western part of the country to Vladivostok in the east. Out of 8,811 newspapers with the aggregate circulation of 230 million and 1,629 magazines (221 million copies) that were put out in the Soviet Union in 1989, less than two hundred were not official publications of party organizations—from the Central Committee to a district party committee.²³

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In 1975, the country's best printing plants were handed over to the party. The rest, utilizing outdated equipment and classified as loss-making, remain a heavy burden on taxpayers.²⁴

Despite all financial support, the party publications began to lose circulation as soon as the obligatory subscription for managers and party members was lifted. The number of *Pravda* subscribers, for instance, dropped by 36.4 percent by January 1st, 1990 compared to the 1987 figure, and is rapidly declining. The situation became so serious that *Pravda* employees, in a bid to save their paper from total collapse, demanded in October 1990 the resignation of their chief editor Ivan Frolov, an unprecedented event in the party press. Other party periodicals also suffered drops in circulation, ranging from 20 to 50 percent. Many ideologically loaded publications had to close down or change their style.²⁵

On the other hand, pro-reform periodicals gained huge readerships. The Soviet and world record is held by the weekly *Argumenty i Fakty*, basically an information bulletin, which managed to increase its circulation in three years from 1.5 million to 33.4 million copies, a vivid indication of the hunger for information in Soviet society and an indictment of the entire system of the press and television in the Soviet Union that failed to provide people with basic facts. A number of "thick" literary journals (*Novy Mir*, *Druzhba Narodov*, *Znamya* and some others) and *Ogonyok* and *Moscow News* increased their circulation by 3 to 10 times. The same is

true with regard to Baltic journals and independent periodicals.

In addition to these, more readers are now attracted to youth publications reflecting the entire spectrum of new sentiments and mass-circulation, and to "thin" magazines with non-ideological content—private life, family, health, gardening.

After a drop in popularity due to their "success" in fighting the West's humanitarian thought, philosophy, and culture, academic journals specializing in humanities have gradually begun to depart from scholastics and popularize the cultural heritage of Russia and other countries of the late 19th-early 20th centuries, winning well-deserved respect of the reading public.

Republican periodicals, especially those published in the tongues of the indigenous population, have dramatically increased their circulation. Many (in the Transcaucasus and the Baltic region) began to serve as legitimate vehicles for the expression of nationalist sentiments and play an immense role in politics, specifically in the campaigns for independence from the Soviet Union, reflecting and promoting separatist tendencies among their populations.

The 1990 Law on the Mass Media

The year 1990 saw the completion of the struggle—or should it better be described as a truce?—between authorities and pro-reform forces. It must be stated that all successive constitutions adopted in the Soviet Union since the days of the Bolshevik revolution proclaimed freedom of speech and all other basic human rights. None, however, provided legal guarantees for the exercise of these rights, leaving the press and the general public largely unprotected against and vulnerable to arbitrariness on the part of government and party bureaucrats.

As a matter of fact, the press in the Soviet Union has always been free in the sense Lenin meant when he said that any journalist has the right to write whatever he thinks appropriate, even if that would be contrary to party line. But then the party, too, he remarked, has the right to take away his party card. And taking away a journalist's party card even ten years ago would effectively put an end to his or her career. As the favorite joke of those times had it, "Any editor may publish whatever he likes. But only once in a lifetime..."

The Soviet parliament adopted a draft law elaborated by independent-minded journalists as the basis for work on a press law in 1988.

Mikhail Fedotov, one of the authors of the draft, in a seminar held in April 1990 at the Journalism Department of the Moscow Higher Party School, described difficulties that accompanied this work at parliamentary committees and commissions. All typists assigned to do technical work were drawn from the party Central Committee pool. Whenever a redrawn draft was handed to them for retyping, they would add some nuances that were not immediately apparent but changed significantly the content of the would-be bill. In addition, the composition of the working group, including experts and parliamentarians, was constantly changed on the initiative of the Supreme Soviet Presidium. Everything was being done to make the work of whom Fedotov described as "politically literate" typists easier.

Despite all the odds and to a large extent due to pressure from journalists themselves, one hundred of whom had been elected to the country's supreme legislative body, the law was completed and finally approved by parliament, and it came into force on August 1, 1990.

Article I of the new law, officially known as the Law on the Press and Other Mass Information Media, proclaims that "The press and other mass information media are free." It also officially does away with censorship, stating that "Censorship of mass information is not permitted."

...this is the first law in the country that enumerates things that are not allowed...

In contrast with the First Amendment environment in the United States, but very much in line with the laws on the press existing in most European countries and consistent with documents such as the European Convention on Human Rights, the Soviet press law enumerates restrictions on the operation of the law: "It is not permitted to use mass information media for divulging state or other secrets specifically protected by Law, call for the forcible overthrow or change of the existing state and social system, propagate (ideas of) war, violence, and brutality, racial, ethnic, or religious exclusiveness or intolerance, disseminate pornography, (and) in order to carry out other deeds punishable by law."

It is not permitted, and is punishable by Law, to use mass information media for invasion of private life of citizens and encroachment on their honor and dignity.

