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ECHOES OF A DYING STATE: PERESTROIKA PROPAGANDA IN THE SOVIET FOREIGN PRESS

By Matthew Brown

“Perestroika means mass initiative. It is the comprehensive development of democracy, socialist self-government, encouragement of initiative and creative endeavor, improved order and discipline, more glasnost, criticism and self-criticism in all spheres of our society. It is utmost respect for the individual and consideration for personal dignity.”²³⁰

The collapse of the Soviet Union marked the end of one of the most tumultuous and volatile periods in modern history. The Soviet Union was not destroyed by a foreign military invasion, nor was it torn apart by civil war. The events that resulted in one of the most powerful countries the world has ever seen literally signing itself out of existence were official government policy, heavily promoted by the Communist Party as the pinnacle of Soviet ideology, and praised by the Soviet intelligentsia as a clear path to a prosperous society. The perestroika and glasnost reforms, instituted under Mikhail Gorbachev, represent the final

²³⁰ Mikhail Gorbachev, *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 34.

chapter of the Soviet Union's history before its collapse in 1991 and the splitting of the Union into 15 post-Soviet republics. How did such promising and widely acclaimed plans destroy the very society on which they were built? The answer to this question lies in how the Soviet Union mobilized its citizens to action; in propaganda.

The reforms began with Gorbachev's assumption to the position of the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in March of 1985. Gorbachev's vision for the future of the Soviet Union involved a public examination of the social, economic, and political issues that plagued the country at the time, while simultaneously developing programs to prepare the Soviet Union for future development in all spheres of life.²³¹ The term *perestroika* was adopted to define the task at hand. Perestroika translates to English as "restructuring", underlining that a massive change was needed within the Communist Party and the Soviet Union, and not simply a handful of minor adjustments. This proposed restructuring of the entire Soviet system and society was to be driven by two concepts: *glasnost* (openness) and *demokratizatsia* (democratization), ultimately resulting in the revitalization of the communist party and the Soviet Union.²³² The "openness" of glasnost meant that issues such as the shortcomings of the Soviet planned economy, corruption within the Communist Party and state bureaucracies, ideological disputes, and foreign policy would no longer be covered up, but openly discussed and solutions sought. Moving hand-in-hand with the dialogue and self-criticism inspired by glasnost, democratization worked to alleviate totalitarian elements in Soviet society and politics by replacing the appointment system with elections for state leadership positions and factory management.

Scholarly writing about the 1980s reforms in the Soviet Union tends to fall into two distinct camps. The type of writing that emerged first is largely focused on the role of Mikhail Gorbachev as the chief orchestrator of reform. Titles including *The Gorbachev Phenomenon*, *Can Gorbachev Change the Soviet Union?*, and *Gorbachev's Revolution* illustrate the academic fascination with the man, and hold him as a figure to guide their discourse and analysis of perestroika

²³¹ Moshe Lewin, *The Gorbachev Phenomenon: A Historical Interpretation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), ix.

²³² John F.N. Bradley, *Soviet Perestroika, 1985-1993: Russia's Road to Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 15.

and glasnost.²³³ They view Gorbachev's efforts as in earnest, though perhaps too ambitious or with little chance of success.²³⁴ Though this style persisted beyond the collapse of the Soviet Union, it first emerged out of a necessity to discuss the reforms, despite the absence of quantifiable results while the reforms were underway. Following the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, more complex arguments emerged. With knowledge of how Gorbachev's programs played out, it became possible to widen one's perspective on the reforms with information about how different factions of the Soviet government and public responded to the changes and how these reactions ultimately led to the end of the Soviet state. These pieces take the internal politics of the Soviet Union into account, along with public opinion and international relations. While presenting the multifaceted nature of perestroika and glasnost and the wide effect of the reforms, these later works hold a general consensus that the rise of nationalism in the Soviet Republics (in the wake of perestroika's restructuring initiatives) is the major reason for collapse.²³⁵

A theme that features heavily within both major types of literature is the legacy of Joseph Stalin. Be it a focus on Gorbachev's final undoing of Stalin, or the role that Stalinism played in holding the Soviet Union together, the argument remains the same: the perestroika reforms represented a move away from Stalin's authoritarian command structure that persisted since his death in 1953, and thus, shook Soviet society to its very core. Susanne Sternthal, in her book *Gorbachev's Reforms: De-Stalinization through Demilitarization*, argues that Josef Stalin is responsible for the various problems that Mikhail Gorbachev

²³³ Lewin, *The Gorbachev Phenomenon*; Zdenek Mlynar, *Can Gorbachev Change the Soviet Union?* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990); Susanne Sternthal, *Gorbachev's Reforms, De-Stalinization through Demilitarization* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1997); Anthony D'Agostino, *Gorbachev's Revolution* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

²³⁴ Marc Zlotnik, "Rethinking Soviet Socialism: The Politics of Ideological Change," in *Restructuring Soviet Ideology: Gorbachev's New Thinking*, ed. Sylvia Woodby and Alfred B. Evans, Jr. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990), 13-37.

²³⁵ George J. Neimanis, *The Collapse of the Soviet Empire: A View from Riga* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1997); Elie Kedourie, "Nationalism and the Balance of Power," in *End of Empire: The Demise of the Soviet Union*, ed. G.R. Urban (Washington, D.C.: The American University Press, 1993); Edward W. Walker, *Dissolution: Sovereignty and the Breakup of the Soviet Union* (Berkeley: Berkeley Public Policy Press, 2003); Wisła Suraska, *How the Soviet Union Disappeared* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998). Suraska analyzes several contributing factors to the Soviet Union's dissolution, though I am citing it here in the capacity that it details the rise of nationalism like the majority of other works.

outlined upon his ascent to power.²³⁶ In this same vein, Elie Kedourie argues that Stalinism is what held the Soviet Republics together, and that with Gorbachev's de-Stalinization, the Republics turned to nationalism and the Union dissolved.²³⁷

