PERESTROIKA:
THE LAST ATTEMPT TO CREATE THE NEW SOVIET PERSON

By
COURTNEY DOUCETTE

A dissertation submitted to the
Graduate School-New Brunswick
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
In partial fulfillment for the requirements
For the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Graduate Program in History
Written under the direction of
Jochen Hellbeck
And approved by

________________________
________________________
________________________
________________________

New Brunswick, New Jersey
May 2017
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Perestroika: The Last Attempt to Create the New Soviet Person

by Courtney Doucette

Dissertation director:
Jochen Hellbeck

Among the first histories of Perestroika, this dissertation traces late Soviet reform from the election of Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985 through the Soviet collapse in 1991. It reconstructs the imaginary horizons of reformers who saw Perestroika as a response to a pervasive moral crisis, signaled by alienation in the workplace and ennui in society at large. Gorbachev set out to address the crisis by transforming the Soviet population, turning each lethargic person into an actively engaged citizen. In this way, reformers followed in the footsteps of their predecessors, attempting once and for all to create the new Soviet person. This dissertation brings the discussion of Soviet subjectivities to the late Soviet period by showing how central the vision of socialist man was to the design of Perestroika and by delving into the consequences, intended as well as unintended, of the push for reform.

This study delves into previously untapped archives of public letters—a document that became a symbol of reform—to explore the mechanisms of popular engagement and subjectivization. The Party state foresaw letter writing as one of the central means of activating the population. From the early Soviet period, the practice of public letter writing distinguished a person as an actively engaged citizen. During Perestroika, citizens used the letter not only to make demands on the state, but to wrestle with their own moral
worth in Soviet society. Read in the context of the institutional, social, and political forces that produced them and shaped their meaning, these sources show that Soviet citizens under Gorbachev were not defined primarily by apathy or opposition to the state, but were acutely attuned to Soviet politics and actively engaged in a shared effort to improve the workings of the socialist project.

The strictly historical methodology employed here resists teleological readings of the period, situates actors in their time, recreates the open-ended historical horizons of the reform project, and takes into view the mostly Soviet and Russian precedents that informed the architects of reform. In so doing, this dissertation challenges studies of Perestroika that view reform as the start of a transition towards liberal capitalism. Beyond Russia and the Soviet Union, this reading of the late Soviet period raises new questions for the study of revolutions in Eastern Europe in 1989 concerning the extent to which socialist notions of ‘man’ shaped emerging political agendas. This study also speaks to research on democratic development at the end of the Cold War, offering a reminder of the multiple models that guided global political change.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In a letter to Gorbachev in 1990, Irina Stepanova inquired if Perestroika aimed to make it possible for people to live or merely to exist. When it comes to their stipends, graduate students usually avoid that question, certain the funds are insufficient even to exist. I am immensely fortunate and grateful for financial support from the Social Science Research Council, the Mellon Foundation, the Kennan Institute, and the Rutgers University History Department, which has afforded the opportunity not only to exist, but to live a full life in the process of completing this degree. The statements and views expressed herein, of course, are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the funding institutions.

The scholarly communities across the globe that I have been part of as a graduate student attest to the fullness of my life. I am particularly grateful for the History Department at Rutgers University. When I started the program, I did not think I would finish it. Professors who were as exacting as they were forgiving, and as demanding as they were encouraging, made the unthinkable thinkable. The outstanding women and gender history program creates an atmosphere in which graduate students’ personal lives are regarded as essential to the work we do. I am grateful for the opportunity to work with Professors Alastair Bellany, Belinda Davis, Melissa Feinberg, Paul Hanebrink, Jochen Hellbeck, Julie Livingston, Temma Kaplan, Seth Koven, Rudy Bell, Johanna Schoen, Bonnie Smith, and Judith Surkis, who have shaped my thinking and sharpened my skills, while providing examples of distinguished scholars and outstanding individuals.
I am particularly grateful to the members of my dissertation committee. From my first semester of graduate school, Bonnie Smith inspired me to see history as a story and to approach the work of the historian with endless devotion and rigor. In seven years I have not clocked as many hours as Bonnie recommended in my first semester, but thanks to her example and encouragement, I have worked far harder than I imagined possible.

Melissa Feinberg has perused and discussed every chapter of this dissertation with me. In our conversations, she seeks to understand my vision as much as she helps refine it. It is a generous gift to students that I aspire to replicate in my own teaching. I am fortunate that Kevin Platt agreed to join my committee as outside reader. His valuable feedback has sharpened my arguments, and his warm enthusiasm for my project encouraged me along the way.

As an advisor and distinguished historian, Jochen Hellbeck has provided unparalleled academic guidance and a model of scholastic excellence. When I first visited Rutgers, he approached me with photographs of veterans of the Battle of Stalingrad, which suggested to me that the study of history could be even more interesting than I had imagined when applying to graduate school. Since then, he has encouraged my growth as a researcher, writer, and historian. I have greatly benefitted from his office hours held by Skype from Bishkek, along the red-brick path that lines the Moscow Kremlin, on the streets of Greenpoint, and even in New Brunswick. His rigorous conversation and insightful responses to my written work have offered the chief technology by which I have started to become a historian.

