

# Free research paper on gorbachev's glasnost, 1985-1991: process and effects

[War](#), [Cold War](#)



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## **Introduction**

Glasnost, or openness was, alongside perestroika, part of Gorbachev's attempt to restructure USSR in order to avoid the imminent economic crisis he feared, but also, as a personal ambition to bring Russia in line with the Western superpowers. Although his reforms were necessary and well-received by the people, the Soviet system itself did not pass the democratization test, and broke into pieces only five years after the implementation of Gorbachev's double strategy. Glasnost had a major role in destabilizing the Soviet Union, as this paper will further show. Being intended to regain the trust of the people, but also, that of foreign investors and state actors, glasnost triggered an internal crisis which could not be mitigated any longer. Following the realization that they had been manipulated by the system, the people in USSR refused to live under this system any longer. Although it was a necessary and well-intended step towards the future,

glasnost therefore represented the beginning of the end for the Soviet Union. Despite realizing his mistake, Gorbachev went on towards democratization and free elections. In particular, he tried to stop the arms race and to initiate the reduction of the nuclear arsenal, thus ending the international tension which had dominated the political scene in the past era. The glasnost era is perhaps, the most interesting in the entire USSR history, because it demonstrated that a totalitarian regime cannot coexist with democratic values such as the freedom of speech and that, once the people have access to information, and the power to express their opinions, they will use this power to free themselves.

## **Background and Beginnings**

Gorbachev was a more serious reformer than he was generally believed to be both at home and in the West, and he was interested in promoting not only an economic reform, but also, to implement glasnost. His ideas about reforming the economy and the entire state apparatus were a result of his travels into France and Italy at age 39. During these trips, he experienced the living standard of the Occidental countries, and returned to his country with the determination to catch up with the West. During Gorbachev's rising career within the party structure, life in Russia changed, with more and more people moving to urban areas, and demanding proper living conditions. More than 90% of the people owned refrigerators and another 60% had a washing machine. Most were dissatisfied with the sizes of their apartments and with the insufficiency of consumer goods. This dissatisfaction was fed by the increasing access to information, through television and radio. More than

93% of the households had TV sets by the 1980s, and authorities permitted the translation of foreign family serials, which made Russians understand how far behind they were as compared to the West.

When Gorbachev took over the power as general secretary, the party met him with enthusiasm and high hopes. He was relatively young, well-educated and full of energy. He had immense power, being able to affect the lives of 285 millions of people. He appointed Yegor Ligachev as his number two. With his new team, he tried to discover the best way to “ bridge the gap between socialism’s ideals and its disappointing realities”. He launched two separate programs, “ perestroika” and “ glasnost” meant solve the economic problems of the large Soviet Union. Perestroika was his restructuring program, which was meant to replace the centralized economy with a market economy after the capitalist model. Accompanying it was glasnost, a policy meant to loosen the government’s control over media, religious groups, and free speech and to make the political system more transparent. Gorbachev believed glasnost to be a necessary condition for restructuring (perestroika), and for the survival of the Soviet state. Glasnost was supposed to give foreign investors the necessary trust in order to invest in the country and help save the Russian economy. By 1988, Perestroika and Glasnost had moved the USSR towards democratization and elected government.

However, as it turned out, the USSR could not survive “ openness”, as more and more of the crimes committed by the Soviet party began to come to light and the corruption of the system became obvious, particularly in the final years of the Soviet Union, when journalists started to dig deeper into

the communist party's dirt, and to bring to light everything that the party leaders tried to keep away from the public.

## **The Process and the Effects of the Glasnost Reforms**

Glasnost is a term with a long history in the Russian political discourse, being meant to represent a politics of openness or transparency. However, this term does not necessarily imply that the democratic freedoms will be respected entirely, but rather, it is a term which defines a situation of compromise, in which the totalitarian government accepts to relax its policies of censorship and to increase its transparency. Glasnost does not equal freedom of speech, in the sense that this term is used in the west to define cultural and political freedom, but rather, it is a specific Russian phenomenon, which resulted from the years of absolutism. It represents an attempt to introduce a transparent mode of government, and to relax censorship in a non-democratic state, as a first step towards democratization.

Gorbachev introduced glasnost as a key concept in 1985. As used by Gorbachev, the term means openness, but also freedom of speech, to a certain extent. "An inalienable component of socialist democracy is glasnost. Broad, timely, and frank information is testimony of faith in people, of respect for their minds and feelings and for their capacity to work things out themselves in one situation or another". This was a concept which could lead to the expansion of freedom of speech for journalists and writers, little by little, if being implemented sincerely by the party. However, Gorbachev, Yakovlev and Shevardnadze were its only true supporters and even they

considered it to be a gift that the leaders in their kindness, awarded to their people, rather than a natural right that people had and which had been restored to them. After a shy beginning, glasnost evolved during the Gorbachev era, to the extent that it completely equated freedom of speech and started to define the attitude of the public press and television entirely. Already in 1987, natural freedom of speech was asserted from below, to the extent that the party could no longer control what was being published, and they were not particularly happy with what they were reading or hearing.

