

Decoding the Soviet Press

by Tom Kent

This article is based on a lecture delivered at the Harriman Institute on March 23, 2015. It reflects the speaker's experiences as an Associated Press reporter and bureau chief in Moscow under Leonid Brezhnev in 1976-81, research for his International Reporting course at Harriman and his recent article, "The Soviet press through the eyes of an American correspondent," published in a journal of the Faculty of Journalism of Moscow State University.¹

Every press has its goals. In the United States, reporters focus on the role of the press as a counterbalance to government power. In some cultures, the press can be tasked with advancing national or religious causes. In the Soviet Union, the press was about serving the interests of the Communist Party.

Some argue that the Soviet press was so hitched to party interests that it was barely worth paying attention to. To these critics, the Soviet news media offered nothing but an unending procession of propaganda, with no real value.

I disagree. My belief, based on 4½ years of reporting from Russia, was that if one ignored the turgid writing and the more blatant propaganda, the Soviet press was an immensely valuable source of information for journalists, diplomats and scholars who took the time to understand it.

The Soviet press's core value was that it was not only a tool to propagandize the masses, but an esoteric means of communication with millions of party faithful who needed a somewhat straightforward accounting of what was happening in the country. A proper reading of the Soviet press could reveal not only predictable stories glorifying the Soviet state, but also top-level government thinking and serious economic and social problems faced by the regime.

To recap how the Soviet press came to be what it was in Brezhnev's time, it's important to remember that Lenin considered himself a journalist. That was the profession that appeared on his party identification. He saw no contradiction between being a journalist and political leader at the same time.

In fact, his central principle of the Soviet press was intimately bound up in the linkage of journalism and

politics: "The Soviet press is not only a collective agitator and propagandist, but a collective organizer."

The Soviets compared this idea of the press favorably to the Western press, which they considered at best a random "depot of ideas" with no coherent ideology and at worst a handmaiden of the ruling bourgeoisie.

Indeed, as communist power took hold under Lenin, amid a pervasive climate of secrecy and censorship, the Soviet press played its role as guardian of the party's interest and organizer of the population in its service.

This was no objective journalism, independently assessing the party's performance, but the voice of the party itself. Journalists were part of the family of party propaganda workers, aided by *rabselkory*, "worker and rural correspondents," who submitted reports from factories and fields.

These amateur reporters were sometimes glorified as the equals of full-time newsmen, providing truly authentic reporting based on their own experiences.

There was some leavening of propaganda in the press during the 1920s, when the authorities lightened their grip on the economy under the New Economic Policy. Even in the 1930s, a student of mine pointed out, the writers Ilf and Petrov were allowed to publish stories about their travels in America, which included complimentary comments about American life.

But in general, as Stalin consolidated power after Lenin, newspapers and radio became ever more controlled, propagandistic and bureaucratized. Stalin's era was hardly a time for improvisation and taking chances; one can imagine high-ranking Soviet editors lying awake at night wondering if anything in the following morning's newspaper might cause offense and bring personal catastrophe.

This extreme caution on the part of Soviet journalists extended through Stalin's death and the arrival in power of Nikita Khrushchev. But after Khrushchev's "secret speech" to the 20th party congress in 1956 led to a period of "thaw" and de-Stalinization, Soviet journalists ventured to be more creative.

Key to this was Khrushchev's son-in-law, Alexei Adzhubei, who edited the government newspaper *Izvestia*. Not only did journalists enjoy freer rein in what they write, but the prestige of the profession rose and the prominence of *rabselkory* declined. Even a song eventually appeared, in 1964, to glamorize the work of Soviet journalists:

1. Kent, Thomas, *Sovetskaya pressa glazami amerikanskogo zhurnalista* ("The Soviet press through the eyes of an American journalist"), *Istoriya otechestvennykh SMI* ("History of the national mass media"), Moscow State University Faculty of Journalism, February, 2015, pp. 109-119.

Three days of walking, three days with no sleep,
For a few lines in the paper
If I had it all to do again, I would choose these endless
troubles
Once again.

However, Khrushchev fell from power and the “thaw” ended, and by 1964 Leonid Brezhnev emerged as supreme Soviet leader. I will focus here on the Soviet press under Brezhnev.

The Brezhnev period of Soviet history had none of the revolutionary excitement of Lenin’s time, the legendary World War II victory of Stalin’s or the utopian dreaming of Khrushchev’s. It was a dull, stolid period of basically getting on with things, rightly called by some the “years of stagnation.”