I am also grateful to the individuals and institutions that welcomed me when I left the safe nest of my home department. Professors Peter Holquist and Benjamin Nathans
took my training in Russian Imperial and Soviet history at the University of Pennsylvania as seriously as that of their own graduate students. Maike Lehman has encouraged my research and welcomed me into an international community of scholars at the University of Cologne. In Russia, I am particularly grateful to the archivists Bela Khasanovna Koval of the Sakharov Archive, who would have allowed me to overnight among the physicist’s papers, if necessary, and Galina Mikhailovna Tokoreva of the Russian State Archive for Socio-Political History, who introduced me to the letters to Komsomol’skaia pravda on which I based this dissertation and unofficially adopted me as her “American daughter” during my research. When I asked her if she would be embarrassed to have a daughter with an American passport, she assured me, with a deep laugh, that she would “fix” the problem.

I am indebted to Natalia Netsvetaeva of Perm’, Russia, and Alla Logaeva of Moscow, Russia, for providing expert research assistance and for transcribing some of the letters I encountered in the archives. I am grateful for their shared enthusiasm about this source base.

There is scarcely a time zone across the globe where I do not have a friend who made this project possible. Fellow graduate students at Rutgers have sustained me throughout the program, including Kate Imy, Christina Chiknas, Adam Wolkoff, Hilary Buxton, and Julia Bowes. I was particularly fortunate that Alissa Klots started graduate school at Rutgers the year after me. She is a loyal friend and devoted scholar who answers any question about archives and the Russian language within minutes, whether she is in New Brunswick or Perm’. I count among my graduate school blessings the
opportunity to be part of a growing community of Russianists at Rutgers, including Anna Nath, Yarden Avital, Paul Mercandetti, and Timur Mukhamatulin.

Outside of Rutgers, I have been fortunate to have the friendship and intellectual companionship of Alexandra Oberlaender, who as a friend and academic godparent has seen me through from a lost-soul masters student at the European University through a doctoral degree at Rutgers. She offers a constant reminder that historians contain multitudes. They can do many things in life, as Alex herself does, and our diverse endeavors make us more insightful scholars. Conversations with Guillaume Sauvé, whose research interests are closely aligned with mine, has provided a continual source of insight and inspiration. His outstanding work compensates for many of the shortcomings of my own. I am grateful to Katherine Zubovich, who made Moscow far friendlier, and Bathsheba Demuth, who made research abroad a culinary delight, as we learned to navigate grocery stores as deftly as the archives.

My deep gratitude goes to my partner Nathan Long, who knew when I spent a vacation seven years ago studying for the GRE that my graduate career would leave its mark on our relationship. He nonetheless proofread applications that got me into a Ph.D. program, read many of the chapters in this dissertation, and let me read portions of the project out loud to him. He also allowed me to lure him to Russia to visit during my research. When I returned home from nearly two years abroad, marked by adventure and loneliness, he gifted me a Tibetan singing bowl and asked me with its ring to be his life partner. Even when the work of this project felt fulfilling, his companionship in life has made my days most rich. I thank him for believing in me throughout this degree, for
teaching me about beautiful sentences, for balancing my work with a home life rich in mythology, and most of all for lightening my life with his puns.

It is a source of profound sadness that the person to whom I am most indebted for this degree is no longer in the earthly realm to celebrate its completion: my mother. She was diagnosed with brain cancer my first year of graduate school and passed away a year later. I am grateful to Professors Seth Koven and Rudy Bell for making it possible for me to be her primary care giver in the final months of her illness while continuing in the program. In her last days, my mother became my teacher of life’s greatest lessons in forgiveness, compassion, and acceptance. She never had the opportunity to go to college, but passionately encouraged my education. She would be ecstatic about me being the first person in our family to obtain a Ph.D. It is fitting that Rutgers’ commencement coincides with her birthday. She follows me through the completion of this degree in spirit. I dedicate this dissertation to her, with my deepest love, respect, and gratitude.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ii

Acknowledgements iv

Table of Contents ix

List of Illustrations x

Introduction 1

Chapter 1. Imaginary Horizons 21

Chapter 2. Activating the Party 49

Chapter 3. Intelligentsia as Truth Teller 89

Chapter 4. Conservative Re-Action 120

Chapter 5. Activating the Citizenry 168

Chapter 6. Empty Shelves, (Im)moral Selves 215

Chapter 7. Fractured Imaginary 261

Conclusion 311

Bibliography 317
# LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Illustration</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>Visitors circling Lenin monument at October Square</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>Gorbachev cutting red ribbon on November 5, 1985</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3-4</td>
<td>Index cards for letters to <em>Komsomol’skaia pravda</em></td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>Letter Department at <em>Komsomol’skaia pravda</em></td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>Office workers at <em>Govorit i pokazyvaet Moskva</em> in December 1985</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2-3</td>
<td>Photographs sent to A.N. Yakovlev by the debate team in Malaia Viska in March 1986</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Front-page announcement of Nina Andreeva’s letter “I cannot forsake my principles” in <em>Sovetskaia Rossiia</em> on March 13, 1988</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Nina Andreeva’s letter on page three of <em>Sovetskaia Rossiia</em> on March 13, 1988</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Activated deputy Andrei Sakharov at the First USSR Congress of People’s Deputies on June 9, 1989</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>“Coupon for the right to receive food”</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>“Attribute of a rights-based government”</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>Price tags for children’s tights</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>Coupons for sausage and oil from July 1990 and August 1990</td>
<td>254</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

