



## THE HISTORY AND ROLE OF "VOICE OF AMERICA" INFLUENCE ON THE COLLAPSE OF THE USSR

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### Abstract

This article is about the development of the Soviet mass media after 1985 and the growing influence of VOA. Also, information on the political and economic problems of the USSR, Gorbachev's position and his speeches, important press coverage is analyzed. In addition, the results of freedom of the press, such as "Vzglyad", will be discussed.

**Keywords:** Vzglyad, Lastochka, Media, Vlasov, VOA, Pravda, Copy, live broadcast, self-censored.

### Introduction

In the USSR of the late 1980s, cable TV was not regulated by censorship. As a result, cable TV channels began to broadcast a wide range of (news) programs from varying, mostly conservative, viewpoints.<sup>1</sup> Cable TV had been able to operate since the coup in the Soviet Union in August 1991, when Article 5 of the law on emergencies called for a complete blockade of the entire media. People were enthralled by VOA of American movies, for example, a film simply titled "American" was regarded as a solution to a variety of social problems.<sup>2</sup> Surprisingly, reviews of and comments on film were even published in local newspapers.

The number of VOA listeners in the Soviet Union had also risen dramatically since newspapers started to publish articles about accessing their radio-station, which has attracted millions of listeners over the years. Despite the persistent threat of a ban, sanctions for US media goods had been lifted. No accusations under Article 70 were made for the possession or distribution of foreign media goods, and in general the public held a positive opinion regarding media in the West.<sup>3</sup> According to my research, positive opinions on

<sup>1</sup> Finifter, A. F. & Mickiewicz, E. (1992). Redefining the Political System of the USSR: Mass Support for Political Change. *The American Political Science Review* p. 857-874.

<sup>2</sup> Shane 1994, pp. 190-205.

<sup>3</sup> A. Uglanov, В 1986 году американские фирмы приобрели 12 советских полнометражных фильмов. "Петр Великий" с американским акцентом (In 1986 American firms purchased 12 soviet full-length films. "peter the great" with American accent). *Argument I fakti* 1987, January



VOA started to appear in the Pravda after Gorbachev's first speech in 1985, when VOA broadcasts started to encourage Gorbachev and his *Perestroika*.<sup>4</sup> Such claims were then used by Soviet propaganda to try to persuade the West that *Perestroika* was good policy. As a result, negative feelings towards the VOA that had built up over time were beginning to dissipate and relations normalized.

What distinguishes VOA in affecting the USSR from other western media or other institutions/devices was the size of its audience and its use of multiple languages in broadcasting. As a result, it had more influence than other Western organizations and programs. This becomes clear when looking at Soviet governmental sources. The fact that the VOA had been supported by Congress from the start is also a hint, just like the dramatic shift in US policy after the Soviet Union attempted to disable the VOA.<sup>5</sup> The KGB was furthermore notably hostile to the VOA as to other Western organizations or media at first. The USSR has been steadily strengthening its ideological defenses against VOA propaganda while also carrying out real activities against the VOA, which is another sign of its importance.

With the waning of the KGB's influence over the media and the ensuing press freedom, comparisons of discrepancies between the US and the USSR's standard of living intensified as a more accurate analysis of the issues of social life became public. This resulted for example in an increase in the publishing of caricatures through the media. Journalists attempted to make their reporting more appealing and tried to cover topics relevant to the public.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, US-USSR relations were often portrayed in a positive way in both domestic media, with many of Gorbachev's speeches emphasizing how beneficial communication between the two super powers was.<sup>7</sup> As the talks about disarmament in Helsinki progressed, caricatures about it proliferated. When the Wall fell, one caricature joked "The wall has been broken down — but there is no culprit."<sup>8</sup> These political caricatures have sparked a lot of debate, for example one from the Pravda during a special issue of *Vzglyad* in June 1990.<sup>9</sup> As a result, more people were focusing on topics that had previously been ignored. However, the government

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<sup>4</sup> Ingram, A, 'A Nation Split into Fragments': The Congress of Russian Communities and Russian Nationalist Ideology. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 51 (4) pp. 687-704 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Цветкова Наталья Александровна *Публичная дипломатия как инструмент идеологического и политического экспансии США в мире, 1914–2014 гг.* Moscow, St. Peterburg university press 2016, pp 322-345.