Even though it had its limits, there is no doubt that glasnost represented a major step forward towards freedom of speech and other basic liberties. Before the implementation of glasnost, the role of Soviet journalism was not to inform, but to indoctrinate. The traditional press photographs only illustrated positive aspects of life in the USSR, presenting images of "happy, smiling, hard-working Soviet people", in the manner of American advertising. However, glasnost removed such curtains and allowed people to glimpse at the truth. In particular, it allowed Russian people to learn and understand their own past. In the past, this too had been prohibited, with Soviet historians hiding certain aspects of history and presenting the public with a censored, revised version which only contained what the leaders allowed their people to know, and removed everything else. The recovering of USSR's true history began with the demystification of Stalin, and the rehabilitation of his victims. In addition, the state began to admit the corruption within the party, in an attempt to achieve a more transparent relationship with the public, and it

allowed more freedom of religion, which was an important aspect of culture that had been restricted until then.

## **Freedom of Speech in the Media and the Public Space**

Newspapers began to cover again the “ bad news” that had been censored in the past in order to respect the limited access to information imposed by the state. Public disasters such as plane crashes, or violent crimes, like rapes, murders or burglaries had not been covered in the past, since the Soviet state was perfectly safe, and free from crime, particularly as compared to the West. In the glasnost era, the authorities had to admit that indeed, crime was a problem in the USSR, but also that the party chose to hide this reality in the previous era.

Furthermore, the cinema had been particularly unpopular due to the low quality of the films. Movies considered dangerous were censored or banned, and most known directors had emigrated to escape oppression. However, during the glasnost era, things changed and movies began to be less censored. As a result, through film and television, the people began to understand how low their living standard was, as compared to that of the Western countries, which increased public dissatisfaction.

After the Chernobyl disaster in 1986, the public television began to approach subjects that had been forbidden until then, having received the encouragement of the government to disclose aspects of the internal problems faced by the nation, in an unprecedented wave of openness and sincerity. Among the topics that featured on the Soviet television in the winter of 1986-1987, there was the abortion wave, poverty, and the

Afghanistan war and deportations, all of which had been kept away from public scrutiny. However, instead of strengthening the Soviet system by giving people more freedom the shocking realities of the world they lived in made people feel disappointed and betrayed by their leaders. As one woman declared, " I am a simple woman. I used to believe in our government. Now I no longer believe'. This reflects a wide-scale phenomenon of people who had believed in the system becoming disillusioned by it and revolted at having been lied to.

### **The Glasnost Dilemma**

Gorbachev had been right to try to transform an old-dated and inefficient system which was clearly keeping the USSR behind the other super-powers. However, this decision was not the result of great forces drawing the Soviet Union towards collapse but rather, Gorbachev's own ambition to implement his visions of a new USSR. In fact, the oligarchs of the previous leadership saw no reason for profound change. Furthermore, if any of them had been chosen general secretaries, they would have avoided looking into the fundamental problems of the system, and would have preserved the situation as they inherited it. As Brown explained in this respect, " the regime had, after all, been politically repressive and economically inefficient for the greater part of the greater part of seven decades". There were no signs therefore of imminent collapse in the coming years, when Gorbachev took power. However, the high cost of preserving the Soviet Union despite its problems, had consisted in the continuation of the international tension regarding a possible nuclear war. By 1990, the consequences of perestroika



and glasnost were visible for everyone. The test of moving the USSR towards democratization had failed lamentably.

## **Conclusion**

Gorbachev was not a revolutionary leader, but rather, he was a reformer. He did not mean to destroy the soviet system but he tried to save it by modernizing it and by increasing the trust of the population, and of foreign powers, in the Soviet government. Gorbachev's purpose in making this attempt was to save the Soviet Union from imminent economic collapse and even more, to bring it in line with the most powerful Western countries. In order to accomplish this, he needed to restructure the economic system (perestroika), but also, to achieve 'openness' (glasnost), which he saw as essential to the process of restructuration. However, glasnost meant the beginning of the end for the Soviet system, which failed the test of the freedom of speech and of access to information. Once people became aware of the abuses and the major problems which torn the Soviet Union apart, they became disillusioned with the system, and understood that they had been manipulated. Once the people could express their dissatisfaction, their voice grew until it became a storm that could not be stopped anymore. The restructuration that Gorbachev had planned could never be accomplished, because USSR dismembered only five years after its initiation.

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