The 84 year-old Evgeniia Semenova Alitundzhi had recently moved to a home for the elderly in Moscow in 1989 when, on her way to the phone, she tripped, tumbled down, and broke her hip. Her accident followed a line of unfortunate events over the course of her life. When the Bolsheviks came to power in 1917, her family’s status as nobility marked her as a member of a scorned class. At the time she was 15, full of life, and immediately took up work for the Moscow committee for the struggle against banditry. Despite her steadfast belief in Party ideals, she was arrested in 1937 and sent to a labor camp. She was rehabilitated only in 1950. She then worked in construction in the Kuibyshev region before returning to Moscow. She had some friends, but grew old largely in solitude. She had no family in part because of her extended incarceration. Alitundzhi preferred to live on her own, but circumstances forced her to move to the elderly home. Her broken hip landed her in the even more dismal setting of Moscow City Hospital Number One.¹

Alitundzhi’s misfortunes were summarized in an early April 1989 letter to the popular daily Komsomol’skaia pravda by a long-time acquaintance of the elderly woman: Liudmila Vladimirovna Koshelenko, a 36 year-old mother and assistant director of a veterinary clinic in Zelenogorsk. Koshelenko had just visited her ailing friend in the hospital, where Alitundzhi shared one room with five women her age with the same injury. The crowded room stank. Murky water stood in a clogged sink that the women shared. The hospital staff was rude and left the women’s meals by their bedside...
feeding them. While at the old woman’s beside, Koshelenko helped as she could. She washed Alitundzhi’s body, cleaned the space around her, and tried to feed her, though the frail woman had practically stopped eating. Koshelenko wanted to do more, but physically could not. She worked, had a family, and lived outside of Moscow.

The hospital’s terrible conditions compelled Koshelenko to write the newspaper. She was not looking for a miracle. She was looking for compassionate human help. “Why is it not common to have caregivers,” she asked. “Evgeniia Semenova receives a 120-ruble pension and could pay for such services.” She pointed out the hypocrisy of her society. “Many talk about the nuns of Mother Theresa,” she wrote, “but why can’t we help our elderly?” Ultimately, Koshelenko traced the problem to the state. When she penned her letter, the Soviet Union was in the midst of Perestroika, the far-reaching reform program launched by General Party Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev in March 1985. Koshelenko bluntly asked: “When all is said and done, when will changes begin?” Her comment implied that reformers were not bringing meaningful changes quickly enough. She suggested that Alitundzhi’s current suffering reflected poorly on the state. “She has been betrayed by the Motherland her entire life,” Koshelenko wrote. “Why, at its advanced age, is the government not in a condition to care for people like her?”

Koshelenko apologized for her sharp tone, explaining that such times left her not knowing how to conduct herself. She wanted to believe that things would change for the better. She hoped “that something will change in our life, in our psychology.” She wanted her twelve year-old son to contribute to that better future. She took him with her

---

2 Ibid., ll. 4-4B.
3 Ibid., l. 5B.
4 Ibid., ll. 4-4B.
5 Ibid., l. 6B.
to the hospital to visit Alitundzhi. “I don’t want him to think that everything he saw is an inevitable trait of our existence,” she wrote.\(^6\) Judging from the notes in blue pen left on the index card attached to the letter, Koshelenko’s words moved her readers at *Komsomol’skaia pravda*. With intentions to improve the injured woman’s situation, they phoned Koshelenko on May 10. They learned, however, that Alitundzhi had passed away two weeks earlier on April 24.\(^7\)

Public letters such as Koshelenko’s became a symbol of Gorbachev’s Perestroika. The Zelenogorsk resident was just one of millions of Soviet citizens who penned heartfelt missives to newspaper editors, local politicians, and state leaders. During Perestroika the letter appeared to take on a heightened significance, as newspaper editors gave an increasingly privileged place to letters, carving out more space for them on the printed page and publishing more letters than ever before. Citizens formed reading groups to discuss published letters. Popular interest in the newspaper’s communications with readers led Yuri Shchekochikhin, youth correspondent at the weekly *Literaturnaia gazeta*, to document his conversations on the phone, at the newspaper reception desk, and by written correspondence in the book *Hello, I am Listening*, the popular scenario of which became the basis for a play and a film.\(^8\) History students at Irkutsk State University felt the historical significance of public letters and sought to preserve them for posterity. They traveled from newspaper to newspaper, offering to archive letters that the periodicals no longer had space to preserve.\(^9\)

---

\(^6\) Ibid., l. 6.
\(^7\) Ibid., l. 1.
The public letter captivated a significant foreign audience, too, entranced by the impressive number of letters received by state and social institutions. The quantity increased dramatically in the early years of Perestroika. *Sobesednik*, a weekly supplement to *Komsomol’skaia pravda*, received 20,000 letters in 1984 and doubled that number in two years, receiving a stunning 40,000 letters in 1986.10 The daily newspaper *Izvestiia* received 352,331 letters in 1986, and 401,700 the next year in 1987.11 These numbers far exceeded the amount of mail collected by Soviet newspapers’ foreign counterparts. To capture the unique phenomenon, a Japanese news station sent a camera crew to *Komsomol’skaia pravda* to film the steady flow of letters streaming into the editorial office, and foreign correspondents and scholars arranged for the translation of letters and their publication in anthologies.12

