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Information, Ideology And Power: How Glasnost’ Affected The Demise Of The Soviet Union

ABSTRACT

This article seeks to offer some insight into how Gorbachev’s policy of glasnost’ (‘openness’ in the media) contributed to the disintegration of the Soviet Union as a territorial state, a unifying ideology of governance, and a system of governing institutions and élites. Official ideology, the Soviet system of information filtration, and Soviet power structures were so intimately bound together that when Gorbachev sought to alter one (by releasing information from its ideological strictures and governmental control) he did irreparable damage to the power of the Soviet ideal. This loss of legitimacy greatly contributed to the dramatic decline and collapse of the Soviet Union over five years. As the surreal structures of Soviet ideology were exposed to the glasnost’ information explosion, popular faith in the Soviet vision and its governing elites crumbled. In response, new political visions stepped in to fill the void, finally breaking up the Soviet Union as a territorial state and a governing institution.

BIOGRAPHY

Olivia Boyd is an arts student in her final year at the University of Queensland, majoring in history and politics. Her academic interests include both modern and pre-modern history of Russia, the Middle East and Asia, with a particular interest in the history of political movements, and intellectual trends. She is also very
interested in seeking to incorporate personal accounts and personal, subjective
expression (art, for example) into examinations of broad political movements,
reflecting a belief that intimate, everyday experiences can illuminate the contested
and embedded power structures in which people live.
Every second our senses are bombarded with millions of items of information. In politics, the way we filter this information into a logical, consistent understanding of the world is formative of ideology, and ideology in turn affects patterns of power. 

Glasnost’ was the vehicle for the collapse of a specific way of filtering information – a process which caused the popular disintegration of the Soviet-Communist ideology and power system it supported (the Soviet state). The origin of glasnost’ was Gorbachev’s perception of the failure of the traditional Soviet system of information flow in creating a viable economy. But in seeking to change the governmental monopoly of political information, Gorbachev unwittingly weakened the Communist-Soviet ideology on which the government was founded, and enabled new ideologies, and their alternative visions of power, to challenge and replace the Soviet Union.

Glasnost’, which is generally translated as ‘openness’, was a reform buzzword of Mikhail Gorbachev that encompassed lifting a degree of the governmental/Party control over the flow of political information within the Soviet Union. For most of the history of the Soviet Union, the mass media had been centralized under the control of the Party/government. According to scholars of totalitarianism, this was part of a wider vision in which community, information, and identity would be fully channelled through the central state, enabling all information which did not conform to the state’s ideology to be filtered out. As far as it was able to be controlled by the government, information in the Soviet Union was assessed and made available more according to its consistency with the Soviet Communist ideology, maintained by the Communist state that it legitimated, than according to reality.

However, Gorbachev saw this organization of information flow as part of the cause of the country’s economic decline, and the reason for the frustratingly slow pace of his perestroika economic reforms – glasnost’ was his response to this impasse. He came to power with the intent of reinvigorating the Soviet economy from the stagnation of the Brezhnev era, but after a year in office, perestroika had not advanced far. Gorbachev and his economic advisors decided that effective reform would be impossible without better knowledge of the real economic condition of the country, and hoped that giving journalists and intellectuals more freedom from ideological strictures might administer a ‘shock’ to a sluggish economy and complacent society. Gorbachev also saw glasnost’ as a way of controlling the bureaucracy: it would take away their former privilege of monopolizing information, and it would decrease the power of conservatives – many bureaucrats of the Brezhnev era had vested interests in the current system and did not welcome reform.

In his book, Gorbachev said: ‘People are becoming increasingly convinced that glasnost is an effective form of public control over the activities of all government bodies, without exception, and a powerful lever in correcting shortcomings.’ In this way, an investigation which began with filling in factual ‘blank spots’ so as to gain a better understanding present economic difficulties, eventually turned into ranging criticism of the ideological and mythological foundations of the Soviet regime. The popular film, Repentance, was one amongst the many works of the glasnost’ era that posed the problems of Stalinism in a way that forced a recognition in each viewer of how their present was so deeply built on the crimes of the past; newspapers and journals were filled with previously unknown violence meted out to people’s grandfathers and grandmothers; and exposés of the past brutalities and follies of the system were beamed nightly in people’s living room televisions. In this way, the release of information from its ideological strictures disillusionsed Soviet citizens who had grown up and based their identity on a highly filtered narrative of the Soviet past, as this account shows:
The next morning the telephone rang in [Natasha] Serova’s office [journalist for the television programme *The Fifth Wheel*, following a story on Stalin-era purges].

