

LET THEM LISTEN

Ann Cooper in Vilnius conducting interviews at the first public demonstration of Baltic independence on the anniversary of the Molotov Ribbentrop Pact; August 23, 1987. Photo by Povilas Obuchovicus.

COVERING THE SOVIET COLLAPSE

BY ANN COOPER



Daniel Schorr was the CBS radio correspondent in Moscow in the mid-1950s, a time when broadcast journalists wrote their scripts at the Central Telegraph Office on Gorky Street (now Tverskaya) and handed them to a clerk, who pushed them through a slot in a wall to an unseen censor. Heavy black pencil marks on the returned scripts indicated the words, sentences, and paragraphs that Schorr was not allowed to say when he broadcast to New York—though sometimes, in mid-read, he would slip in some extra information for listeners: “13 words deleted here” or “Two paragraphs deleted here.”

Schorr told stories of those heavily censored days over a jovial dinner with several NPR colleagues in my Moscow apartment in 1988. The NPR crew was there to help cover the historic summit meeting of Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev. For two of our team—commentator Schorr and reporter Anne Garrels—it was the first time they’d been allowed in since Soviet authorities had expelled them (Schorr in the 1950s, Garrels in the early 1980s).

Gorbachev’s glasnost (usually translated as openness) was the policy that opened a door for Schorr and Garrels to return. But the Soviet glasnost experiment was only beginning, and much of the infrastructure that severely restricted the movements and access of Moscow-based foreign correspondents was still entrenched. Like all foreign journalists and diplomats, I was required to live in a specially guarded housing compound. My car was always easily identified with its bright yellow K004 license plates (denoting “American correspondent”); and all travel outside Moscow by car, plane, or train had to be registered and approved by the Foreign Ministry (a

typical turn-down response: “You want to go to Baku? Sorry, no hotel rooms are available in Baku next week”).

Soviet surveillance was also still very much in place. Sinister-looking men occasionally tailed me en route to interviews, and it was assumed that our conversations in the foreigners’ compounds were constantly monitored.

As glasnost developed, though, people began to ignore the surveillance—cautiously at first, then much more boldly. By early 1990, when I interviewed former political prisoner Lev Timofeyev in his Moscow apartment about the disappearance of fear, he said he was certain authorities were listening in. But, he added, “Now there is no fear about it. Let them listen.”

As NPR’s first Moscow correspondent, I was obliged to cover anything and everything that happened in my five years there. One day I might be scrambling to report on the explosive, behind-closed-doors ejection of Boris Yeltsin from his Communist Party leadership position. Another day I might see the unveiling of yet another Kremlin economic reform plan—each seemingly more complicated than the last. Arms control developments were a staple of our news diet, as were visiting foreign dignitaries and the frequent national Communist Party meetings that had always been heavily choreographed (and were heavy on sycophancy)—but now sometimes erupted in genuine, passionate policy debates.

Just covering events in Moscow was more than a full-time job, but there was also a tsunami of news in Russia’s provinces and the 14 other Soviet republics. I made dozens of trips: in Uzbekistan, I watched at the border

with Afghanistan as the last Soviet tanks and soldiers came home from a humiliating war; in Siberia, striking coal miners described their abysmal working conditions; in the Baltic republics, which I visited more than a dozen times, I chronicled the growing demands for independence from Soviet power.

Underpinning so much of this news was what Lev Timofeyev had identified with his “Let them listen” comment. As glasnost spread across the country and through its major institutions—politics, arts and culture, the church, journalism, academia—you could literally hear people losing their fear of speaking out and watch them openly embrace ideas that once would have earned them a stint in the Gulag, or even execution.

But you could also see how this exhilarating freedom set off a backlash, eventually joined by glasnost architect Gorbachev. He denounced as “rabble” the many protesters calling for his resignation at the May Day 1990 Red Square parade. For me, the disappearance of fear and its many repercussions was the central story of the final years of the Soviet Union.