Published collections shed light on the earliest interpretations of the public letter—interpretations that remain fairly intact to the present. In the preface to one anthology, John Riordan, Professor of Russian Studies at the University of Surrey, explained the impressive surge in the number of letters as a result of Gorbachev’s policy of glasnost, or openness, which included a revolution of the press and the relaxation of censorship across the Soviet Union. He linked the increase in letters to “growing public confidence in Soviet periodicals,” and interpreted the breadth of topics letter writers addressed as a reflection of “the spontaneous and sometimes unexpected course of

---

10 Riordan and Bridger, eds., *Dear comrade editor*, 8.
He thought the letters worth publishing for a foreign audience because they provided a window into the minds of ordinary Soviet people. In this way, he interpreted the letter itself as the unfettered expression of the *vox populi*. Riordan was not familiar with Koshelenko’s letter, but read through his analytical lens, it appears as an expression of thoughts from the private life of Koshelenko, who deemed them important enough to thrust into the public sphere in the form of a letter to the newspaper.14

Riordan and other anthologists regarded the ability of Soviet people to speak their minds openly as a remarkably new feature of Soviet life under Gorbachev. A comparison of Riordan’s interpretation of the public letter during Perestroika to the 1950s work of sociologists Alex Inkeles and Kent Geiger, who did not regard the letter primarily as an act of individual expression, demonstrates this point. They wrote:

> For many letter writers—and vicariously for the readers—the letters to the editor may serve as a channel for airing personal grievances. To the degree that this serves to release tensions generated by the realities of everyday Soviet life, the *samokritika* letters may be said to serve an important function in facilitating the rule of a regime which finds it extraordinarily dangerous to permit the relatively free expression of affect concerning many aspects of the function of the existing social system.15

In short, Inkeles and Geiger saw the public letter as a “safety valve” for the Soviet government. Public written communications created a highly controlled sphere for expression of the people. The sociologists reasoned that it was important for the state to provide this outlet, for pent up frustrations might otherwise crack the foundations of the

---

13 Riordan and Bridger, eds., *Dear comrade editor*, 8-9.
14 Riordan was not the only one to argue that glasnost produced the increase in public letters. This argument appears in other documents collections from the period as well. See, for instance, Christopher Cerf et al., eds., *Small fires* and Rozhanskii et al., eds., *Pis’ma ob istorii i dlia istorii*.
Soviet state. From Riordan’s perspective, the letter had ceased to be a tool of limited expression controlled by the state. It now exemplified the ability of Soviet people to speak freely in an age of newfound openness.

Investigations into popular participation in Perestroika, to which public letters as understood by Riordan and others might contribute, remain among the minority of scholarly studies of the period. More prominent in the field are explorations of the political and economic vectors of reform. Yet the interpretation of citizens’ written communications as evidence of newfound freedom of expression dovetails with economic and political analyses in a notable way: both cast Perestroika as a period of remarkable transition—transition to greater openness, increased individual freedoms, more democracy, and legal market opportunities. The transition paradigm accommodates a variety of arguments on late Soviet reform, the range of which is captured by political scientist Archie Brown, on the one hand, and historian Stephen Kotkin, on the other.


Focusing on the six years of Perestroika and the role of particular individuals in shaping reform, Brown investigates “how important Gorbachev was as a mover or facilitator of the Soviet Union’s transition from orthodox Communism to a different kind of political system.” Though he traces the shift from authoritarianism to democracy, he avoids a simplistic equivalence of socialism with authoritarianism and post-socialism with democracy. He even regards the First USSR Congress of People’s Deputies, the first partially popularly elected parliament in the Soviet Union, as a peak of democracy in Russia before or after 1991. As a political scientist, Brown’s chief objective is a pragmatic one. He aims to illuminate general principles by which authoritarian regimes become democratic—principles that make it possible to compare the Soviet case to political transitions in other parts of the world that occurred at roughly the same time in order to develop a set of prescriptions for such transition.

In contrast, Kotkin trades Brown’s narrow chronological framework for a broad one spanning half a century and shifts the emphasis from individual actors to economic institutions and structures. Kotkin regards Perestroika as part of a gradual process of structural change that started in the 1970s, when the capitalist West began its transition to