She could tell from the caller’s voice what she was about to say. ‘Are you telling me that our life was in vain?’ said the caller. After each broadcast on the Stalin era, there were waves of such calls, many from people on the edge of despair.

‘If the ideology of the government is false,’ Natasha said, ‘this does not mean that life was in vain. The ideology was not right, but life was not in vain.’

As with history, media criticism of current affairs progressively pushed beyond what Gorbachev advocated, until no political subject was left taboo. As an example, *Moscow News*, one of the more left-wing newspapers, attacked the bureaucracy for ‘unrealistic state orders of car batteries from factories … for failing to serve the people … for maintaining cultural mediocrity … for causing the recent physical tragedies of the Soviet Union (with which perhaps the ‘Almighty’ was punishing the negligent) … for covering up the effects of Chernobyl disaster … for undermining democratic electoral processes…, and for subverting perestroika, glasnost, and democratizatsiya’, as well as illustrating that the economy was in a shambles, that the Soviet Union suffered enormously from environmental pollution, that crime rates and unemployment were skyrocketing, and, as progressively more and more barriers were broken down, criticism of the KGB and Gorbachev himself. Such widespread, withering criticism was a fatal blow to the Soviet government – in an ideology that believed that it ‘had history on its side’, and was in the long run superior in every way to capitalism, the Communist party apparat were legitimised by being the agents of the promise of the Communist utopia. Until 1986, the Party/government had filtered information to make reality conform to that ideology. Thus, when it was revealed that the Soviet economy was serving its citizens poorly, the belief that Communism was economically superior was crushed; when Soviet citizens watched the Berlin Wall fall on television their belief that Communism had a global destiny was shattered; when *The Fifth Wheel* showed that the Party bosses lived in villas, ate caviar and shopped at well stocked stores (so different from the empty stores most people faced as the economic crisis deepened through the late 1980s and early 1990s) people thought that maybe Soviet society was not a classless fraternity marching to a glorious future.

Accordingly, the realistic half of doublethink drove out the ideological half, and the repressed awareness of the Lie poured out into the open in a flood. This loss of legitimacy would prove fatal to the system, for its surreal structures were such that they could not survive exposure of the truth. Thus, a regime born of ideology started to collapse once the ideology was extinct.

The level of disillusionment with the regime reached heartbreakingly high levels, as illustrated by the comments of a man in a Moscow cinema at the end of the film *Tak Zhit Nelzya* (We Can’t Go On Living Like This) which exposed the criminal corruption of the government: ‘After that, you want either to shoot yourself or to emigrate. There’s nothing else left.’

The disintegration of the Soviet-Communist ideology under the auspices of glasnost’ also involved a decline of loyalty to the centre in the republics on the periphery, creating movements for nationalist separatism from the Soviet state. Even as the glasnost’ in the centre questioned the foundations of the Soviet vision, in the republics, the same process unleashed criticism of Soviet nationalities policy, while intellectuals, national elites, and local media began to articulate a powerful new ideology of the nation, to fill the void. In the battle over history in the republics, Stalin’s policies were being reinterpreted through a narrative of nationalism and imperial oppression – for a Kazakh or Ukrainian collectivisation (a reform of the 1930s which made agriculture communal and subject to the governmental bureaucracy, and caused huge famines in the process) was arguably seen as an ethnic attack, while for Armenians living in Azerbaijan, Stalin’s ethnic mass deportations took on the dimensions of a quest for national destruction. Carrying tales of past injustice into the present, nationalist intellectuals fiercely attacked policies of ‘Russification’ as an instrument of inequality between the Russian ‘elder brother’ who guided the lesser, peripheral nationalities: ‘Thanks to all the Soviet peoples for their fraternal help … However, we have outgrown the children’s trousers and no longer need to be under guardianship. Give us the right to take charge of our destiny.’