Of course, it wasn’t a straight path from the Communist Party’s ruthless control of everything to a period of remarkably free speech. Reformers and conservatives battled at all levels of power, in all kinds of institutions. A trip I made in 1988 offers a snapshot of how that turbulent push and pull affected foreign correspondents.

I’d met Sasha Mokretsov, a young Russian veteran of the war in Afghanistan, who invited me to his hometown, Perm. For years, the Soviet war in Afghanistan was a highly censored topic, and young

men who served there came home with mental and physical injuries that got scant public attention. Sasha, with help from a sympathetic local Komsomol leader, Andrei Yablokov, had organized an informal group where the city’s young veterans could talk and support one another; in a previous era, when it was dangerous to contradict the myth that Communism took care of all problems, it would have been impossible to form such a group.

I was eager to go to Perm to learn more about Sasha and his group and to see how other people in the city regarded the disastrous Soviet military venture. There was a big problem, though. During the Cold War era, Perm was declared a closed city, completely off limits to foreigners. No American had been allowed to visit since.

No worries, said Sasha. He would get his friend Andrei, the Komsomol chief in Perm, to send me a formal invitation.

That invitation, and the new commitment to more openness, somehow convinced the Foreign Ministry to quietly sweep away a Stalinist policy and clear me to become the first American in decades to visit Perm.

Only after I arrived did I learn of my next major obstacle. Andrei and Sasha had acted on their own in inviting me, and when local Perm Communist Party bosses learned what they’d done, they were apoplectic. Andrei received strict orders to keep me so busy I would have no chance to speak with anyone, about Afghanistan or anything else of substance.

He had little choice but to oblige. During the day, he led me on a classic Soviet propaganda tour, from



Above: Cooper in Perm interviewing Soviet veterans who had served in Afghanistan, 1989.



FOR ME, THE DISAPPEARANCE OF FEAR AND ITS MANY REPERCUSSIONS WAS THE CENTRAL STORY OF THE FINAL YEARS OF THE SOVIET UNION.

museum, to factory, to a very slow boat ride on the Kama River that killed an entire afternoon.

But in the evenings and on the weekend, with a wink and a nod, Andrei's agenda disappeared. I had dinner with veterans at Sasha's home. I met more of them on the weekend, when they gathered in a nearby forest for athletic competitions that they dubbed "war games." A journalist, sent to photograph me on that interminable boat trip, later told me how Afghan veterans had once confronted his editor, asking why the newspaper didn't write about the war. "We don't have any war dead in Afghanistan," the editor told them. (In fact, the year I visited Perm—eight years into the conflict—the Soviet government finally revealed how many soldiers had died: over 13,000. At least 28 of them came from Perm.)

My most moving encounter was a late-night visit to Perm State University. Volodya, a blind veteran introduced to me by Sasha, was studying there, with help from fellow veterans who read his textbooks to him. Volodya took me to a dorm room where a dozen students had gathered to share thoughts about Afghanistan.

Some of the students were veterans, and nearly all called the Soviet invasion illegal. "In democratic countries, things like that don't happen," one said. Another said of the secret invasion: "If people had known the facts then, I'm sure the answer would have been no."

Not so, said a third student. If the public had been consulted, "we would have agreed," he said. Because in 1979, when the Soviet military entered Afghanistan, "We thought in a completely different way. Perhaps we didn't think at all."

The greatest joy for foreign correspondents in the late Soviet era was the ability to have such conversations, with people from all walks of life who were bursting to share their thoughts and opinions for the first time.

Perhaps the second greatest joy for foreign reporters was the Congress of People's Deputies, the legislative body created by Gorbachev and elected in 1989. We called the elections "quasi-democratic" because, although there was freewheeling political competition for some seats, Gorbachev's plan kept two-thirds of the deputy slots safely in the hand of reliable Communists—including Gorbachev and the other Politburo members, who appointed themselves so they didn't have to face voters.

A few years ago, I wrote a nostalgic essay for *Columbia Journalism Review* about spring 1989. Back then, the new legislature had first convened, and Soviet journalists and foreign correspondents had unprecedented access to its sessions in the Kremlin Palace of Congresses.