---

20 Not all scholars of Perestroika do so. In the 2004 discussion of late Soviet reform in *Slavic Review*, one of the main sources of disagreement concerned whether the Soviet Union could be reformed and even whether or not it was worth reforming. Those who answered no to either question in large part attributed eternal authoritarian features to the USSR. See, for instance, Karen Dawisha, “The Question of Questions: Was the Soviet Union Worth Saving?” *Slavic Review* Vol. 63, No. 3 (Autumn 2004), 513-526.
21 One third of the Congress was popularly elected by geographical location. Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor*, 188.
22 In this regard, Brown’s approach resonates with other scholars who situate democratic development in a global context at the Cold War’s end. See, for instance, Temma Kaplan, *Crazy for Democracy: Women in Grassroots Movements* (New York: Routledge, 1997); and Padraic Kenney, 1989: *Democratic Revolutions at the Cold War’s End: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2010).
a post-industrial economy. The Soviet government, Kotkin suggests, attended less conscientiously to this inevitable process. As a result, by the mid-1980s, the Soviet landscape spanned “ten time zones of antiquated heavy industry and decaying infrastructure” and was marked by “some 15,000 rust-belt factories, perhaps two-thirds of them non-viable in market conditions.” Reformers had no choice but to attempt to address this issue and make the Soviet economy as successful as its Western counterpart. Kotkin ultimately wants to explain why the Soviet collapse was peaceful, or, as his title puts it, “Armageddon averted.” He attributes the relatively nonviolent process to the fact that reform and the collapse were part of long-term processes much larger than Perestroika, and much too large, apparently, for reformers to influence. In contrast to Brown, he argues that the outcome of the transition was not liberal democracy, but illiberal democracy.

One of the chief weaknesses of the transition paradigm particularly as Brown deploys it is that it reads Perestroika from its end, i.e. in light of the collapse, rather than its beginning. Brown essentially regards the architects of Perestroika as proto-liberals, thereby projecting on them an ideology with which they did not identify. Kotkin’s reading of the last years of Soviet history removes the emphasis from reformers

---


25 To the extent that individuals and reformers themselves figure in the process of the Soviet collapse for Kotkin, they do so as aids to the process. He suggests that they did so “unwittingly,” though nonetheless focuses on “how and why the Soviet elite destroyed its own system,” which at the very least marginalizes the question of what reformers actually intended to do (5). He places the bulk of the blame on Gorbachev in particular: “the ‘real drama of reform,’” he writes, was not in the conservative backlash to reform, but “featured a virtuoso tactician’s unwitting, yet extraordinarily deft dismantling of the Soviet system—from the planned economy, to the ideological legitimacy for socialism, to the Union” (85).

altogether; more important to his narrative than the agency of historical actors are global geopolitical shifts over which state leaders had no control. This approach fails to explain how reformers made sense of and responded to those shifts. Despite their differences, Brown and Kotkin face the same problem—one they bear in common with other transition scholars. Namely, they overlook reformers’ explanations of why they launched reform, the worldview that guided their decisions along the way, and what they expected to achieve by overhauling life in the Soviet Union.

A close reading of reformers speeches and Party documents in which the earliest iterations of reform were inscribed suggest that Gorbachev and his allies regarded Perestroika not simply as a response to economic or political weakness, as transition scholars suggest, but as an antidote to moral crisis. In his speech before the April (1985) Plenum of the Central Committee, the Soviet leader called for the Party to eliminate “all that opposes economic norms and ethical ideals of our society” and struggle against “all negative phenomena foreign to the socialist way of life [and] our communist morality.”

To the extent that reformers addressed economic problems, they hitched those concerns to the moral development of the citizen. Also in his April Plenum speech, Gorbachev stated that reform aimed to “gradually, step by step, increase the welfare of the people, improving all sides of life of Soviet people, [and] creating the best conditions for the harmonic development of the personality (lichnost’).” From the Soviet perspective, economic conditions were not important in and of themselves. Reformers attended to the material conditions of life because they in part made it possible for each Soviet person to fully develop his or her personality.

28 Ibid.
Moral language pervades every page written during Perestroika, but understanding it poses a thorny issue for historians. As Sheila Fitzpatrick remarked in an early edition of *The Russian Revolution*, scholars of 1917—and, we might add, Soviet history more generally—have been “preoccupied with questions of moral judgment. A strongly negative moral judgment was always implicit in the totalitarian model; and those scholars who now reject it often seem more interested in changing the moral judgment [. . .] than trying a less judgmental approach.”29 On the whole, Soviet historiography has come a long way since Fitzpatrick penned these words. Yet the moral language of Perestroika remains frequently eclipsed by historians’ moral judgment of the period. For instance, former economic journalist Leon Aron describes the Gorbachev era as a “moral revolution,” but to his mind, the revolution entailed overcoming of an inherently immoral Soviet political system. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the heroes of Aron’s “moral revolution” are Russian liberals.30 Even Kotkin falls into the trap of moral judgment when he writes that “the Communist fable of a Lenin supposedly gentler than Stalin,” which constituted a core element of reform ideology, brought on the “demise of Lenin’s police state.”31 Words like “police state” are not neutral terms, nor are they historically accurate descriptors of the Soviet Union under Gorbachev. The politics coloring Kotkin’s judgment resemble Aron’s. He plainly states that liberalism is essential to achieving the highest standard of living on earth.32

While it would be unrealistic to expect historians not to ask if the actions of historical actors were moral or not, it would also be beneficial to historicize morality.

---

31 Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted*, xii.
32 Ibid., 173.
This kind of analysis would lead to asking not whether we think our historical subjects acted morally, but whether or not they saw themselves acting in a moral way and what their moral imaginary looked like. If we attend to the moral language of Perestroika without subjecting it to our own moral standards, we open up new ways of understanding the late Soviet period. Doing so illuminates the essence of reform. Ultimately, reformers sought to remake Soviet people according to a Soviet socialist understanding of man. In his speech before the April (1985) Plenum, Gorbachev promised that “relatively quick results” were possible, if “we activate the human factor, striving for each [person] to carry out his position at work voluntarily and with full effect.” The term “human factor,” which quickly became a centerpiece of Perestroika, referred to the creative energy of each person. Reform aimed to unleash this energy in the workplace and society at large. In short, attending to the moral language of reform suggests that Perestroika constituted an effort achieve a goal at the heart of the Soviet project: the creation of the new Soviet person.