While police repression was a shadow of what it was under Stalin, the party still had no taste for criticism. There was also no premium given for creativity. Journalists quickly took the cue, slipping on their own into a mode of just getting by.

This included the press continuing to serve, as it long had, two essential functions: “agitating” and organizing the population at large, and providing, somewhat between the lines, communication between the Kremlin and the 18 million party members across the country.

If the Communist Party of the Soviet Union existed today, it would use email or a secure website to pass “eyes-only” messages to party members. Nothing like that having existed in Brezhnev’s time, the Soviet press’s task -- and genius -- was to hand the same messages to the public and the party, but phrased so as to deliver a discrete meaning to each audience.

Let’s talk first about the message to the public at large.

The first goal was to get everyone reading the press. Newspapers and magazines were cheap. Party activists bearing catalogues from *Soyuzpechat*, the state press distribution agency, urged and nagged the population to subscribe to as many publications as they could bear. No wonder the circulation of newspapers in Soviet Russia was reputedly the highest in the world.

Part of the urgency in distributing the official press was the penetration of Soviet Union by Western radio broadcasts aimed at undermining the communist regime. Although there was little sign the broadcasts caused much unrest, they clearly alarmed Soviet authorities.

As Vladimir Artemov wrote in a propaganda manual called “The Truth About Lies” (*Pravda o Nepravde*) in 1979:²

Imperialism’s new strategic line now pro-

2. Artemov, Vladimir, *Pravda o Nepravde* (“The Truth About Untruth”), Moscow: Political Literature Publishing House, 1979, p. 8.

ceeds from the impossibility of destroying real socialism with the help of an internal opposition, since that does not exist, or through armed intervention. The inspirers and leaders of Western propaganda have placed before it the task of stimulating the creation of an opposition to communism The main method of imperialistic anti-Soviet propaganda directed toward the Soviet Union is the disguised infiltration of hostile ideas.

Reading the Soviet press in Moscow, we saw many techniques for convincing the population that things were going well at home and abroad, and that Russia had nothing to gain from Western ideas. They included:

- Inflation of international reaction to Soviet pronouncements. Whenever Brezhnev gave a speech, the press would be replete the next day with world reaction under such headlines as “L.I. Brezhnev’s speech in the center of attention of the world public.” Soviet papers would always imply that Brezhnev’s comments were received with international admiration, or at least that their importance was such that it could not be suppressed. “Even The New York Times was forced to admit that L.I. Brezhnev stressed ...” was a common formulation.
- Direct attacks on Western broadcasts and propaganda. These rarely involved refutations of specific Western claims, but focused instead on the evil of foreign broadcasts. Newspapers frequently ran cartoons showing Western officials, fat and armed with bags of money, spewing filth into the Soviet Union, or hypocritically hiding Western ills while trying to propagandize Russia.
- Juxtaposition of international stories in the press. Soviet editors carefully laid out their papers to create a specific political impression. They would often put side-by-side stories about strikes and riots in Western countries to create an impression of building opposition to the West’s bourgeois rulers. (Interestingly, Soviet polemicists of the time accused the Western press of making its own “special selection, distribution and transmission” of news to advance the goals of the bourgeoisie.)³
- Internally, describing failure as something good. In 1979, the Soviet Union reinstated *rybny den*, “fish day,” in restaurants and cafeterias. The press described fish day (first tried in the 1930s) as a benevolent attempt to make sure citizens benefited from the nutrients provided by fish; in fact, it was obvious from persistent meat shortages that authorities had little alternative.

3. Ibid., p. 9.

- Minimizing of bad news. Reading Pravda every morning, I turned first to the very last page to look for little boxes with headings like *Proishestvie* -- “Incident.” Such tiny spaces were reserved for domestic plane crashes and other disasters that authorities apparently felt reflected badly on them. (Some say such limited coverage was fine with Soviet citizens, who had an almost superstitious disinclination to read such stories. There was also a belief that, given the past and present hardships of Soviet life, people took such disasters in stride and assumed measures would be taken to prevent their recurrence, so no extensive coverage was required.)