<sup>6</sup> Andrei G. Ritcher, *Ideology of perestroika and the Soviet Mass Media*. N.17. 2001 year.

<sup>7</sup> TASS: Выступление Генерального секретаря ЦК КПСС товарища С.ГОРБАЧЕВА на Пленуме ЦК КПСС 11 марта 1985 г. (Speech of the General Secretary of the CPSU Central Committee Comrade S. GORBACHEV at the Plenum of the CPSU Central Committee on March 11, 1985) Pravda, March 12. P, 3

<sup>8</sup> S. Opetyan, У Берлинской стены (By The Berlin Wall). Pravda 1990 January 13. P, 7. TV program ORT Pravda Page 4. June 16, 1990.

<sup>9</sup> Anniversary of the "Vzglyad" program that changed the country: 30 facts about the legendary program. *Komsomolskaya Pravda*. 2011.



chose to ignore these caricatures and as a consequence allowed new critical issues to arise. Specifically, caricatures singled out the Communist Party as a priority.<sup>10</sup> As all critiques of the Party's ineffectiveness was put on display in easy to understand caricatures, internal stability naturally took a big hit. Combining with resentment on persisting economic problems in the Union, stability further dropped because each mistake and each mistakes made when trying to rectify the first mistake now become subject of harsh criticism from the media.<sup>11</sup> No one was truly in control of the media anymore after *Glasnost*.

A VZGLYAD interview with USSR Air Force Marshal S. F. Akhromeev published in a special issue on October 9, 1989, sparked widespread controversy. During the one-hour program, which featured a full question-and-answer session, Akhromeev detailed how the army would be affected by the USSR's internal difficulties and the weakening of the USSR's economy. Akhromeev specifically addressed economic difficulties, such as a shortage of food and clothing in the USSR army in 1989. Because the VOA and other Western media re-edited his words and broadcasted them in other languages as part of their regular programming, VZGLYAD also influenced western propaganda efforts. As a result, VZGLYAD was subjected to yet another round of KGB censorship, as discussed in my thesis. Throughout the live broadcast, the show was openly chastised for addressing sensitive state matters by other state outlets. Because of the Air Force Marshal's outspokenness, public opinion turned against certain Soviet military policy.<sup>12</sup>

In 1989-1990, the Pravda published an extraordinary number of critical articles about the Communist Party's historical sins. Article 70 and the Gulag were the most discussed topics. The KGB was the main offender.<sup>13</sup> KGB retaliation against these criticisms based on irrefutable evidence – the published caricature – had an adverse effect however. Following critical articles in which the Pravda detailed how the VOA discussed a certain issue a few years ago but the

KGB had blocked disseminating this information became public knowledge.<sup>14</sup> Public opinion began to turn against the government. VOA radio repeatedly extended the hours of its daily broadcasts in such situations, because a lot of people were listening to

<sup>10</sup> Evgeniya Konovalova, *The Effects of Western Broadcasting on the Soviet People in Glasnost and Perestroika Period: The Case of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* M. A. Dissertation Prague 2012

<sup>11</sup> Цветкова Наталья Александровна *Публичная дипломатия как инструмент идеологической и политической экспансии США в мире, 1914–2014 гг.* Moscow, St. Petersburg university press 2016, pp 322-345.