The claim that Stalin is responsible for the state of the Soviet Union that Gorbachev inherited is a valid one. A brief survey of Soviet history supports this argument. Stalin's legacy includes the bureaucratization of the Soviet Union, and the militarization of Soviet society and foreign policy under a totalitarian state. While centralization of state controls may have been justified in his own time by the need to industrialize and the inevitability of preparing for and fighting the Second World War, Stalin established precedents that persisted in Soviet leadership well beyond his death.²³⁸ Perhaps one of the most damaging legacies of Stalin is the defense-first mindset he initiated. Due to what he saw as capitalist (and during the Second World War, fascist) encirclement, Stalin devoted the majority of the country's resources and capabilities to preparing for what he saw as an inevitable war. This resulted in a centralized system of state command that permeated not only economics, but also political and social life with the Communist Party (and all too often, Stalin himself) as the sole source of authority.²³⁹ Having the country on a perpetual war-path against ideological "enemies," internal and external, meant the justification of suppressing political opponents, the direct control of the Soviet Union's still budding industrial system, and an openly hostile foreign policy. All aspects of life, social, economic, and intellectual, were politicized and directed by the state and its narrow interpretation of Marxist-Leninist ideology.

Following the death of Stalin, attempts were made by Nikita Khrushchev to reduce spending on the military, increase the quality and quantity of consumer products, and adapt Soviet policy to the new social and economic realities of the post-war world.²⁴⁰ While the Khrushchev era did indeed see a thaw in international relations and some internal social and economic reforms, Communist Party conservatives led by Leonid Brezhnev ultimately ousted him from power, returning to heavy-handed Stalinist style governance. As

²³⁶ Sternthal, *Gorbachev's Reforms*, 3.

²³⁷ Kedourie, "Nationalism and the Balance of Power," 104.

²³⁸ Sternthal, *Gorbachev's Reforms*, 6.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

historian Yuri Afanasyev states, regarding the period between Khrushchev and Gorbachev, “The intellectual and ideological stagnation of those years was worse than the economic stagnation.”²⁴¹ Stalin’s heavily centralized and bureaucratic party and government had effectively transcended his own death, reforms of his successor, and remained the status quo of the Soviet system for another 20 years until Mikhail Gorbachev introduced plans for far-reaching and radical changes.

Outside of the Gorbachev-focused writing and the writing dealing more directly with the collapse of the Soviet Union, there are authors that make arguments that are undoubtedly in the minority. A particularly interesting, though highly dubious claim is that the reforms themselves were nothing but propaganda, designed to gain Western financial aid for an already collapsing system.²⁴² While propaganda did feature heavily in the portrayals of perestroika and glasnost, the idea that the reforms themselves were part of some ploy to trick the West out of a full victory in the Cold War is laughable. It ignores the complex nature of both propaganda and the reforms.

The vast majority of propaganda studies revolve around the analysis of psychological techniques and rhetorical devices propagandists utilize in their craft, and suffer from a definition of propaganda that lends little to more sophisticated scholarship. These types of writing typically result in lists of notable tactics, case studies detailing multiple historical examples, and methods readers can employ to challenge propaganda when they encounter it. Scholars who have published works to this effect include D. Lincoln Harter, Edward L. Bernays, and Karen Dovring.²⁴³ Studies of this type exist for the explicit purpose of exploring propaganda for its own sake, as a standalone phenomenon. They

²⁴¹ Yuri Afanasyev, “The Agony of the Stalinist System,” in *Voices of Glasnost: Interviews with Gorbachev’s Reformers*, ed. Stephen F. Cohen and Katrina vanden Heuvel (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1989), 97.

²⁴² Marian Leighton, *Soviet Propaganda as a Foreign Policy Tool* (New York: Freedom House, 1991), 99-127.

²⁴³ Edward L. Bernays, *Propaganda* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1928); Karin Dovring, *Road of Propaganda: The Semantics of Biased Communication* (New York: Philosophical Library, Inc., 1959); D. Lincoln Harter, *Propaganda Handbook* (Philadelphia: Twentieth Century Publishing Company, 1953). Harter even begins his work with a list of “77 techniques” that are common, and refers to the psychological basis of each and how they have been used in the past. This is rather typical of books of this type, exploring little beyond the techniques a propagandist utilizes.

view propaganda as a tool for those in power who wish to deliberately and maliciously alter the beliefs of others through deception and hidden agendas.²⁴⁴ This oversimplification is incredibly problematic when studying propaganda for application in the field of history. It ignores the society from which the propaganda emerges, and pigeonholes those who use propaganda as evil, creating moral judgments that are generally to be avoided in the writing of good history.

One scholar that takes a more sophisticated approach in his work with propaganda is Jacques Ellul. Ellul was a French academic, writing in fields that spanned psychology, sociology, political science, and theology. A common theme featured throughout his varied writings is society's relationship with technology and the social power that comes along with technological power. His focus on social phenomena in relation to cultural and political power structures features heavily in his work *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*.²⁴⁵ Ellul's *Propaganda* represents a distinct break from previous studies of the field, viewing propaganda as a symptom of mass societies, rather than an intentional creation. He states that to "delineate the real dimensions of propaganda we must always consider it within the context of civilization."²⁴⁶ Previous analyses did little of this, relegating propaganda to a role in which it acts only as the tool of advertisers and despots. He goes on to write, "Propaganda is a good deal less the political weapon of regimes (it is that also) than the effect of a technological society that embraces the entire man and tends to be a completely integrated society."²⁴⁷ Here, Ellul makes clear that his take on propaganda is far more nuanced than that of his predecessors. He views propaganda more as an unintentional result of modern society, rather than something it deliberately creates. In this way, propaganda can be seen as an indicator of a society in which the state permeates multiple facets of life; in Ellul's own words, a "completely integrated society." "Propaganda must be seen as situated at the center of the growing powers of the

²⁴⁴ Eugen Hadamovsky, *Propaganda and National Power*, trans. Alice Mavrogordato and Ilse De Witt (1933; repr., New York: Arno Press, 1972); William Hummel, *The Analysis of Propaganda* (New York: William Sloane Associates, Inc., 1949).

²⁴⁵ Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965).