The Soviet press also worked to hold the attention of ordinary readers by publishing fun-to-read stories. Among those I remember was a tale of how Soviet scientists had discovered cells from a prehistoric mammoth and were going to bring it to life in a laboratory. (These stories often were distinguished by their lack of what we in the West would call journalistic enterprise. The information in the story was often portrayed as having been handed to the correspondent by the state institution involved; there was rarely any sign that the newspaper had heard about something itself and gone to officials to seek confirmation. Obvious questions a reader might ask – when might the mammoth be recreated and how did authorities plan to raise it – were left unanswered. A reader had the impression that the officials had told the paper exactly what they wanted to, and that the reporter had not dared ask even an obvious question.)

More significantly, Soviet papers served as a buffer between citizens, sometimes disgruntled with the indignities of daily life, and the ruling authorities. Citizens wrote thousands of letters to newspapers every month, and saw the letters published and measures taken.

Subjects could include such things as low-level bureaucratic incompetence, hot water shortages, ill-fitting doors in government apartment buildings, late buses, heels that fell off shoes and small-scale corruption. The letters worked: newspapers launched “raids” or investigations that exposed lazy bus drivers, sloppy cobblers and greedy store directors. Whatever corruption may have reigned at higher levels of Soviet society, newspapers helped assure citizens that the leadership cared about the issues closest to them.

Sometimes Soviet newspapers brought journalistic gold to foreign correspondents: real insights into national social problems. At the time, ordinary citizens were wary of talking to any foreigner, much less correspondents, who were being regularly denounced in the press as ideological saboteurs. Therefore, Soviet press stories about social issues opened a rare door for us to what

ordinary citizens were talking about. These ranged from a disapproving article in *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, the Communist youth league paper, about girls who wore too much gold, to *Literaturnaya Gazeta*’s stories about the problems of finding a sober husband and the lack of places for teenagers to hang out after school.

The weekly *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, published by the Union of Soviet Writers, seemed to have been officially ordained as the central spot for discussions of social problems. We were acutely aware that these stories, true as they seemed to be, were still being served up to us on a silver platter by the Soviet establishment. That is, the social problems described had been approved for discussion. We felt a bit like animals in a zoo, being given a regular feeding by the zookeeper. Still, we leapt at every feeding.

In fact, the paper’s appearance every Wednesday launched an unseemly round of competitive strategizing among Western correspondents in Moscow.

Once the paper highlighted a problem, the best way for us to write about it would be to try to expand on the story, finding some citizen who might talk to us or trying to interview some officials. But such journalistic due diligence took time -- time during which a competing Western correspondent might beat the pack by simply quoting the *Literaturnaya Gazeta* piece (“A Soviet newspaper said Wednesday that women can’t find a sober husband ...”) with no additional work.

Each Wednesday, we had to guess if the paper’s latest revelations about Soviet life could hold for a while, or whether we needed to report on it right away to avoid being scooped by our colleagues.

While the Soviet press supplied ordinary citizens with propaganda and a bit of truth about society, it spoke on a completely different plane to the party faithful. It was if party members and citizens at large tuned to the same frequency, but heard entirely different programs.

The key was that party members and citizens read different parts of the press. Party members focused on:

- Accounts of government and party activities. Events like international visits and party meetings were written in a highly formalized language, focusing more on which officials were present than on what was actually accomplished. Although the mysterious disappearance of officials from photos as a sign they had been purged had largely gone out of style after Stalin, even in Brezhnev’s time the listings of officials and their placement in photographs reflected their political importance.
- Long articles on Soviet positions on international issues. Largely through rumor, we came to believe that articles that were unsigned, or signed A. Petrov or I. Alexandrov (whether such people

truly existed was unknown) was a sign the article had been approved by the highest Kremlin circles.

Of particular interest was how the press dealt with changes in Soviet positions. The party claimed to be the instrument of the historical inevitability of communism; as such, it may have thought party members would expect of it a practically clairvoyant ability to stake out correct and enduring positions on every issue. In any case, it used highly evasive techniques to explain changes in position. In particular, it prefaced new positions with terms “as is known” -- *kak izvestno*: “As is known, the Soviet Union has always approached the issue of strategic arms with willingness to compromise.” To a party member finding the sudden reference to flexibility new, the “as is known” phrasing would lead him to believe he perhaps had just not been paying attention before.

- Editorials with a hidden message. Every morning, Pravda published an editorial on the left side of the front page. At first glance, these editorials were of little consequence. They would carry bland headlines like “Along the road of success, for the benefit of the people” and consist mainly of assurances that agriculture or industry was performing wonderfully. It’s likely few ordinary people ever read them.