Moreover, under the openness of the glasnost’ media, growing nationalist agitation was broadcast throughout the Soviet Union. On television and in the newspapers, people in other republics were able to watch Gorbachev bow to the demands of rioters in Kazakh, his failure to assert Soviet control over low grade ethnic war in the Caucasus, and his inability to clamp down on the legal war being waged in the Baltic republics over their right for sovereignty. In turn, other republics were emboldened to press their own demands. Moreover, the rapid disintegration of the ideology that had once bound the multi-ethnic...
Soviet empire together meant that glasnost’ made forcible preservation of the union almost impossible, because its ethical justification was crumbling. In January 1991 when the Lithuanians rebelled against the USSR, Soviet troops in the capital, Vilnius, fired on the crowds and killed fourteen people. As news of the Vilnius riots rippled through the Soviet Union, support for Gorbachev cooled rapidly, and Vilnius became a byword in the emerging culture of opposition and democracy that voiced itself in numerous rallies on the streets of Moscow. The release of information from its bureaucratic-ideological strictures enabled the creation and expression of nationalities inconsistent with a multinational state, and the inability of the government to control its own periphery now it had forfeited legitimacy from its internationalist ideology, added to popular loss of faith in the Soviet vision.

POWER

Having created such popular disillusionment with the Soviet regime and its ideology, the glasnost’ media was also vital in transforming this disillusionment into political action, and (as is suggested by the above account of the nationalities) creating new ideologies to fill the vacuum. Just as they had controlled information, the pre-Gorbachev Party/government had also controlled social organisations. When Gorbachev allowed the existence of neformaly, or free, informal organisations, he gave dissatisfaction with the regime the opportunity to organise into collective action. The Democratic Union, which went on to form the major opposition to the Communist Party, started as an amalgamation of clubs who had decided that the system was hopelessly totalitarian, and advocated instead the democratic ideals of the February Revolution. Similarly, in 1989 clubs formed around coal miners called the first major strike since the Bolshevik Revolution forcing promises of better working conditions, higher pay and faster reform from the government, while simultaneously debunking the mythology that the Party/government represented the best interests of the working class. In 1990-1991, another such strike of coal miners was a principle component in forcing Gorbachev to negotiate a new Union Treaty with the republics, allowing their autonomy. The ability to mobilize popular disillusionment into political organisation created the political alternatives that replaced the Soviet government in people’s loyalty, and then in real political terms in 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union. Many like Anatoly Malykhin, the leader of the 1990-91 coal miner’s strike, were able to trace the time when they turned from apolitical, unthinking cogs in the Soviet machine to well-informed, passionate political activists, back to the information explosion of 1986.

Glasnost’ coverage of Soviet politics was indeed an essential part of the strength of the democratic movement, because it politicised a formerly quiescent Soviet society, giving the various parties and neformaly mass popular support. Although it is true that the press was dominated by the liberal, Westernising intelligentsia, and did not accurately reflect the dispersal of political opinions amongst the populace, the preponderance of this view in news stories and features, and the presence of public opinion polls which reflected this news bias were very important in manufacturing popular dissent. This mass politicisation of a formerly apathetic Soviet populaton was very important in giving opposition parties and neformaly the support they needed to present a credible alternative to the crumbling Soviet Communist ideology, as well as giving the press leverage against the government to continue and enhance its independence. As an example, when the popular journal Arguments and Facts published an opinion poll which revealed Andrei Sakharov to be the country’s most popular politician, with Yeltsin coming in second and Gorbachev a beggarly 17th, Gorbachev reacted by pressuring the editor of Arguments and Facts to resign. This prompted a campaign in the wider press against Gorbachev, which in turn sparked large demonstrations in Moscow and a threatened strike of the Moscow subway workers to ensure the government keep its ‘Hands Off Arguments and Facts!’ The pattern of media intransigence, attempted governmental control, wider media outrage, and popular demonstrations against the government was to be repeated many times over and served to strengthen active hostility to an already weakened regime.