<sup>12</sup> В. РЯБОВ, Кто обслуживает аппарат? Опасна ли перестройка для аппарата партии? - • - Вам вообще нужен аппарат? - • - Откуда взялся образ врага? - • - Партийный аппарат сегодня и завтра) (Who Serves the Apparatus Is Perestroika Dangerous for the Party Apparatus? - Do you need an apparatus at all? - • - Where did the image of the enemy come from? - • - Party apparatus today and tomorrow) V. RYABOV. Secretary of the Party Committee of the Central Committee of the CPSU. Pravda Page 2. April 03, 1990.

<sup>13</sup> Archie Brown. *The Soviet Union: Reform of the System or Systemic Transformation?* Cambridge University Press. 2004.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. P 45



VOA waves at in these times and were dependent on the VOA for reliable information.<sup>15</sup> The circumstances looked quite impressive to people in the Soviet Union who were in comparison socially and economically backward. As a result, the VOA laid the groundwork for the first embers of internal strife. The VOA's role in raising social consciousness in the USSR caused real structural harm to the KGB, which consequently resulted in the dissolution of the USSR in the minds of the USSR's people followed by political dissolution.<sup>16</sup>

With the start of the Cold War, most media had started to adhere to their government's policy and politicized their news accordingly, the USSR included.<sup>17,247</sup> This was evident in early Cold War television coverage, which was frequently scripted and occasionally even produced by the Defense Department. This development is important because the media had to recognize government power and increase popular support for government action. The media's primary function was therefore to reaffirm and protect national political and economic preferences. While private Western media had aided in the defense of western economic and military interests, the state-censored Soviet media has stood ready to protect its own.<sup>18</sup> Media on both sides had succeeded in generating public support for their government's actions against an external enemy. Without the use of its media, the Soviet Union would probably never have been able to secure or maintain adequate political support for such a long conflict as the Cold War, especially not while rebuilding from the Second World War. But by the late 80s, the Communist Party could no longer regulate the USSR's media and this in turn led to a free press which confronted the Party with all forms of criticism.

When US media first tried to enter the USSR, it had used a variety of tactics to increase its level of influence. One of them was to imitate the Soviet media's current strategy.<sup>19</sup> Since the USA and the West had held a rather cold attitude toward the USSR for years, choosing this strategy meant a marked change in policy. Both East and West had an interest in obscuring negative consequences of *Perestroika*. Also, media action could contribute directly to hostility between the government and the people of the other Country. Positive media coverage in the West was also crucial for the USSR, which had been losing ground in foreign affairs—especially after its disastrous invasion of Afghanistan. As discussed above, it was very important to inform everyone that *Perestroika* was the right program for the Soviet Union, even for the Americans. In several

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<sup>15</sup> Stanislav Kondrashov, 'Good news from Washington', The Digest of the Post-Soviet Press, No.38, Vol.39, October 21, 1987, pp.14-15.

<sup>16</sup> Alan Cassels, Ideology and international relations in the modern world. Total war and propaganda. New York: Routledge 1996, p. 206.

<sup>17</sup> Shane 1994, pp. 220-230.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Alan Cassels. Ideology and international relations in the modern world. Total war and propaganda. New York: Routledge 1996, p. 206.



meetings with Gorbachev, American president Reagan repeatedly pressed him not to abandon *Perestroika*, insisting that it was the right program.<sup>20</sup> We should also expect KGB censorship to have eased somewhat as a result of reform policies in the Soviet Union, as evidence by the fact that many media outlets, such as Voice of America, the BBC, and CNN, could to a certain extent operate within the Union.<sup>21</sup> *Perestroika*, in short, helped the USSR retain its place in the international arena. To counter Soviet propaganda, the West thus took constructive view towards their questionable enemy. This also meant a real concern in the Soviet State's internal structure. By 1991, the Soviet Union had struggled and failed to sustain social stability and interdependence on a global scale. The main explanation for this failure became communist ideology. That was the message American media spread in Soviet everyday life and that was the view it manipulated with media control and the relentless dissemination of bad news.<sup>22</sup> After such hands-on practices, it was extremely difficult for the Soviets to keep internal tensions at bay.