"During breaks journalists could roam the palace's vast lobbies, where it was possible to corner Andrei Sakharov, listen to the pontifications of Boris Yeltsin, and even, on occasion, probe the thoughts of Mikhail Gorbachev or his fellow Politburo members Yegor Ligachev and Alexander Yakovlev, the political yin and yang of the Communist leadership," I wrote. "What a feast for access-starved journalists, who, in the pre-Gorbachev era, could waste weeks or months seeking meetings with even the most low-level officials."

Inside the chamber, the Congress of People's Deputies gave a national platform to once-banished hard-core dissidents, pro-independence Baltic politicians, and workers from many

fields—all of whom had managed to win one of the competitive seats. For two weeks, when Congress met for the first time, the country virtually stopped working, as people tuned in to jaw-dropping debates carried live, gavel-to-gavel, on state TV. Speech had surely never been freer in Soviet history.

But like so many new ideas in those years, this freedom of political speech ran into a massive roadblock. Deputies could denounce policies or call for radical changes like a multiparty system, but they had no actual power to change anything. Power remained firmly in the grip of the Communist Party, where many members now also felt free—to denounce Gorbachev and his reforms, and demand a return to the authoritarianism of the past.

That was the intent of the State Committee for the State of Emergency, a.k.a. the *putschists*, who put Gorbachev under house arrest in August 1991 and announced they would roll back many of his reforms in order to “save the Motherland.”

Rumors of coups had circulated periodically for years, sometimes so intensely that foreign editors ordered their Moscow correspondents to cancel vacations or reporting trips outside of Moscow. When it finally came, the actual coup attempt caught many of us out of the country, or out of town. I was reporting in Vilnius, capital of the Soviet republic of Lithuania, but managed to get back to Moscow in time for the coup leaders’ surreal press conference the first evening.

On the coup’s 20th anniversary, I wrote for *Columbia Journalism Review* about that evening: “Some of the most brazen and important acts of modern-day journalism played out on TV screens across the Soviet Union.” One of those brazen acts was a cheeky

question thrown to the *putschists*, during their live press conference, by a young Russian journalist: “Could you please say whether or not you understand that last night you carried out a coup d’état?” Another was a video story, snuck onto the evening news, that showed a defiant Boris Yeltsin, surrounded by hundreds of supporters, denouncing the coup and calling on people to resist. Until then, the airwaves had been full of docile anchors, reading over and over the propagandistic decrees of the coup leaders; now, journalists had managed to signal that there was resistance and a strong voice—Yeltsin’s—at its head.

Other Soviet journalists also defied the coup, broadcasting truth on radio, distributing it via fax, and circulating it in primitive underground newspapers. Clearly the hardliners had badly underestimated what it would take to control media that had grown accustomed to the freedoms of glasnost. I have never been prouder of my profession.

Nor have I ever been as sleep-deprived as I was when I raced around Moscow speaking with Yeltsin’s defenders, calling friends in other cities to learn what was happening there, and monitoring independent radio station Ekho Moskv (Moscow Echo), which kept up its broadcasts from clandestine locations. When the coup attempt collapsed on the third day, more nonstop reporting followed as Moscow exploded in joy. People danced on Red Square. They toppled Felix Dzerzhinsky’s statue from his pedestal at KGB headquarters. They gathered to cheer Yeltsin, calling his name along with a chant I had not heard before: “Ros-si-ya, Ros-si-ya.” The new chant sent a signal; Soviet collapse now felt inevitable.



Above: Cooper in St. Petersburg while working on a story about Pushkin, 1987.

A number of foreign correspondents were scheduled to move on from Moscow to other assignments in 1991. What month they left had a distinct impact on how they saw its future. A leading British journalist who departed a few months before the coup wrote a valedictory piece full of the pessimism that was widespread at the time, particularly following the Soviet Army’s attack on the pro-independence movement in Lithuania that January.