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, xvii.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

State and governmental and administrative techniques.”²⁴⁸ Further reiterating and expanding on his argument, Ellul holds that as a state develops power and expands its role in society, propaganda is a natural byproduct.

Ellul’s assertion that one must examine the social landscape to better understand propaganda is echoed in the discipline of history. One historian whose ideas fit well with this idea of understanding the society producing the propaganda is Moshe Lewin. Lewin, a noted scholar of Russian and Soviet history, holds that to properly understand the Soviet Union, one must examine the social forces at work within it.²⁴⁹ It is not sufficient to simply view the Soviet system as a government in control of its citizens. Lewin states that “one needs to work from a conceptualization of the state that allows one to grasp the connections between the political and other areas of social life.”²⁵⁰ This type of view is especially important when examining the media produced by the Soviet Union for the Western capitalist world. It is of limited use to label propaganda of any type, Soviet included, as a mere tool of the state. As with any aspect of government or political systems, the social forces behind propaganda and state-produced media must be thoroughly examined and analyzed to truly arrive at an understanding of how it functions.

The ways in which the Soviet Union depicted its own national project of restructuring, when viewed in conjunction with Ellul’s theories, give valuable insight to Soviet society. As the media in the Soviet Union was state owned and directed, newspapers and periodicals coming out of the USSR reflect the official program of the Soviet government and the Communist Party—supreme forces in nearly every aspect of Soviet life at the time. While a study of material published for Soviet audiences is ideal, the author encounters a significant language barrier preventing work with original Russian language sources. However, it is possible to operate around this problem by examining Soviet publications printed in English. This naturally leads to the questioning of just how similar the content of Russian language publications is to those written in English. By looking at material that has been translated from the domestic Soviet press of the reform period and comparing it with English language pieces of the same

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, xviii.

²⁴⁹ Lewin, *The Gorbachev Phenomenon*, 7.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

time, it can be determined that the views expressed are indeed consistent with each other.²⁵¹ In fact, pieces printed in English language Soviet publications were often listed as coming from newspapers and magazines circulating in the Soviet Union, though obviously in translation. These realities firmly establish the validity of examining English language publications as a means to explore Soviet print media regarding the reforms. For the sake of this paper, the monthly magazines *Soviet Life* and *Sputnik* will be used because of their close correlation to works translated directly from Russian sources, as well as their inclusion of pieces also read by Soviet audiences, allowing them to function to a certain degree as substitutes for domestic, Russian language sources. Evaluating the content of the pieces found within these magazines using Ellul's propaganda theories will shed light upon the society that produced them, expanding our understanding of the perestroika and glasnost reforms and how they affected the Soviet Union.

Representations of the perestroika and glasnost reforms in the Soviet English language media fit the criteria for propaganda as established by Jacques Ellul on multiple levels, thus revealing the centralized nature of the Soviet State and its supreme power in society. The specific categories these works of propaganda can be classified into and the psychological methods they utilize further illustrate the character and intent of the reforms beyond their face values and reflect the foundations that Soviet society was built on. As the reforms progressed, pieces found in Soviet media began to drift farther from the characteristics of propaganda, increasingly resembling more independent journalism and works of opinion until the ultimate dissolution of the Soviet state. This shift represents the successful implementation of certain aspects of the perestroika and glasnost reforms, while simultaneously signifying their ultimate failure in revitalizing the Soviet Union at all levels. The failure of the Soviet government to create the society that it promised to its citizens resulted in the abandonment

²⁵¹ Isaac J. Tarasulo, *Gorbachev and Glasnost: Viewpoints from the Soviet Press* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1989). This volume provides a great number of Soviet news articles published in translation. They are taken from various Soviet domestic newspapers and magazines and organized by subject matter. The pieces regarding perestroika are incredibly consistent with the types of statements made in *Soviet Life* and *Sputnik*, justifying my use of those magazines as representative of the Soviet press of the time. Perhaps the largest difference in content is found in the treatment of Soviet pop culture, detailed much more in the domestic articles than those destined for foreign readers, which tend to focus on fine arts and traditional culture.

of the social foundations that were used to advance the reform programs in propaganda, resulting in the collapse of Soviet state power.

A Social Approach

When working within Ellul's framework and a basic knowledge of Soviet history, one can easily understand why propaganda existed at the time Gorbachev took power and why it continued to exist at the inception of the perestroika and glasnost reforms. Gorbachev inherited a political system and society still operating under the Stalinist structure of state controls. As Ellul stated, propaganda is a natural phenomenon that results from such completely integrated and centralized societies. Though Gorbachev's reforms aimed to restructure the state completely and reduce the authoritarian influence it exerted over citizens' lives, the fact remains that he and his reformers were emerging from and working within a society already shaped by 50 years of supreme state power. It may seem counter-intuitive that a state would develop propaganda to initiate a process of decreasing state controls, however, the reforms were themselves state-organized programs. As acts of policy, they would be powerless and ineffective without the support of the public and a drive towards the active participation of the masses. This returns us to what Ellul holds as the one shared characteristic of all forms of propaganda: a will to action.²⁵² The social circumstances necessary for propaganda to exist already long in place, Gorbachev and his fellow reformers utilized the existing state media infrastructure to promote and advance their agenda of restructuring and openness with the public.

It is important to pause at this juncture and establish the nature of propaganda. The term, through decades of simplistic interpretations, has achieved an extremely negative connotation. Propaganda is often seen by the general public as an inherently malicious effort to distort the truth (or lie outright) and bring about the propagandist's ulterior or dubious motives by altering what individuals believe. However, this view is flawed on several levels. First, propaganda need not be malicious, nor need it contain lies. As stated above, the one primary piece of criteria that determines whether or not something is propaganda is the will to action. The ethical value of the action itself is not relevant to the label of propaganda. This connects to the second issue with the common misinterpretation of propaganda: it does not need to alter what an

²⁵² Ellul, *Propaganda*, x.

individual believes, but only move them towards action. Ellul calls this seeking *orthopraxy* rather than *orthodoxy*.²⁵³

Having established the validity of this particular theoretical framework of propaganda in relation to the state of society in the 1980s Soviet Union and the basic implications it has on the definition of propaganda, we can begin to look at more specific applications of the theory within Soviet publications produced for the West. While Ellul largely attempts to avoid outlining specific techniques of propaganda, he does outline different types of propaganda and the characteristics they demonstrate.²⁵⁴ Exploring which characteristics are present within the pieces of propaganda produced to advance reform not only further validate their labeling as propaganda, but in turn add the understanding of the reforms themselves and what their intended goals were.