The media had played a critical role in sustaining the Cold War, as well as in the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the ending of the USSR-USA rivalry, by sustaining a persistent state of crisis. Sensational propaganda and politicized reporting had ignited widespread distrust and paranoia in the public sphere. Through educating and engaging with the people of SU, the media was often used as a powerful weapon of conflict. The media infiltration of the USSR after 1985 can therefore be best described as a highly antagonistic move that served as a smooth power strategy by the US to undermine the USSR. American media became more cautious as part of the conflict and antagonism became directed towards the national government of the Soviet Union.<sup>23</sup> The governments (or organizations) that properly used the media might gain had a clear dominance over the others by enhancing their mass media outlets' influence. The United States and other Western countries rose to prominence as media powerhouses in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>24</sup> They were able to do so by using modern communication technologies and manipulating cultural differences, as well as sowing public fear and creating propaganda, the Pravda noted shortly after the Fall.<sup>25</sup> The development of a subversive communication strategy aimed at the Soviet Union population was therefore probably the most visible and direct contribution to the collapse of the Soviet Union

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<sup>20</sup> Evgeniya Konovalova, *The Effects of Western Broadcasting on the Soviet People in Glasnost and Perestroika Period: The Case of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. (M. A. Dissertation) Prague: University of Prague 2012.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Shane 1995. Pp, 213-245

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. Pages 24-30

<sup>24</sup> Семь дней без нас (Seven days without us). Pravda, August 31, 1991, p. 5. Note: It was the first Pravda publication since the August coup, which had received widespread coverage in virtually every region and was supported by US-style 'perestroika'.

<sup>25</sup> Shane 1995. Pp, 213-245





in 1991.

At least, that is what the Russians believe. In 1997, the Pravda concluded in an article by Viktorov titled "The Long Shadow of the Pentagon" that firstly it was a great accomplishment of the US government that Gorbachev had approved all of the contracts of US media. Secondly, the USA was grateful towards the USSR for allowing entry of US mass media into the country, and because giant Western media outlets such as BBC, BMC, and CNN were given unrestricted access to all parts of the Union. This was in a sense the good side of *Glasnost*. Thirdly, the reduction of the USSR's military forces and their withdrawal from Eastern Europe were seen as a further move for the peace of Europe. However, these activities later contributed to the catastrophic obstacles that led to the split-up of the entire USSR. The Soviet government's ignorance of US media had, the Pravda concluded, accelerated the entry of US media into the Union's every day social life by airing live Q&A shows on television. The USSR struggled to regulate their media landscape as a result of Gorbachev's freepress policy—*Glasnost*—which resulted in internal wars, economic turmoil, and a rapid spread of knowledge. Knowledge about the dire state of the Union. Due to the proclamation of a state of emergency between 23-31 August 1991, several Soviet Republics simply proclaimed their independence from the USSR. During the Gorbachev administration, the Kremlin's problem had regularly been covered by Soviet media, which was often preoccupied with foreign affairs and tended to neglect domestic affairs. Karpychev practically predicted the disintegration of the Soviet Union in advance, in 1990,<sup>26</sup> and in December 1991 his analysis proved correct. The Soviet Union was declared defunct on December 26, 1991.

The proliferation and persistence of external information attacks has intensified, especially since 1989, without any means in place to adequately counter these attacks. I think this oversight was caused primarily by the negligence of the leadership of the USSR. As a result of the influence of *Vzglyad*, which in turn was heavily influenced by the VOA, the whole of Soviet society could all too easily conclude that for years the KGB and by extension the USSR government had deceived the whole nation. As a result, the USSR lost its credibility and communism as an ideology was defeated in the Cold War. Increased Americanization and aspirations for a Western standard of living had combined with internal economic difficulties to undermine the viability of communism as an ideology.

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