Television also played a vital role in the transformation from popular apathy to discontent, to political action. The television broadcast of the Nineteenth Party Conference in 1988, and the first session of the Congress of People’s Deputies in 1989, was truly a ‘big bang’ for the Soviet political consciousness. Politics, once fenced off within the shadowy proceedings of the Politburo, had entered millions of Soviet living rooms. Around two hundred million people turned into the daily eight hour broadcast of the first session of the 1989 Congress while it was on, and attendance levels at work and school dropped off drastically as Soviet citizens stayed in with their televisions. Once a delegate gained the floor – and the television camera – a plethora of concerns, criticisms and complaints of all types was heaped out. On the streets and in millions of living rooms, radicals who spoke courageously out against
the government became instantly recognisable television celebrities, and gained much sympathy amongst Soviet citizens. As Boris Yeltsin said:

On the day the Congress opened, [the Soviet people] were one sort of people; on the day that it closed, they were a different people … Almost the entire population had awakened from its state of lethargy. … the entire country was glued to their TVs … Politically, those ten days gave people more than the seventy years of millions of Marxist Leninist politicians … It was as though the entire nation – well, almost – woke up from hibernation.

The intimate relationship between media coverage and the politicisation of the masses can be seen in the 1991 coup, during which television was the main source of information. Even though the Central Television station was under the control of the coup leaders (who called themselves the GKChP), glasnost’ was so imbued in the staff of Central Television’s news programme Vremia, that when faced with a return to pre-1986 television they staged a quiet revolt. During the plotter’s first press conference, the cameraman and editor made sure that shots of the GKChP spokesman, Grenadii Yanaev, included his trembling hands, runny nose and sweating face, and editing and camera work made the most of patronising questions from journalists as well as the snickers and laughs at his expense. The overall effect for a nation of millions watching was that of a repugnant dilettante. As the head of the KGB attested, ‘after the press conference by the GKChP, the general impression was created that this was a simple adventure and the perplexing questions multiplied.’ The next day, a report on the situation in Moscow aired on Vremia that showed Yeltsin’s stand against the GKChP’s tanks and soldiers at the front of the White House (Russia’s parliamentary building). Not only did this report air footage of a democrat activist telling audiences to come to the White House and defend it against the attackers (after the coup many said that they learnt what to do from this news spot), but it also created a mythology of the democratic resistance with the shot of a heroic Yeltsin standing on a tank amongst a crowd of ardent lovers of liberty, to protect the White House, democracy, and political freedom. The powerful story was all camera work – a long shot would have revealed a little crowd lost in the vast expanse of the White House grounds with a small, ungainly man failing impotently on a huge tank, the words of his speech lost in the huge space. In these subtle, yet decisive ways a collective revolt of editors, cameramen, and reporters created a decisive narrative of democratic power against the old Soviet regime. As they had been since 1986, the press manufactured the mass dissent that would come to fruition in the enormous street demonstrations on the second and third days of the coup, eventually toppling the plotters and the Soviet regime.

Seen in retrospect, the victory over the conspirators was, first and foremost, a symbolic one: the conspirators never achieved enough cooperation from the military and the KGB to overwhelm the opposition physically. As it turned out, the really critical struggle was fought not only in the streets but on millions of television screens, where competing scripts, images and styles offered viewers starkly opposed versions of the past, present and future. The Emergency Committee suffered defeat in this critical battle over hearts and minds when it failed – whether through oversight or inability – to control Central Television completely and to deploy rhetoric and symbols in a compelling and credible manner in support of their claim to rule.

CONCLUSION

Glasnost’ was instrumental in the decline of the Soviet Union through the effect it had on the dissemination of information, the Soviet ideology, and the power relationships that ideology helped constitute. As a result of Gorbachev’s reforms, the traditional Soviet way of filtering public information according to the Soviet-Communist ideology was broken up. This in turn prompted crippling mass disillusionment – the Soviet ideology and the Soviet manner of information dissemination had constituted one another. As a result of this break-down, the Soviet Party/government which had been legitimated by this ideology also collapsed in the face of new, competing ideologies and power-relationships built on liberalism, democracy, mass politics, and nationalism. Like the chemicals that interact to create and explosion, information, ideology and power creating a heady time of change that ended the Soviet experiment, and re-invented the Soviet people.

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