Overt vs. Covert Propaganda: The Novosti Story

One distinction that Ellul draws is between covert and overt propaganda.²⁵⁵ The names themselves leave little to the imagination. Covert propaganda actively hides its aims and that it is intended to influence or push its audience towards a given action.²⁵⁶ The other side of the situation is overt propaganda. Overt propaganda does little or nothing to hide its source, and the actions it hopes to elicit are made clear. Official propaganda ministries are a key identifying factor for overt propaganda.

Soviet Life and *Sputnik*, the periodicals that this study is focused on, certainly fit within the definition of overt propaganda. Though intended to be magazines that showcase Soviet current events and culture, there was never any doubt that they were works of propaganda. Part of this classification stems from the fact that both of these journals (as well as many others) were published by Novosti. *Agentstvo Pechanti Novosti* (Novosti Press Agency, or simply Novosti for short) was created in 1961 with the stated goal of publishing “magazines, newspapers, and brochures designed to acquaint foreign readers with the Soviet Union,” amongst other similar domestic duties.²⁵⁷ While this may sound innocent enough, the reality of Novosti’s formation and activities

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 6-84.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁷ Baruch A. Hazan, *Soviet Propaganda: A Case Study of the Middle East Conflict* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1976), 49.

are quite revealing of its true function. The founders of Novosti came from several other Soviet organizations, public in name, but working within state sanctions. Members of the Union of Journalists, the Union of Writers, the Union of Soviet Societies for Friendship and Cultural Contacts with Foreign Countries, the National Union for the Dissemination of Political and Scientific Knowledge, and other similar groups had a hand in the foundation and management of the agency, which was in turn staffed with intelligence officers and graduates of KGB courses.²⁵⁸ While these groups had no official government connection, the state of society did not allow for independent bodies to exist without governmental approval. All publications were property of the people (the Communist Party), and journalists were hand-picked and expected to conform with and adhere to the party line. It is for this reason, although not directly state sponsored, that Novosti can be considered as an organ of the Soviet government with propaganda production as its chief goal. The manner in which these facts differ from the stated purpose may lead observers to classify Novosti as a producer of covert propaganda, however the state of the Soviet press was no secret, and publications coming directly from Novosti carried with them the stigma of state and party sponsorship.

An example of the close ties between Novosti and the Soviet state in the Gorbachev era can be found in one of its board chairmen, Valentin Falin. Elected to his position by the Council of Sponsors (leading members of the aforementioned groups and unions) in March of 1986, Falin's biography is very telling of the types of individuals that controlled Novosti. Graduating from the Moscow Institute of International Relations in 1950, Falin held various executive posts within the USSR Ministry of Foreign Affairs.²⁵⁹ From 1971-1979 he served as Soviet Ambassador to West Germany, as first deputy head of a department in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Central Committee from 1978-1983, and was awarded the Order of the October Revolution, three Orders of the Red Banner of Labor, and other medals for his service to the state and Communist Party.²⁶⁰ This lifetime of government work and intimate connection with the Communist Party, publicly stated, only furthers the charge that Novosti was overtly producing propaganda, though without explicitly labeling itself as such.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁹ "Valentin Falin Elected Chairman of APN Board," *Soviet Life*, May 1986, 29.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

Soviet Life in particular leaves no doubt as to the overt nature of its propaganda. Published from 1956-1991, *Soviet Life* was part of an agreement between the Soviet and American governments to allow for the limited distribution of specific periodicals in each other's countries (the American equivalent being *Amerika* magazine).²⁶¹ *Soviet Life*'s successor journal, *Russian Life* claims that while the magazines were intended to contain general interest pieces from the country of production, there was never a doubt that both functioned as mediums for the distribution of propaganda.²⁶² The presence of such an agreement between the two governments is itself an indicator that each party recognized the reality of the situation.

The propaganda coming out of Novosti was not limited to English language materials. Novosti was truly a massive agency. Publications were produced for more than 110 countries, with official representatives present in 82 of them maintaining connections with 140 major international news agencies.²⁶³ Some of their materials were published in multiple languages, while others were specifically targeting particular languages and nationalities. For instance, the newspaper *New Times* was printed in Russian, English, Spanish, German, French, and Arabic, containing broad-based stories and news coverage.²⁶⁴ Other publications including *Far Eastern Affairs* (printed in Russian, English and Japanese), *The Land of the Soviets* (Syria), *Al-Magallya* (Egypt), and *Fakel* (Hungary) were comprised of material specific to the region or culture in question.²⁶⁵ Novosti's gargantuan international scope, combined with its state-approved structure is further testament to the fact that it was indeed a propaganda house and not a simple news agency.

Vertical vs. Horizontal Propaganda: A Call to Action from Above

The voice developed in works of propaganda produces the next key distinction that Ellul makes: vertical vs. horizontal propaganda. Vertical propaganda is, as its name implies, top-down in orientation. The speaker is usually an authority figure or someone "in the know" acting from a superior position of power.²⁶⁶

²⁶¹ "About Russian Life: Our History," *Russian Life Magazine*, accessed March 6, 2013, <http://www.russianlife.com/about/>.

²⁶² *Ibid.*

²⁶³ Hazan, *Soviet Propaganda*, 49.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁶ Ellul, *Propaganda*, 80.