For the initiated, however, the crux of the message was somewhat hidden: it invariably came in a paragraph midway down the page, beginning *Odnako* – “however.” *Однако.* Thus, an editorial might talk for five or six paragraphs about the marvels of Soviet animal husbandry but then say, “However, not on all state and collective farms is attention to the well-being of animals carried out at the highest level.” It would then talk briefly about leaky barns and animals left too long in the rain, before concluding with assurances that overall, the treatment of animals in the country was quite excellent.

We understood that an editorial like this was a signal to party members that the neglect of animals had become a serious problem with consequences the economy. While a Western newspaper might have headlined, “Animal neglect worries officials,” this was not the Soviet way. Soviet authorities obviously felt that bad news needed to be put in the context of good news, lest readers think the party was mismanaging the economy overall. Party members in agricultural areas would understand that sheltering animals was now a top priority.

One advantage for foreign correspondents reading the Soviet press was that its bureaucratic vocabulary was relatively simple for foreigners. With a few years of university Russian and an occasional look at the dictionary, almost every article was understandable. The

Russian press of the 21st century, which has more slang and foreign words, is far more difficult for foreigners to read (though the language is probably more interesting for Russians).

Soviet electronic media were very different from what foreign correspondents expected. In the West, news almost always broke first on radio and television, so we naturally expected it to do so in Russia as well. This rarely was the case, however. Central radio and television were not in the “hot news” business, but worked from the same principles of propaganda and *partiinost*, or party loyalty, as newspapers. They seemed content to let newspapers set the day’s news agenda, and then to follow their lead.

An exception was official, important party announcements. These originated from the TASS news agency but usually were made known first on the radio. Reports of plenums of the Communist Party Central Committee were commonly read on the radio at 3 p.m. Moscow time, before they appeared on the three TASS teletype machines in our office. We always listened closely to that newscast, because we never knew precisely when a plenum might be held.

When the radio reported on a plenum, we were particularly alert for the words, *Plenum obsudil organizatsionny vopros* -- “The plenum discussed an organizational matter” -- a signal that a senior official had been dropped from or added to the Politburo. Thus it was, for instance, in May 1977: we were gathered around the radio for the 3 p.m. news when it reported that after discussion of an “organizational matter,” Nikolai Podgorny had been “freed” from his Politburo duties.

I quickly typed one paragraph saying Podgorny had been dropped from the leading body, one of our Soviet staff punched it on paper tape, we ran the tape through our teletype machine and it was in New York a minute later.

On the whole, however, there was little urgent news in the electronic media, though our habits from the West never let us ignore it. Each night we had the television on as the large clock on the screen moved to exactly 9 p.m., time for the nightly news program *Vremya* (“Time”).

After the announcers – often Igor Kirillov and Nonna Bodrova – said *Dobry vecher, tovarishchi* (“Good evening, comrades”), there hung a moment of silence when we all waited to see what was coming next. If a photo of the Kremlin appeared behind them, it was an official announcement, though almost always something that had been on the radio and TASS previously. If they said something like *Na polyakh strany* (“In the nation’s fields”) and launched into agricultural news, there was a general sigh in our office and a move to boil water for

more tea; there was unlikely to be anything urgent in the newscast. (We did keep watching; the latter part of the program sometimes carried interviews of interest.)

We always wondered if the *Vremya* announcers received special coaching on how to read important announcements. Sometimes, when reporting that a party plenum had discussed an “organizational matter,” they would raise their eyes to give the viewer a significant look – meaning “you’d better pay attention to this.” We also imagined that Kirillov smirked a bit after intoning “Na polyakh strany,” as if to say, “No news tonight, folks.” More likely, however, it was just a coincidence – the product of the fevered imagination of Western correspondents frantically trying to pull significance out of anything.

One TV program we always watched with interest, however, was *Segodnya v mire* (“The world today”), a 15-minute commentary on international news in two daily editions that began in 1978. Its presenters were Valentin Zorin, Farid Seiful-Mulyukov other well-known specialists on foreign affairs. The tone of this program was more relaxed than the stiff, protocol-filled reports on *Vremya*. While it was short on urgent news for us, it did provide some insight on what Soviet policymakers were thinking and how they were explaining world events to their people.

