

---

## **An Assessment of the Relationship between Glasnost and the fall of the Soviet Union**

Leung Wai Sum, Sam

Year III, Undergraduate

Faculty of Arts, The University of Hong Kong

*The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 was an unexpected shock to the world. Historians accounted many factors for the collapse of the Soviet behemoth, including the various reform of Gorbachev, his indecisiveness, and of course the strategy of the Americans under the “Cold War” mindset. This essay would focus on the internal condition of the USSR, especially the effect of glasnost. I would assess how glasnost contributed to the disintegration of the Soviet system by discussing the effect of liberalizing the USSR. I argue that glasnost was an indirect yet fundamental cause for the downfall as it unintentionally amplified the problems of the reform, and problems that existed before 1985 that were well concealed by the party.*

---

### **Introduction**

It is important to first define the core of the discussion, namely glasnost and the fall of the Soviet Union. Glasnost, or widely translated as “openness”, refers to the policies Gorbachev adopted to liberalize the Soviet Union. Literally Glasnost means “voicedness” or “speaking up.”<sup>1</sup> This further implies its emphasis on the freedom of expression. Generally it also involves a freer flow of information, more public input into decision making and more initiative at all levels of society.<sup>2</sup> A key facet of glasnost to stimulate

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert Strayer, *Why Did the Soviet Union Collapse?: Understanding Historical Change* (London: Routledge, 2016), 46.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

the citizens' expressiveness, which I would discuss below, would be the lifting of censorship on various sensitive topics. Historians have different interpretations and definitions of "the fall of the Soviet Union". Some, like David Marples, regard it as the takeover of the Soviet state by the RFSFR in 1991.<sup>3</sup> This approach is certainly correct yet too high-politics-oriented, as it downplays the importance of social changes within the Soviet state. Here I would consider the fall of the Soviet Union broadly as the collapse of the Soviet system. I would examine below how glasnost crippled the long-established Soviet system and created a momentum that pushed forward the end of Soviet rule.

### **Why Glasnost?**

Before digging into the effects, we should first understand the motives for introducing glasnost. Glasnost was undoubtedly a complementary program of perestroika. Gorbachev was aware of the skepticism of the entrenched conservatives towards his radical economic reorganization, and thus attempted to manipulate public opinion to support his reform agenda.<sup>4</sup> As a result glasnost was introduced to consolidate the legitimacy of reform. It was to mobilize the criticisms from below to build up a momentum for reform against the perceived resistance to perestroika.<sup>5</sup> Moshe Lewin described this openness brought by glasnost as "a precondition" for the success of further reforms.<sup>6</sup> This description is certainly valid. Many followers of Brezhnev that was against radical reforms remained inside the party apparatus.<sup>7</sup> Yet we should not overestimate the resistance Gorbachev was facing. At the initial stage of his rule, the ruling bodies underwent drastic personnel changes, as exemplified by the replacement of 60% of Central Committee members.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, Glasnost was a useful tool to direct public opinion against the old soviet system and did cultivated support towards

---

<sup>3</sup> David R. Marples, *The Collapse of the Soviet Union : 1985-1991* (London: Routledge, 2013), 109.

<sup>4</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Shortest History of the Soviet Union* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 183.

<sup>5</sup> Lambert, Nick. "The Dilemmas of Glasnost", in *Gorbachev and Gorbachevism*, ed. Walter Joyce, Hillel Ticktin and Stephan White (London: Frank Cass, 1989), 53.

<sup>6</sup> Moshe Lewin, *The Gorbachev phenomenon: a historical interpretation* (University of California Press, 1991), 117.

<sup>7</sup> Marples, *The Collapse of the Soviet Union : 1985-1991*, 11.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

Gorbachev's reform at its initial stage.

Glasnost was not meant to destroy the Soviet system, but to preserve and perfect it. As Edele noted, Gorbachev, a sincere communist, wanted to pursue the Leninist ideal that free speech would be possible again after the suppression of the bourgeois counter-revolution had been accomplished.<sup>9</sup> Glasnost was according to Gorbachev a key step towards the ideal communism. In fact glasnost was an idea emphasized by Lenin himself to stress the importance of media campaigns in the construction of socialism in the Soviet Union.<sup>10</sup> Thus we should not view glasnost as a tool to end communism, but as a failed attempt to revive it. It is important to note that Gorbachev was aware of the danger of glasnost, and thus it was implemented cautiously. He stressed that glasnost does not mean 'freedom of action for demagogues and slanderers' and 'there should be a respectful attitude towards cadres in general'.<sup>11</sup> Censorship on important issues was exercised informally by political officials.<sup>12</sup> Therefore it is clear that Gorbachev did not intend to end the soviet system with glasnost, but its ultimate collapse was brought by the unintended consequences of glasnost. Glasnost was simply a political failure but not some mastermind of Gorbachev that intentionally ended the cold war.