This is the standard form of propaganda that comes to mind in most discussions of the subject, representative of Nazi German, Stalinist, or American propaganda. The other, more uncommon type of propaganda in regards to voice is horizontal propaganda. Horizontal propaganda comes from sources within a given group and is directed towards a society where all members are (in theory at least) equal in standing and knowledge.²⁶⁷ A propagandist in horizontal systems acts more as a facilitator for discussion rather than from a position of power, guiding his targets towards the intended action. According to Ellul, this type of propaganda was found within Maoist China, where members of the Communist Party were planted in various social groups, slowly influencing said groups from inside.²⁶⁸

The propaganda of the perestroika and glasnost reforms is markedly vertical in its orientation. Speeches from leading government officials, often Gorbachev himself, and pieces written by various academics in high posts calling for reform, qualifying the necessity for change, or projecting the expected benefits of the new course are very common. This coincides with the top-down nature of the reforms themselves, as well as the media used to transmit information about them. Had the movement been from the masses or a faction within the government not backed by Gorbachev, it is highly unlikely that positive information regarding them would be found in party-backed sources like *Soviet Life* or *Sputnik*. As perestroika and glasnost were created and directed by the government, it only makes sense that the most enthusiastic advocates of the programs would be found within the government and associated bodies.

Soviet Life often published excerpts and summaries of various official speeches given by Gorbachev regarding his proposed courses of action and the benefits he claimed they would hold. These are clear examples of vertical propaganda, coming from the head of the Soviet state directed towards not only his own citizens but the world as a whole. The May 1986 issue of *Soviet Life* published a summary of General Secretary Gorbachev's political report speech given on February 25, 1986 to the Twenty-Seventh Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, titling it "We Look to the Future Confidently"; itself a quote from the speech.²⁶⁹ "Accelerating the country's socioeconomic development is

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 81.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 82.

²⁶⁹ "Mikhail Gorbachev, 'We Look to the Future Confidently...,'" *Soviet Life*, May 1986, 3.

the key to solving all our problems—immediate and long-term, economic and social, political and ideological, internal and external. It is the only way our society can and must achieve a qualitatively new stage.”²⁷⁰ Gorbachev acknowledges wide-spread problems within his country, and proposes his newly-revealed plans for reform as the sole path to correcting them and moving into the future. As leader of the USSR, he urges the population towards participating in the process, and for foreign listeners/readers to accept his reforms as positive for all mankind. At the conclusion of the piece, Gorbachev is paraphrased as assuring his audience that “The Communists and the entire Soviet people support the party’s policy of accelerating the country’s socioeconomic development and its Program’s clear orientation toward communist construction and world peace.”²⁷¹ Here Gorbachev has qualified his reforms by using his authority as head of the Communist Party to his advantage, giving them the blessing of the party and by proxy, the public as a whole. Though the reforms aimed to reduce this type of authoritarian directive, the fact remains that the Communist Party was, at this early stage of reform, still accepted as the representative of all citizens; a piece of the Stalinist legacy.

Outside of Gorbachev’s own speeches, other high-ranking individuals were commonly featured in *Soviet Life* writing about the necessity for restructuring and outlining how their fields would be affected. Many of these individuals are academics and professors, primarily from the fields of economics and sociology. As leading scholars in their fields, they are utilizing their titles and positions to add weight and authority to their interpretations. Doctor of Economics from the Central Economic and Mathematical Institute of the USSR Academy of Sciences Natalya Rimashevskaya is featured as writing, “the program provides for improving working conditions and remuneration, increasing the consumption fund, giving more assistance to large families, reviewing pension arrangements and retail prices, improving housing conditions and health services, and further developing education, culture, art and the mass media.”²⁷² Sociologist Tatyana Zaslavskaya, also a member of the USSR Academy of Sciences, is featured several times in *Soviet Life* throughout the Gorbachev period. Her assessments concern the development of society as a whole, rather than specific economic

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁷² Natalya Rimashevskaya, “Social Aims of Society,” *Soviet Life*, November 1986, 53.

goals. In a March 1988 interview with *Soviet Life*, Zaslavskaya is asked if she as a sociologist can guarantee that perestroika will be successful in bringing about positive changes for the Soviet Union. She answers, "The result will depend on the choice of virtually every member of society...a consistent democratization of all spheres of public life is under way—a process that could become the main factor of success."²⁷³ The open support of academics like Rimashevskaya and Zaslavskaya is crucial to the public mobilization behind perestroika. As experts in their respective fields, their statements are received with more credibility by the public.

More meaningful for foreign audiences who may not necessarily be influenced by Soviet politicians and academics are the experiences of people who are on the ground experiencing the changes themselves. Well aware of the distrust many Westerners felt towards anyone directly associated with the Soviet government, *Soviet Life* printed articles by friendly, relatable individuals lending indirect support to the government programs through the reporting of their everyday observations. While they may not hold official titles or positions of importance, accounts from these individuals, especially when published in a magazine like *Soviet Life* can be considered vertical propaganda. They are directed from someone who can be considered "in the know" in relation to foreign readers that have no tangible connection to the reforms taking place. An example of this type of vertical propaganda can be found in the October 1987 piece "Moscow—Center of Change".²⁷⁴ Mike Davidow, an individual given no formal introduction and taking a familiar tone, relays his observations of perestroika Moscow. Davidow lauds the vibrancy of the local bazaars, noting how full of life everyone is and the festive atmosphere surrounding the community. He writes that this jubilant affair is the direct result of the fact that collective farms and co-ops are now allowed to sell their surplus products independently (a piece of the perestroika reforms) and are thus alleviating the food shortages that once plagued the city.²⁷⁵ Davidow's claims are substantiated by the fact that he is on the scene, bearing witness to the changes in progress. Works such as Davidow's act as support for the politicians, policy makers, and academics that promised such improvements would occur.

²⁷³ "Perestroika: For the People or of the People?," *Soviet Life*, March 1988, 9.

²⁷⁴ Mike Davidow, "Moscow—Center of Change," *Soviet Life*, October 1987, 53.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

Irrational vs. Rational Propaganda: Ideals Put into Action

Ellul differentiates pieces propaganda into two more classes based the type of appeals they use to encourage action: irrational and rational. Irrational propaganda is made to excite the audience, speaking with great passion and emotion often about lofty ideals or principles with no statistical grounding.²⁷⁶ Rational propaganda on the other hand, makes heavy use of facts, figures and statistics to appeal to the man's favorable view of verifiable information and illustrate the successes or failures of a course of action.²⁷⁷ Here, it is important to again emphasize that propaganda need not be lies. A piece of propaganda may be 100% factual information, but conveyed in a manner that demands support and action.