The true source of most “hot news” in the Soviet Union was TASS, whose wires extended to every daily newspaper and broadcast news organization in the country. Even Pravda frequently used TASS as its source for official announcements; the words *TASS upolnomochen zavavit* (“TASS is authorized to state”), were the most authoritative words in the vocabulary of the Soviet press. But while it served the nation’s most prestigious news media, TASS’s own functioning was mysterious. We had no idea about how official material made its way from the party and government to TASS, and how newspapers across the country came to run it, in almost identical layouts, within hours.

For foreign correspondents, TASS was useful mainly as a steady stream of commentary about international affairs and even about our own reporting. TASS stories from sensitive parts of the world revealed much about the Soviet view of the countries involved. I remember TASS waiting 24 hours to report a plane crash in an African country with good relations with Moscow. Our impression was that the Soviets did not want to embarrass the country by reporting bad news about an event there too quickly. TASS also wrote commentaries, sometimes biting ones, about the work of foreign correspondents in Russia. These were transmitted on the TASS English wire, to make sure we saw them.

Only rarely did TASS report major news at odd hours, outside the normal cycle of Soviet newspapers

and television. One instance came late one night in 1979, when TASS carried an announcement on its Russian-language wire that a “limited contingent” of Soviet forces had entered Afghanistan. It was the first word that Soviet troops had moved into the country.

Soviet journalists were not like journalists elsewhere, happy to hang out with foreign colleagues and chat over a drink. They worked in offices with little public access, and tended to keep far away from us. We viewed them as government officials, and they never denied their job was to advance party and government interests.

But the mere loyalty of journalists wasn’t enough for the Soviet regime. The extreme management of the press was reflected in a small number in the form A12345 at the bottom of the last page of every newspaper. This number, it was whispered in our time, referred to the censorship process, or the individual censor, that the publication had gone through. Only later did it become publicly known that this number was indeed the signature of the Directorate for the guarding of state secrets in the press (*Glavlit*).

Of course, the very prospect of state secrets ever appearing in the Soviet press appeared ludicrous to us. The content of Soviet newspapers, radio and television were written by journalists with such inbuilt caution, and reviewed by so many levels of editors and party officials, that it hardly seemed necessary to have yet another level of review.

However, as we later learned, *Glavlit* censors indeed went over everything, armed with a secret *perechen*, or inventory, of things not to be mentioned. In addition to secret military information, these lists included the names of dissidents and others who were not to be publicly referred to. The *perechen* itself was a secret document, closely held by *Glavlit* personnel who worked in newspaper offices.

The effectiveness of *Glavlit*’s work seemed complete. For example, every day we were amazed that at the height of the Cold War, with enormous international interest in any news about the Soviet armed forces, the Ministry of Defense managed to publish an entire newspaper (*Krasnaya Zvezda* – “Red Star”) about the military that contained nothing worth reporting to our readers.

Every photograph, every article was so scrubbed of any that the newspaper shed no light at all on Soviet military deployments or readiness – except to assert that the forces were invincible. In the same vein was the radio program *Polevaya Pochta* (“Mail Call”), a compendium of letters from Soviet servicemen to their families back home. It was full of arid references to servicemen who were “carrying out important work at a certain location.” Listen as we might, there was nothing we could

find to report.

Many negative things were said about the Soviet press. Looking back at it, I remember the frustration we felt over reports that glorified the party line with little regard to actual circumstances, or that didn't answer obvious questions that any reader would ask.

At the same time, the Soviet press in the Brezhnev period delivered exactly what it was supposed to. It was perfect embodiment of the journalistic practices and ethics laid out in the *Spravochnik sovetskogo zhurnalista* ("The Soviet Journalist's Handbook) – all aimed at the advancement of the cause of the Communist Party and combating "hostile propaganda" from abroad.

In fact, the Soviet press may have been more accurate in describing the thoughts of Soviet officials than we ever imagined. I remember attending a long press conference – a speech, really – by Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, who spoke for 45 minutes, almost without notes, about Soviet arms control policy.

My first thought was, "He talks just like Pravda." In fact, however, it was Pravda that talked just like Gromyko. Central Committee documents that were declassified in the 1990s show that top Soviet officials, even in secret communications to each other, used the same stilted, bureaucratic language that we saw in the Soviet press. It may well be that the Soviet news media, which we felt were concealing the real nature of the Soviet leadership, was in fact channeling it with extraordinary authenticity.