Transition scholarship overlooks the subjectivizing thrust of Perestroika, for it cuts the reform period off from the Soviet practices, institutions, and discourses that shaped reformers’ worldview and the landscape on which they carried out their policies. The conception of man that motivated reform offers one example of the Soviet socialist impulses at the heart of Perestroika. The idea of the citizen actively engaged in the workplace and society at large reflected the chief elements of a distinctly Soviet socialist subjectivity. In the socialist conception of man, the public and private became seamlessly integrated. In contrast, in the liberal notion of man, an autonomous private life remained

---

33 Materialy plenuma TsK KPSS 23 aprelia 1985 goda, 8.
demarcated from the public sphere.\textsuperscript{34} Even in the 1980s, Soviet reformers regarded a person who exemplified the liberal notion of man as bearing the undesirable affliction of a “double morality,” or as one perpetually engaged in “double speak,” saying one thing in private and another thing in public. Reformers sought to overcome this condition, which they saw as a source of the afflictions stunting the development of the Soviet person.

The vision of man that animated reform is one thing, but how the Soviet population related to it is another. In \textit{Everything was Forever, until it was No More}, anthropologist Alexei Yurchak casts doubt on the potential of the socialist understanding of the person resonating with many Soviet people. In his study of ideology following Stalin’s death in 1953, he insightfully argues against applying binaries that for so long dominated the study of the popular relationship to Soviet ideology, including belief/disbelief and dissident/activist. Without drawing sharp divisions between state and citizens, he suggests that Soviet people mastered the forms of Soviet socialist rhetoric, fluently reproduced state discourse, and yet became increasingly estranged from the language over time. Producing the language became a kind of performance. The gradual hollowing-out of socialist rhetoric explains the chief conundrums of his book: why nobody expected the Soviet collapse in 1991, yet few were surprised when it happened.\textsuperscript{35} Few were surprised, he suggests, because the language of the Soviet project had lost its meaning.\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{34} Jochen Hellbeck, \textit{Revolution on my Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 9-14.
\textsuperscript{35} Alexei Yurchak, \textit{Everything was Forever, until it was No More: The Last Soviet Generation} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 1, 16-18.
\textsuperscript{36} The sociologist Vladimir Shlapentokh offers a similar reading to Yurchak’s. He enumerates the characteristics of the ideal Soviet person, but makes it clear that the population at large did not share that vision. See Shlapentokh, \textit{Public and Private Life of the Soviet People: Changing Values in Post-Stalin Russia} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 13, 18-36.
As an account of the late Soviet history, Yurchak’s study offers mixed results. On the one hand, it offers the important insight that Soviet citizens harbored no expectation of the collapse of the USSR. On the other hand, it reads the period from 1953 to 1991 as one of steady development, as if along a straight line. This approach does not account for the loops and switchbacks that punctuated Soviet history, including Perestroika itself. Yurchak does not explain how the attempt to revive socialism under Gorbachev fits into his understanding of the late Soviet period. He also does not acknowledge that reformers actually recognized the hollowed out relationship to ideology. This realization lay at the foundations of Perestroika itself. What the anthropologist calls “performative,” reformers called “stagnation.” The idea that people had slowed down and lost their ability to be actively engaged citizens convinced reformers of the existence of a pervasive moral crisis and the need for reform.

The weaknesses in accounting for state-level processes do not automatically discredit the mechanism that Yurchak establishes for interpreting the relationship between the Soviet state and citizens. In a way, the interpretation he creates space for dovetails with the understanding of public letters advanced by anthologists of Perestroika-era communications. Riordan, for instance, regarded the letter as a sign of new conditions of life during Perestroika—namely, the ability of Soviet citizens to speak their minds openly. Thoughts that individuals cultivated in private could now be openly aired in public. This divide between public performance and private thoughts does not necessarily resonate with Yurchak’s understanding of the late Soviet period, but it

similarly reflects his conclusion that Soviet people became increasingly estranged from state ideology.

Public letters like Koshelenko’s, however, raise questions about this interpretation. Some might see in her letter evidence of a Soviet citizen estranged from the state, for she openly criticizes the pace of reform and the state’s relationship to its elderly citizens. Reading her missive against the backdrop of the broad moral discourse and the attempt to activate Soviet citizens, however, show her in dialog with key political discourses of the day. Koleshenko’s letter intervened in the broad social discussion of morality during Perestroika. This point is clear in her comment that “many talk about the nuns of Mother Theresa.” This comment provides an indication of one way in which moral discourse manifested itself among the population at large. Reformers themselves did not necessarily discuss Mother Theresa or praise her as a moral paragon. Indeed, Mother Theresa had little to do with Soviet socialist notions of morality. Yet Koshelenko made this historical figure compatible with culturally familiar notions of morality. She noted Mother Theresa in order to point out the division between saying and doing in her society. Even though everyone spoke of Mother Theresa, she wrote, nobody did anything to address the flawed system of caregiving. Koleshenko appeared to share reformers’ understanding of the ultimate goal of Perestroika as the production of a new kind of consciousness in which words and actions merged when she expressed hope that “something will change in our life, in our psychology.”