The propaganda of perestroika and glasnost contains both rational and irrational elements, revealing the comprehensive nature of their goals. Irrational pieces make use of concepts like democracy, social justice, and promises of a new age in the Soviet Union. The rational pieces use statistics and reports to underscore where the past system has fallen short, and illuminate where the new course has been successful. Utilized together, these two types of appeals paint a picture of a society undergoing a complete transformation of ideology and infrastructure. The irrational and the rational support each other—one laying out the ideological basis of the reforms, the other providing tangible and calculable evidence of their necessity and successes.

Given the ideological shifts that perestroika and glasnost were working towards, irrational propaganda served to excite the public with ideals of the inherent "goodness" of the new system. One theme that is featured quite often is that of social justice. The idea of a just and moral society in which social conditions do not limit opportunity or the ability to achieve one's goals is upheld as a proud Soviet tradition, albeit one that is still being perfected and brought to a reality.²⁷⁸ The attainment of social justice and equality is lifted up as the supreme goal of reform. Readers are assured that the actions taking place before them have this in mind, and that the Communist Party will do everything it can to advance the principle.²⁷⁹

²⁷⁶ Ellul *Propaganda*, 85.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 84.

²⁷⁸ Vsevolod Davidovich, "Promoting the Cause of Social Justice," *Soviet Life*, March 1986, 50.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

Perestroika was made to look appealing in that it was to usher in a new age of prosperity and socialist enlightenment. It was throwing off the shackles of previous ideological stagnation, and proceeding with the development of new ideas in light of modern realities. One individual who made this claim very clear was Boris Krotkov, editor-in-chief of *Sputnik*. At the beginning of each issue, Krotkov writes a letter to his readers giving his (and consequently, the Party's) take on the current state of affairs in the Soviet Union. His style is a perfect example of irrational propaganda, promising a brighter future in the wake of reform. "We want more socialism. But we need socialism constantly renovating, capable of being in the vanguard of human civilization...and not for some abstract prestige, but for the sake of each and every one [sic.] of us. For the sake of me, my children and grandchildren, their bright future, the road to which was opened by the October Revolution."²⁸⁰ Krotkov offers no specifics, rather relying on the broad appeal of a promising tomorrow shaped by ideological developments.

Though emotional appeals such as Krotkov's are quite common in material emerging from this period, there are an even greater number of pieces with a focus on justifying perestroika with hard facts and statistics. Wage levels, industrial production statistics, and efficiency reports are among the vast number of figures thrown at readers in these types of articles. These reflect the fact that a major portion of perestroika's reforms were economic, and as such, changes could be quantified and judged accordingly. Problems with past economic planning were accompanied with the statistic that the industrial output growth rate in 1982 was 50% below the average of the growth rate for the previous five-year planning period.²⁸¹ The economics of the Uzbek Republic were cast in a dismal light by listing that industrial capacity had been underused for the preceding 20 years, leaving goals for growth rates and economic targets unmet.²⁸² A 60% decline in the growth of the national income of the USSR from 1971-1986 was noted, naturally alongside calls for change.²⁸³ These numerical revelations direct readers to one conclusion: the old system has failed. When the ideology

²⁸⁰ Boris Krotkov, "Along the Trail Blazed by the October Revolution," *Sputnik*, July 1987, 13.

²⁸¹ "Nikolai Ryzhkov: Accelerated Economic Growth, A Better Life for the People," *Soviet Life*, May 1986, 20.

²⁸² Vladimir Mizhiritsky, "Big Economic Changes in the Offing," *Soviet Life*, September 1987, 8.

²⁸³ Abel Aganbegian, "Three Waves of Restructuring," *Sputnik*, October 1987, 44.

and policy no longer produce quantifiable success, people are bound to seek an alternative—namely, perestroika.

The economic effects of perestroika, or rather the state of the economy during the perestroika reforms, were also made public via statistics. Surely, readers are to believe, any improvements in production or efficiency could be attributed to the numerous changes brought about in economic policy. Industrial production is listed as having increased by 4.4% and agricultural production by 3% between 1985 and 1986.²⁸⁴ Use of “progressive” technologies was to be expanded by 50-100%.²⁸⁵ These statistics are not published to be remembered by readers. What is important is the overall impression they create. With growth numbers positive and goals set high for the future, readers gather that things must be looking up, paying no mind to what “progressive” technologies may be or just how closely the recorded growth rates correspond with previous plans. What is remembered is that they were shown numbers, and that the numbers looked promising.

The scope of the perestroika and glasnost reforms is much better understood when utilizing the framework of rational vs. irrational propaganda. Both types were featured heavily, representing the multi-faceted nature of the reforms themselves. On one hand, there was to be a massive shift in ideology, bringing about a new era of justice and prosperity. On the other, these ideas were to be concrete, manifesting themselves in improved production that could be seen on paper or in the factories.

Lenin and Stalin as Symbols

While Ellul is careful to establish that propaganda is not solely the manipulation of symbols for a psychological effect, he stipulates that symbols can be manipulated within a propaganda system to provoke action.²⁸⁶ In order for a symbol to be manipulated effectively, it must first be ingrained within a society. Once the symbol has been properly established and elevated through the pre-education of a society, it can be called upon to serve the purposes of the propagandist.²⁸⁷ The manipulation of revered or hated concepts or individuals

²⁸⁴ “On the Party’s Tasks in Fundamentally Restructuring the Management of the Economy,” in *Soviet Life*, September 1987: 51.

²⁸⁵ Ryzhkov, “Nikolai Ryzhkov,” 21.

²⁸⁶ Ellul, *Propaganda*, 20-23.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

provokes reflexive actions in those who have been taught to feel a certain way about them.