### **Awakening: Exposing Underlying Problems of the Soviet Union**

The most significant effects of Glasnost could be represented in the liberalization of media. Media is a powerful political tool. It could create narratives that are politically beneficial to different interest groups. Historically, media is employed by different Soviet leaders to create favourable narratives. Stalin used the Soviet media as an instrument of his personality cult. Khrushchev used the media to facilitate de-Stalinization. Gorbachev also used media to create a favourable narrative supporting his reform. He mentioned in a speech in December 1984 that glasnost is "an effective means of combating bureaucratic distortions and obliges people to take a more thoughtful approach to...the rectification of shortcomings and deficiencies. In large part the

---

<sup>9</sup> Mark Edele, *The Soviet Union : a Short History* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2019), 201-202.

<sup>10</sup> Brian McNair, *Glasnost, Perestroika and the Soviet Media* (London ;: Routledge, 1991), 29.

<sup>11</sup> Lambert, "The Dilemmas of Glasnost", 53-54.

<sup>12</sup> Jerry F. Hough, *Democratization and Revolution in the USSR, 1985-91* (D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1997), 144.

persuasiveness of propaganda...depends on this.”<sup>13</sup> The Soviet media subsequently was mobilized to engage in genuine criticism and self-criticism.<sup>14</sup> Despite the motive of Gorbachev to facilitate a momentum for the reform, the liberalized media turns out too powerful and destabilized the Soviet system.

Firstly, the demystification of soviet history undermined the legitimacy of Soviet rule. One of the Soviet media campaigns was termed by Gorbachev as “Filling the blank spots”. It aimed at portraying an honest account of Soviet history. Traditionally the Soviet media functioned as “collective propagandists and agitators” and state control of historical narratives in the media was central to the party’s ideological work.<sup>15</sup> This means that the Soviet state manipulated and controlled historical narratives in the press to consolidate the legitimacy of its ideology. Yet as glasnost struck, this control of history was released and discussion on sensitive parts of soviet history became possible, if not promoted. For instance in February 1988, *Pravda* published a series of articles that were “devoted to important episodes in the history of the Communist Party and the Soviet State.”<sup>16</sup> Yet the version of history the state media promoted was already relatively positive regarding the unfavourable parts of soviet history. Notably *Pravda*’s series only showed how Lenin described Stalin as “too rude”, before going on to analyze how Stalin still achieved dominance.<sup>17</sup> The more ferocious attacks on the ugly soviet past come with historical revelations published via unofficial channels, as we will see below.

One of the central, also the most disastrous themes in this campaign of recovering soviet history would be the Stalinist era. Atrocities in the Stalin era were widely reported in the media, examples include the uncovering of mass graves and the interview of executors.<sup>18</sup> The reexamination of the Great Patriotic War especially brought devastating effects. The ultimate victory of the soviets in the war, which was a key

---

<sup>13</sup> McNair, *Glasnost, Perestroika and the Soviet Media*, 53.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 54.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 62.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>18</sup> Strayer, *Why Did the Soviet Union Collapse?*, 47.

foundation of the legitimacy of Soviet rule, became overshadowed by the exposure of the malignant behaviour of the state, including the mass execution of Polish officers, criminal treatment of civilians in Eastern Europe and willful ignorance of the German threat.<sup>19</sup> This exposure of the ugly Soviet past greatly shattered the base of legitimacy of the Soviet Union. Many soviet citizens were shocked when they realized the atrocities their government had committed.<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, historical figures deemed as villains in Soviet historical view, such as Bukharin and even Trotsky, were rehabilitated as more positive figures.<sup>21</sup> This further confused the soviet citizens and challenged their view of history developed before 1985. Ultimately this exposure to the Soviet past cultivated distrust and disbelief towards the Soviet government.