I left about a month after the collapse of the August coup, when euphoria was still high and the future seemed to hold democratic promise for what would soon be 15 separate countries. As a result, I had trouble understanding what was going on in the 1990s—particularly in Russia, where, in 1993, Boris Yeltsin sent tanks to fire on the same White House where he had led opposition to the 1991 coup attempt. Some of the people he was attacking had been by his side in those scary August days of 1991.

A year later I was puzzled by the amnesty granted to those who had been charged with treason for arresting Gorbachev. And in 1996, my NPR

colleague Anne Garrels had to tutor me extensively in current Russian politics, when I returned to help her cover Boris Yeltsin's reelection campaign. His main opponent was a Communist. But didn't Communism collapse, along with the Soviet Union? And if Yeltsin had been the savior hero five years earlier, wouldn't his reelection be a slam dunk?

Well, hardly, and that's why I was there, getting a crash course in the chaos of the Yeltsin presidency and the new public yearning to return to some of the stability of the Soviet era. Yeltsin won the 1996 election, but he was helped along by some of the journalists I had once so admired, who had abandoned their ethical principles to keep their man in office.

By the time Vladimir Putin replaced Yeltsin, I had moved from journalism to press freedom advocacy, as executive director of the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). I brought to that job "knowledge of the former Soviet Union and rosy, outdated memories of glasnost. None of that prepared me for being a press freedom

advocate in the challenging new world of post-Soviet journalism," as I wrote in a lengthy 2020 report for Harvard University's Shorenstein Center, which surveys the history of Russian media from glasnost to today.

As CPJ director, I made several trips to Russia, most of them prompted by the murders of talented journalists who dared investigate the country's new powers: Putin, his political cronies, and the rich oligarchs who swore allegiance to him. Violence was the most severe tool, but under Putin press freedom was curbed in so many other ways, from oligarch takeovers of independent papers to administrative fines against critical news outlets (for alleged tax violations or failure to meet a fire code).

Putin's first decade in power was a dismal time for Russian media. Yet press freedom seemed to have hit a new low when—as a journalism professor—I visited Russia in October 2014. It was several months after Russia's annexation of Crimea, and I'd been invited by the U.S. Embassy in Moscow to come as an expert speaker. The list of suggested topics included radio journalism, using social media for reporting, and several other subjects—but *not* the sensitive issue of press freedom.

The Russia I visited on that trip was far less friendly to an American than the one I'd left in 1991. I did several press events, some of which were dominated by hostile questions from one or two journalists, whose vehemence seemed to cow others into silence.

At Voronezh State University one afternoon, the journalism rector introduced me in an auditorium that was filled to its 300-seat capacity. I was pleasantly surprised to see the turnout. But as soon as I finished my talk (I no longer remember what I said, and it

was surely eclipsed by what was about to happen), several young people stood up holding signs, in English, demanding a stop to Nazism in Ukraine. (Whatever I did speak about, it had nothing to do with Ukraine.)

Two other flamboyant provocateurs monopolized the question time. One was a muscle-builder from Luhansk who said he'd worked as a fixer for American journalists covering the conflict in eastern Ukraine. Every one of the Americans, he insisted, lamented that they "can't report the truth of what's going on here" because their bosses in the U.S. ordered them to write only anti-Russia stories. So he claimed, offering not a shred of evidence.

A local website covered the session, and I emailed the article to my husband back in New York. "You look quite stressed," he wrote, referring to the photos accompanying the text.

The visit indeed had its stressful moments. But the strongest feeling I had was sadness, never more so than at the end of that session in Voronezh. Once the provocateurs had their say, and after the rector dismissed the audience, a dozen or so journalism students came up to take selfies with me. I was glad to see them, but sad that they had remained silent through the event. I understood why: unlike those students in Perm, finding their eloquent voices in 1988, these students were living in a new reality. It's one likely to survive throughout Putin's tenure, when criticism is once again stifled, and those who express it can face serious consequences. ■

Ann Cooper is CBS Professor Emerita of Professional Practice in International Journalism at Columbia Journalism School and a faculty member emerita at the Harriman Institute.