Within the Soviet Union, there was no symbol more respected than that of Vladimir Lenin. The architect of the October Revolution, Lenin's status was elevated to that of an immortal sage, accessible through his writings and his embalmed body that rests in its Red Square mausoleum.²⁸⁸ The cult of Lenin is something unmatched in Western society. During the October Revolution and following his death, Lenin grew from being a political theorist into an abstraction of all that was possible for the people of the Soviet Union.²⁸⁹ The veneration of Lenin was by no means consistent in its intensity. However, it endured usurpation and corruption by the personality cult of Josef Stalin, was revitalized to an extent by Nikita Khrushchev, only to again be relegated to half-heartedly celebrated state holidays in the following decades.²⁹⁰ Though the Soviet concept of Lenin was not always at the forefront of political life, it managed to maintain its character relative to the revolution and the benevolent and all-wise status Lenin was elevated to. The enduring power of Lenin as a symbol of the purity of his ideology and goodwill in the Soviet Union made his identity and the myths surrounding him a natural target for manipulation.

The possibility of using Lenin as a symbol was by no means ignored by proponents of the perestroika and glasnost reforms. Once again, Lenin was used to justify the new course of action proposed for the Soviet Union; his writings being cited as a source of inspiration for reform and new policies labeled as a continuation of his work. All Soviet citizens were imbued with a deep appreciation and respect for Lenin's accomplishments and theories, and aligning one's platform with that of Lenin was a sure method to achieve a reflexive action from the public.

A piece of Leninist theory that proved vital to the promoters of perestroika was the view that society must adapt to practical realities, updating its approaches to face issues that previous theorists, Lenin included, could not possibly foresee. Gorbachev's use of a Lenin quote is explained in a *Soviet Life* piece when he repeated, "When the situation has changed and different problems have to be

²⁸⁸ Nina Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives!: The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), xi.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 132.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 252-263.

solved, we cannot look back and attempt to solve them by yesterday's methods. Don't try—you won't succeed.'"²⁹¹ With this general notion justifying the drive toward reform, other more specific elements of Lenin's writing and life were used to direct the changes. The openness and critical nature of glasnost could be aligned with Lenin's claim that "our strength lies in stating the truth," and the war against bureaucracy justified by the importance Lenin placed on reducing bureaucracy in times that were to see great changes.²⁹² These congruencies were not held to be coincidences, nor should they be. They represent an attempt to return to classical Leninist theories uncorrupted by the Stalinist system, and updating them as per Lenin's own advice. Using Lenin as a symbol was not simply an attempt to gain public support for a new course, but the result of a society that had been conditioned to look to him for answers. In Gorbachev's own words, "It is precisely...in Lenin's spirit that we acted at our congress. It is precisely in this way that we are going to act in the future as well."²⁹³

While Lenin was used as a symbol of pursuing a progressive socialist society through reinterpretation and creative thinking, the image of Stalin was utilized to personify the ills that faced the Soviet Union at the time of reform. We have already established the general character of Stalin's additions to the Soviet system, and this history was not lost on Gorbachev and the other reformers. There were few in the Soviet Union whose families were not harmed by Stalinism.²⁹⁴ In the propaganda of the late 1980s, Stalin's influence was typically portrayed as repressive, centralizing, and instrumental in bringing about the authoritarian management system that was to be reformed (a valid representation, as established in earlier sections).²⁹⁵ "The vast majority of deviations from socialism, many of which have not yet been overcome, emerged in Stalin's time...Stalinism implies mass terror, contempt for human life, the massacre of millions of innocent people on political grounds."²⁹⁶ While it is historical fact that Stalin did shape the Soviet Union in this way, the real interest lies in how Stalin was directly associated with the problems reformers were facing. By directly linking the pre-perestroika system to Stalin and his legacy of terror, these pieces create the reflexive desire to distance oneself from the old ways. In the West,

²⁹¹ Pyotr Mikhailov, "Leninist Rethinking," *Soviet Life*, May 1986, 7.

²⁹² *Ibid.*

²⁹³ "Closing Speech By Mikhail Gorbachev," *Soviet Life*, May 1986, 5.

²⁹⁴ Sternthal, *Gorbachev's Reforms*, 1.

²⁹⁵ "Party Conferences: Pages of History," *Soviet Life*, July 1988, 9.

²⁹⁶ "Stalin is my Idol!," *Soviet Life*, January 1989, 29.

where Stalin is usually depicted as the ultimate evil of the Soviet Union, this correlation had potential to be very successful in winning the support of many Americans.

The combination of Lenin (an already revered figure) as a symbol of correct socialist ideology and Stalin (feared and hated by many in the Soviet Union and abroad) as the source of socioeconomic ills reveals an interesting side of the perestroika and glasnost reforms. The reforms seized upon the collective senses of success and failure. Reformers recognized where they believed their country had deviated from its founding principles, and turned their focus to the success of Lenin's October Revolution as a way of mitigating the damage and continuing on what they believed to be the correct path. The propaganda reflecting this duality of Soviet leadership was not a planned out tactic as more rudimentary studies may conclude, but an organic result of the social fabric and history of the Soviet Union at the time.

Changing Coverage: No Direction but Down

As the Soviet Union continued down the labored and uncertain path towards democratization, there are certain shifts visible within the content of *Soviet Life* and *Sputnik*. The materials presented in the publications drifted farther from the criteria used to define propaganda. Beginning in 1989 and lasting through the official dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991, articles being to appear that do not contain the same drive towards action found in earlier pieces. Rather than suggesting a correct path or reassuring the population that the present hardships are in the service of future benefits, questions about the future of the Soviet Union are brought up and left open-ended. The questioning of reforms begins somewhat modestly, but as time goes on the dissatisfaction intensifies. By early 1991, certain articles openly express distaste with all things coming from the government with great exasperation.