Secondly, the liberalized environment allowed nationalism to culminate and grow in the republics. Glasnost had led to a surge of nationalism across the Union and crippled its unity. To be clear, nationalism had always existed within the Soviet Union. For instance, the Baltic people never fully reconciled to their incorporation into the Union.<sup>22</sup> Yet it was repressed and well concealed by previous rulers. As Alex Pravda noted, “As long as the whole Soviet political system remained under tight control, the dual national strategy “worked relatively well to contain serious centrifugal nationalism.”<sup>23</sup>

It was glasnost that allowed nationalist feelings to burst out on the streets. The liberal climate encouraged ethnic groups to “air long-standing grievances.”<sup>24</sup> It amplified the effects of nationalism into national movements and created organized nationalist forces. An abundance of nationalist informal groups were set up under glasnost and they eventually merged into “popular fronts” in their respective republics. These organizations also further exploited glasnost to articulate publicly national themes. Baltic nationalists used the past crimes committed by the Soviet Union to gain support, also using the newly exposed Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact to question the Soviet

---

<sup>19</sup> Edele, *The Soviet Union : a Short History*, 203.

<sup>20</sup> Fitzpatrick, *The Shortest History of the Soviet Union*, 198.

<sup>21</sup> Strayer, *Why Did the Soviet Union Collapse?*, 47.

<sup>22</sup> Fitzpatrick, *The Shortest History of the Soviet Union*, 202.

<sup>23</sup> Pravda, “The Collapse of the Soviet Union, 1990–1991”, 358.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 357.

annexation of the Baltic states.<sup>25</sup> As a result nationalist and even independence movements gained momentum under glasnost. Fitzpatrick described that the three Baltic states “were moving ever closer to the exit.”<sup>26</sup> This reflects that glasnost unintentionally provoked nationalism in the peripheral non-Russian republics. This was described by Marples as “Gorbachev’s most important failure.”<sup>27</sup> Strayer also described that “no crisis of nationalism threatened the Soviet peace in 1985”, yet by late 1990 all 15 republics had declared its “sovereignty.”<sup>28</sup> Yet this comparison of 1985 and 1990 would be problematic. Jerry Hough noted that the press remained under tight control in discussions of nationalist discourses until 1988.<sup>29</sup> Until the fall of 1988, there was not a single article related to nationalism in *Kommunist*, a Central Committee journal.<sup>30</sup> All in all, we could not doubt that glasnost did influence the nationalist discourse in the republics and paved the way for them to gain momentum to break out from the Union.

### Counter-effects: Dismantling Gorbachev’s Rule

The burst of information under glasnost made soviet citizen distrust the government for not upholding social justice. From the start, glasnost already involved self-criticism on government officials. As McNair noted, “the first blow” of glasnost was an article discussing social justice and attacking party privileges, also calling for the end of party privileges.<sup>31</sup> Ironically this was not achieved, and the exposure of party privileges led to counter-effects. Glasnost discredited the upper layers of the government and the party due to the exposure of social injustice, such as that party officials could obtain supplies of foreign or other goods unavailable to the public and access to special hospitals.<sup>32</sup> What is more, perestroika led to hyperinflation and lack of supply of daily necessities in cities. The material deprivation brought by perestroika further aggravated the distrust of soviet citizens who saw a widening disparity between the life of officials and ordinary citizens. A woman from Kharkov wrote “Why is it that people in authority

---

<sup>25</sup> Vladislav M. Zubok, *Collapse: the fall of the Soviet Union* (Yale University Press, 2021), 57.

<sup>26</sup> Fitzpatrick, *The Shortest History of the Soviet Union*, 202.

<sup>27</sup> Marples, *The Collapse of the Soviet Union : 1985-1991*, 103.

<sup>28</sup> Strayer, *Why Did the Soviet Union Collapse?*, 65.

<sup>29</sup> Hough, *Democratization and Revolution in the USSR, 1985-91*, 145.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> McNair, *Glasnost, Perestroika and the Soviet Media*, 62.

<sup>32</sup> Lewin, *The Gorbachev phenomenon: a historical interpretation*, 118-119.

have everything, flats, dachas, and money, and others have nothing? ... I used to believe in our government. Now I no longer believe."<sup>33</sup> This reflects that the material disparity between Soviet officials and Soviet citizens was aggravated by perestroika and exposed by glasnost, culminating in widespread disbelief towards the authority. Suspicions and criticisms of the social injustice of the Soviet state ultimately led to a widespread belief crisis in Soviet rule and underlined its fall.