The above is definitely a compromise between radicals and conservatives in parliament as well as a tribute to the tradition of the USSR's legal system. What is noteworthy, however, is that this is the first law in the country that enumerates things that are not allowed, rather than things that are allowed, marking a transition to the principle "Whatever is not banned by law is allowed."

The law allows all organizations, parties, groups, and individual citizens aged above 18 to establish mass media, and bans monopolization of any medium (press, radio, or television).

For the first time in Soviet lawmaking, the parliament adopted a law that rests on the principle of registration, rather than permission—a precedent yet to be emulated by other laws of the land. Many radical publishers and editors, however, are opposed to the idea of registration. Some, like Sergei Grigoryants, have declared they will refuse to register their publications with the authorities as required by the law.

Characterizing the new press law, American journalist Nicholas Daniloff observed, "The Soviet press of the 1990s will not have an easy time, nor have Soviet hardliners given up trying to control the media. The battle goes on.

"Yet during the struggle fought between conservative and liberal factions of Soviet society, more than 600 independent newspapers, journals, and newsletters have made their appearance in the Soviet Union."²⁶

Reflecting and repeating the fears that characterized the atmosphere around the press debate in pre-revolutionary Russia, many a Soviet parliamentarian would declare that, given the right to institute press bodies, private individuals in the country would fall prey to and become fronts for profit-seeking cooperators (private entrepreneurs), "underground millionaires," and even foreign intelligence agencies keen on destroying the Soviet state. "...group capital will be behind the individual seeking to institute a press body, and this person will actually represent an organization, recognized or non-recognized, formal or informal, legal or illegal. The personalized right will become a mere camouflage or cover for the right of the organization," *Pravda* wrote in 1990.

"One should not disregard the fact that the personalized right will inevitably lead to disorder, chaos, and the unpredictability of the situation in a sphere that demands that all persons involved in it should possess a sense of lofty social responsibility."²⁷

Many parliamentarians and members of the

general public feared a backlash from the government and party apparatus which still wielded substantial power and were capable of launching an all-out attack aimed to crush the emerging free press, repeating the fears voiced at the end of the century during the work of the Kobek Commission.

Conclusion

Can there really be a backlash of any kind? Can the situation be reversed? Is it possible that the press would be willing to restrict its newly found freedom?

Before trying to find answers to these questions, it is necessary to look back at the situation in the country at a time when Mikhail Gorbachev came to power. The "period of stagnation," as Leonid Brezhnev's rule was called and the brief tenures of Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko that followed were characterized not only by the slow pace of economic development, but also—which is even more important—by the overall apathy of the population. It was obvious that the country had no future among industrialized nations in the technological and information age unless structural changes were made in the economic and political systems and corresponding incentives were created for productive work. Perestroika, which means "restructuring" in Russian, was precisely such an attempt to propel the Soviet Union into the modern age. And the press—rightfully—was assigned an important role to play.

In a mere five years, the Soviet press has turned from being "the gold asset of the party" as defined by Brezhnev into an independent body watching over the processes of decision-making, government, and democratization. It has become in fact the largest opposition force in the political arena of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and early 1990s that is yet to see the emergence of organized political parties able to compete for power. No government or presidential order or parliamentary decision passes unnoticed by the press. Vying for readership and commercial success, which is synonymous with survival in the new economic conditions, newspapers, radio, and television can no longer afford heeding the calls for "caution" from the Communist party or the central authorities.

Although launched from above, glasnost was necessitated by both domestic and international factors. It was not a whim of only one political leader, nor can it be done away with by a presi-

dential decree or parliamentary decision. A free press has become a part of political processes taking place in the country. And these processes have changed the situation in the country with all constituent republics firmly set on the course towards sovereignty or independence. What is even more important is people living in all republics of the Soviet Union have changed. They have become more active politically; they know that their opinion matters, that they can make the difference.

*...they will never again
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Any crackdown by the central authorities may alter the content of some central publications. But even they will never again become docile vehicles for official ideas. Nor can the government become nearly as repressive or authoritarian as it was fifty, twenty, or even ten years ago.

In addition, any action by the central government will have little or no effect on the opera-

tion of the press in constituent republics. True, individual republics may restrict their local press bodies by creating difficulties with newsprint, imposing high taxes on media-related businesses, or harassing journalists, covertly or overtly. In the emerging market economics, new businesses will surely try to influence the press by granting or denying it advertising rights, bribing individual journalists, or just buying up papers and television stations...

Isn't that a familiar picture?

The Soviet republics are entering the community of nations not only adding their own problems but also partaking of the problems that exist in countries with free press and democratic government traditions that are centuries old. The battle for democracy and democratic institutions will continue forever, and it is precisely because of this battle that democracy remains alive.

Addressing the United States Congress in 1990, Czechoslovakia's playwright-president Vaclav Havel observed, "As long as people are people, democracy in the full sense of the word will always be no more than an ideal. One may approach it as one would a horizon in ways that may be better or worse, but it can never be fully attained."

Endnotes

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24. *Argumenty i Fakty*, July 28 - August 3, 1990.
25. *Ogonyok*, April, 1990.
26. Nicholas Daniloff, *op. cit.*
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