In December of 1989, *Soviet Life* printed an article titled "Unemployment: Avoiding the Pitfalls".²⁹⁷ The piece almost acts as an introduction to the word "unemployment" and its implications, as until the perestroika reforms, there had been full employment in the USSR. The root of the massive levels of unemployment (primarily in Central Asia and the Caucasus region) is held to be the self-financing of all factories and plants. The article states that because these production facilities are no longer state supported, they have reduced

²⁹⁷ Victor Shirokov, "Unemployment: Avoiding the Pitfalls," *Soviet Life*, December 1989, 23.

costs by eliminating superfluous workers. The article goes on to say that if the Soviet Union desires economic recovery, the “myth” of full employment needs to be done away with. A question is asked of readers in the final lines: “What should be done to ease the situation, to avoid pitfalls, and to guarantee and safeguard our citizens’ right to work?”²⁹⁸

Interestingly, the piece gives no hypothetical solutions. In earlier issues, this type of question would warrant a lengthy reply, thick with hopes of a better future at the expense of today. However, progress is no longer the task at hand. The question asks what can be done to ease the situation and safeguard citizens, not advance their causes. This piece cannot be considered propaganda, as it does not suggest or lead towards any specific action, but rather asks readers “what can be done?” It openly labels full employment, previously a key feature of the Soviet economy and a point of pride, as a “myth.”

Two months later in February 1990, a piece entitled “Socialism: Where is it headed?” was published in *Soviet Life*.²⁹⁹ The article begins by praising the enthusiasm with which Warsaw Pact countries of Eastern Europe have embraced perestroika and the spirit of change that comes with it. After this optimistic introduction, the tone of the writing becomes more questioning of the Soviet Union’s allies. The author, Nikolai Shishlin questions the direction the countries will go in with their reforms. He lists three possible views on the further development of “socialist community” within these states. The first is that socialism is dead and that the only future is in a return to a “bourgeois-democratic” system. The second is that socialist democracy will take hold and that Stalinist interpretations will be defeated. The third possible outcome is that “revolutionary” changes will take place and “cleanse” the socialist ideal. Shishlin concludes that all three opinions have the right to exist, that no single course can be suggested, and that everyone should be prepared for more unpleasant surprises. Finally, he ends by making an appeal to the right of free choice of government and encourages cooperation.

This type of writing would be completely alien in *Soviet Life* were it published a year earlier. Even entertaining the fact that socialism may be dead without responding with a voracious attack on all possible angles would be next to sacrilege. Like the article before it, this one makes no suggestion as to the course the states it discusses should take. Granted, it does call for cooperation and

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁹⁹ Nikolai Shishlin, “Socialism: Where is it Headed?,” *Soviet Life*, February 1990, 12.

freedom to choose one's own government, but these goals presented without the ideological components of previous pieces are nothing more than a hope for any form of stability.

Representing the most extreme move away from the classification of propaganda is an article written by Yuri Gafsky titled "In Search of an Economic Strategy."³⁰⁰ Printed in the February 1991 edition of *Soviet Life* (1991 was the final year *Soviet Life* would be published), the article takes a scathing tone, renouncing all government efforts to improve the economic situation. Gafsky compares the promises of Gorbachev to the failed promises made by Josef Stalin, stating "in recent years ordinary Soviet citizens have been showered with promises of social boons."³⁰¹ He ties any increase in wages or pension amounts to the government's willingness to print huge amounts of currency to satisfy promised increases, which are rendered moot by the inflation this behavior inevitably leads to. He discusses with tangible levels of disgust the waffling of various government bodies as they struggle to come up with a working plan of any type to save the economy, revealing the contradictory nature of the policies adopted at that time. He closes by saying, "The Soviet economy moves according to the principle, 'One step forward, two steps back.'"³⁰²

Clearly, the transformation is complete. Socialist ideology is never even mentioned in this article. No course is proposed, and there is little to no hope for the future of the economy, and almost no faith left in the government to solve the problems Gafsky argues it is only making worse with its own ineptitude and indecision. There is no way this government-bashing rant, completely devoid of hope or any direction for the future, can be considered propaganda; at least not within the criteria established by Ellul. This absence of propaganda indicates the absence of the state power Ellul held as necessary for propaganda to exist. The Soviet Union was effectively done, officially ceasing to exist 10 months following the publication of this article.

What happened?

How could reforms that started out so promising end in the dissolution of one of the world's greatest superpowers? At the beginning of the march towards greater openness and a more fair society, the Soviet Union represented a highly

³⁰⁰ Yuri Gafsky, "In Search of an Economic Strategy," *Soviet Life*, February 1991, 50.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 62.

centralized, bureaucratic, top-down oriented civilization. In 6 short years, it would sign itself out of existence. Surely, there must be a way to explain such a dramatic fall.

We can arrive at one of many possible understandings by utilizing the theories of Jacques Ellul, as has been done throughout this study. Ellul writes that propaganda must be rooted in action, and that a failure to take action is in itself counter-propaganda.³⁰³ The failure of the Soviet state to reach the goals it established for itself was its ultimate downfall. The Communist Party promoted a new course of action, deeply rooted in Leninist theory and the idea that the Party is an effective representative of the people. While democratization was indeed achieved, the rest of the package was conspicuously absent. The economy was in a state of complete ruin, far from the promised consumer prosperity. The legitimacy of the Party as a guiding force and the traditions it rested on were called into question and ultimately thrown out by voting citizens. The Communist Party of the Soviet Union, its leaders and experts, and ideological foundations were rendered impotent and ineffectual in light of their public failings. The social backbone that the propaganda and reforms were based on caved in. Elections favored new political parties, and the Soviet Republics decided, one by one, to pursue their own separate courses of development apart from the Soviet Union, consistent with the nationalist claims made by post-collapse historians.

The close study of propaganda from this period demonstrates in stark terms the decline of Soviet state power. From the initial speeches and statistics to mobilize the masses, to the open rejection of government policy, the collapse of the state is clear. Ellul's claim that propaganda represents a powerful state rings true in this case. As Communist Party supremacy faded, the Soviet print media's publications drifted farther and farther away from the characteristics of propaganda. In a sense, this marks a sort of success the Communist Party and Gorbachev never intended for. Perestroika and glasnost did indeed finally de-Stalinize the Soviet Union, but at the cost of the Union itself. Soviet state power fell victim not only to the general failure of perestroika, but also to its limited successes.

³⁰³ Ellul, *Propaganda*, 21.

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