Reading Koshelenko’s letter in this way diverges from the methodological practices of early anthologists of Perestroika-era letters, such as Riordan. It bears more in
common with the approach of scholars of other periods in Russian and Soviet history, including historian Yanni Kotsonis. In a study of the late Imperial peasantry, he writes:

> Our sources can be used effectively by considering why and in what circumstance they were produced. At issue is not only their veracity and accuracy, leading the scholar to sift, cross-check, calculate, and verify—something historians do as a matter of course—but the very reason the sources were produced and the intention of the producers.38

Kotsonis reached this conclusion in the process of working with peasant interviews conducted by urban doctors and teachers. For some scholars, such interviews provide the best source available for accessing the mind of the peasant. Kotsonis concludes that the interviews provide no evidence of “a ‘real’ peasant mindset or a comprehensive picture of what it is to be a peasant.” Instead, he sees them as “a response to an appeal or proposition from someone else”—namely, doctors and teachers who conducted the interview. It is the “intersection” between interviewer and interviewee, he writes, that “we can and should narrate.”39

Kotsonis’s point is to begin the analysis of our sources not with the words on the page, but with the political and social forces that called the documents into being. The point is not to remove agency or choice from letter writers like Koshelenko. Certainly, her decision to pick up her pen mattered to the creation of her letter, just as the decision of many Soviet people not to write resulted in the absence of their letters. Yet once a letter writer had a writing utensil in hand, she became participant in a robust conversation about what it meant to write letter, the subject one addressed in communications to public

39 Ibid., 12.
figures, what one asked for, the tone in which one levied requests, and what one expected from writing. In short, expression was not unfettered.\textsuperscript{40}

Much like the conception of man at the heart of the moral agenda of Perestroika, the practice of letter writing was nothing new. It dated back at least to the late Imperial period, when reduced censorship revolutionized press culture.\textsuperscript{41} Some scholars even trace public letter writing back to the practice of petitioning the tsar since the 1400s.\textsuperscript{42} What distinguished letter writing in the Soviet period is the way it became part of the effort to create a distinctly socialist subjectivity. Scholars have attended the ways diaries, autobiographies, and even trial confessions provided a space in which Soviet people mended any gap between their public and private lives.\textsuperscript{43} Public letters, which in the Soviet case were highly autobiographical documents, as Koshelenko’s suggests, provided an analogous opportunity. Like Soviet leaders who had come before them, reformers regarded letter writing as a practice of the actively engaged person. As Gorbachev put it in his speech before the April (1985) Plenum, “The C[entral] C[ommittee] regards [public letters] as a great help to [our] work [and] a visible manifestation of the interest of Soviet people in the affairs of their government.”\textsuperscript{44}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{40}This approach is not unique to Kotsonis, though he provides a particularly clear and thoughtful example of it. See also Sonja Luhrmann, \textit{Religion in Secular Archives: Soviet Atheism and Historical Knowledge} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), esp. 3-4.
\item \textsuperscript{42}Margareta Mommersen, \textit{Hilf mir, mein Recht zu finden. Russische Bittschiften von Iwan dem Scheeklichen bis Gorbachow} (Frankfurt am Main: Propyläen Verlag, 1987).
\item \textsuperscript{44}Materialy plenuma TsK KPSS 23 aprelia 1985 goda, 21.
\end{itemize}
During Perestroika, what it meant to write a public letter was shaped above all by reformers themselves, who sent a clear message about public letters and what it meant to write one. In his speech before the April (1985) Plenum, Gorbachev stated:

Preparations for the Twenty-Seventh Party Congress [and] the discussion by laborers of Congress documents will undoubtedly call forth the active participation (aktivnost’) of Soviet people. Party committees should take an interest in cultivating glasnost [and] ensure that all channels of communication with the masses are working, [and] in tracking the kind of attention devoted to popular opinion, critical statements, [and] statements and letters from citizens.45

This statement suggested first that Gorbachev saw an inextricable link between a wave of public letters and political matters—in this case, documents being drawn up in preparation for the upcoming Party Congress, which would be published in the newspaper for citizens to read and comment on. His statement also sent a message to those institutions responsible for working with citizens’ letters. It emphasized to them the importance of working closely with citizens’ communications, which in turn underscored the significance of letter writing itself, promising to citizens who wrote that their communications mattered.

Kotsonis’s advice to begin the interpretation of documents not with the words on the page but the forces that brought the documents into begin gives way to a new reading of public letters during Perestroika. Read in the way recommended by Kotsonis, Kosheleiko’s letter appears not as an expression of opposition or apathy towards the state, but as a highly subjective document in which the author sought to engage reform by thinking through her own moral qualities. Her letter provides an example of how letter writers enacted the moral expectations associated with letter writing. Besides writing the letter, itself a sign of activation, she was acutely aware of her tone and how her audience

might perceive her as an ethical subject. She apologized for her sharp tone, and noted that such times left her not knowing how to conduct herself. She also sought to show herself as an activated person. She took up the housekeeping that nurses did not do, she washed her friend Alitundzhi’s body, she cleaned up the space around her bed, and she fed the ailing woman.