Furthermore, supplemented by the effects of glasnost, Gorbachev's attempt to further construct legitimacy through introducing elections in the Soviet Union failed drastically. Some historians viewed the effects of glasnost as destabilizing Soviet politics through prompting voters to support non-communist candidates in elections. They often emphasized the defeat of communist party candidates in the election of the Congress of People's Deputies in March 1989. Sheila Fitzpatrick notably mentioned that "20% of candidates put up by the party were defeated" and "an unexpectedly large number of defeats for senior party candidates" as glasnost energized the intelligentsia to participate in elections.<sup>34</sup> Robert Strayer even used "success" to describe the election result for the democratic movement and emphasized that a coalition of democrats, the Inter-Regional Group was able to push for more radical agendas.<sup>35</sup> Though he did not provide any data for the election results. On the other hand, Jerry Hough was more skeptical towards the "victory for oppositions". He stated that "despite the spectacular defeats of some party officials, the Communist Party won a sweeping victory", also revealing that the Inter-regional Group only consisted of 10 to 15% of the deputies.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, it is still quite remarkable that an opposition faction could be formed in the USSR Congress considering the country had been dominated by the Communist Party for a long time. Glasnost had to some extent turned people's back on the Soviet Union. As discussed previously, glasnost involved making the soviet political process more visible. As the Congress was opened on May 25, 1989, it was televised nationally. Yet the broadcast created counter effects to delegitimize the Congress. As Jerry Hough noted, the Congress was in fact controlled by the communist party and its broadcast only cultivated

---

<sup>33</sup> Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon averted: the Soviet collapse, 1970-2000* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 66.

<sup>34</sup> Fitzpatrick, *The Shortest History of the Soviet Union*, 202.

<sup>35</sup> Strayer, *Why Did the Soviet Union Collapse?*, 61-62.

<sup>36</sup> Hough, *Democratization and Revolution in the USSR, 1985-91*, 166.

disappointments and a lack of confidence among liberals.<sup>37</sup> The experiment of the Congress again failed to gather popular support for Gorbachev's reform. Ultimately Glasnost generated counter-effects that endangered Gorbachev's rule and paved the way for the collapse of the Soviet system.

### **Conclusion**

All in all, glasnost was a great time for writers, but a disaster for the Soviets. Gorbachev did attempt to renew censorship over TV and radio with the abolition of "Gostelradio" in early 1991.<sup>38</sup> Yet it was already too late. Sense of social injustice and revelations of the ugly past had jeopardized the reputation of the party. Unfavourable opinion was further reflected in elections where the communist party's grip on politics was unprecedentedly weakened. Nationalist movements sprung up all over the Union. The Soviet system which functioned somewhat stably over the past years was crippled with glasnost. The rule of the Communist Party was endangered. Indeed glasnost did not directly cause Gorbachev to announce the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Yet when we understand the fall of the Soviet Union from a broader picture, we could see how glasnost generated momentum to move away from Soviet rule and paved the way to its ultimate collapse. Glasnost itself may be an indirect cause, but undoubtedly a fundamental destabilizer. The liberalized flow of information unintentionally functioned as an amplifier of other problems within the Soviet Union that contributed to its eventual downfall, including nationalism, the failing economic reforms and ultimately the dwindling support towards Soviet rule.

---

<sup>37</sup> Hough, *Democratization and Revolution in the USSR, 1985-91*, 170-171.

<sup>38</sup> Marples, *The Collapse of the Soviet Union : 1985-1991*, 104.

---

## Bibliography

1. Edele, Mark. *The Soviet Union : a Short History*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2019.
2. Fitzpatrick, Sheila, *The Shortest History of the Soviet Union*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2022.
3. Hough, Jerry F. *Democratization and Revolution in the USSR, 1985-91*. Brookings Institution Press, 1997.
4. Kotkin, Stephen. *Armageddon averted: the Soviet collapse, 1970-2000*. Oxford University Press, 2008.
5. Lambert, Nick. "The Dilemmas of Glasnost". In *Gorbachev and Gorbachevism*, edited by Walter Joyce, Hillel Tickin and Stephan White, 48-63. London: Frank Cass, 1989.
6. Lewin, Moshe. *The Gorbachev phenomenon: a historical interpretation*. Univ of California Press, 1991.
7. Marples, David R. *The Collapse of the Soviet Union : 1985-1991*. 1st ed. London: Routledge, 2013.
8. McNair, Brian. *Glasnost, Perestroika and the Soviet Media*. London ;: Routledge, 1991.
9. Pravda, Alex. "The Collapse of the Soviet Union, 1990–1991." Chapter. In *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, edited by Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, 3:356–77. The Cambridge History of the Cold War. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
10. Strayer, Robert. *Why Did the Soviet Union Collapse?: Understanding Historical Change: Understanding Historical Change*. Routledge, 2016.
11. Zubok, Vladislav M. *Collapse: the fall of the Soviet Union*. Yale University Press, 2021.