At first sight, the interviews of Kotsonis’s research seem very different from the public letter. While one reflects a conversation, the other represents a single authorial voice. Yet if we follow Kotsonis’s methodological recommendations, the letter seems remarkably similar to the interview. The public image of letters and their authors acted as interviewer, and letter writers as interviewees. Contextualizing them as Kotsonis does of his sources gives way to a radically new way of working with letters. It vastly alters the reading of Perestroika-era letters. While Riordan understood the letter as the unfettered expression of an individual who could finally speak up and out against the state, I see them as one component in a dynamic conversation between reformers and citizens.

Since the opening of the Soviet archives during the period of Perestroika, which gave way to a veritable archival revolution, scholars have used public letters to many ends, ranging from expressions of public opinion to participation in the state project.46 In all of these approaches, historians begin their reading of the sources with the words on

---

the page. Here, however, I begin with a consideration of the forces that produced the letters. In so doing, I arrive at a different understanding of the mountains of letters that appeared during Perestroika. While anthologists such as Riordan understood the emerging mountains as a result of relative freedom, I suggest the practice of letter writing experienced a boom as citizens sought to participate in Perestroika—and specifically, in reform as an effort to engineer distinctly Soviet socialist subjects in whose concept of self the private and public spheres became one.

The seven chapters of this dissertation trace the life of the last attempt to create the new Soviet person from 1985 through 1991. Chapter One explores the imaginary horizons of reformers in an effort to reconstruct the temporality of Perestroika at its inception and to understand why reformers set out to enact far-reaching policies and where they believed their efforts would take them. Chapter Two investigates reformers’ attempt to activate the Party and work through this well-established organization to achieve the moral ends of Perestroika using conventional practices including letter campaigns to discuss new Party documents. Chapter Three examines the self-activation of the intelligentsia, which with very little prodding from above engaged the moral aims of reform, and even championed the public letter as a privileged form of social engagement.

Chapter Four shows the unanticipated paradoxes of reform that emerged in the conservative response to Perestroika, including the period’s most famous letter from Nina Andreeva, who as an activated Soviet subject criticized the course of reform and sought to refine its moral underpinnings. Chapter Five explores the attempt to activate citizens through democratic exercises surround the First USSR Congress of People’s Deputies—
including voting procedures, conference proceedings, and writing letters to the prominent delegate Andrei Sakharov—and shows that letter writing continued to shape Soviet socialist democracy even in the age of direct representation. Chapter Six addresses the period of heightened shortages in 1989-1990 that resulted from policies aiming to further moral reform, and reformers’ attempt to make complaints about food useful to Perestroika. Chapter Seven examines the fate of public letter writing in the wake of the Soviet collapse and shows the fracturing of the shared imaginary with which Perestroika began.
CHAPTER ONE

Imaginary Horizons

Cloudy skies blanketed north-central Moscow as crowds assembled on October Square on November 5, 1985. The date marked the sixty-eighth anniversary of the October Revolution. People gathered to unveil a new sculpture honoring the revolutionary Vladimir Lenin. The leader’s chiseled body stood above a woman framed by a rippled flag who represented the Motherland, and six ordinary people, including a worker, soldier, sailor, commissar, and machine gunner. Thick rows of spectators encircled members of the Politburo and Communist Party Central Committee who gathered at the red granite base. Ceremonies included speeches by the highest ranking members of the Soviet government as well as distinguished citizens, among them K.P. Sinozerskii, member of the Communist Party since 1917 and participant in the storming of the Winter Palace in Petrograd, and L.A. Koroleva, a recipient of the Lenin Scholarship and student at the Lenin Pedagogical Institute in Moscow. Festivities concluded with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev cutting the red ribbon hugging the sculpture’s base (Image 1.1-1.2).

Lenin’s unveiling came just eight months after Gorbachev’s election as General Party Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party. His ascent to power followed the death of three leaders in quick succession: Leonid Brezhnev in 1982, Yuri Andropov in 1984, and Konstantin Chernenko in 1985. By the time Chernenko died in 1985, the death of a leader had become so routine that children did not even get the day off school for his funeral. While in office, he had spent more time in the hospital than the meeting room.
Chernenko’s rule followed the not much longer rule of Yuri Andropov, who remained in office a mere fourteen months after Brezhnev’s death. Brezhnev died after a half-decade attempt to keep him alive. In the late 1970s, he suffered a stroke in which his heart stopped beating. Doctors successfully revived him, but he moved increasingly slowly and his speech became slurred. The deterioration of his health played out on national television for the entire country to see. In the decade leading up to Gorbachev’s election, the face of socialism had become old.

By 1985, Politburo members hoped for one thing from the new Soviet leader: that he would not die in the next twenty-four months. As Chernenko’s life came to an end,
they whittled their choices down to two of their peers. The more likely candidate was Grigory Romanov, the second youngest member of the Politburo. Raised in a peasant family outside of Novgorod, he was educated as a shipbuilder in Leningrad and, after serving in World War Two, became a respected designer in a shipyard in the northern capital in the 1950s. He worked his way through the local Party apparatus, and in the 1970s Andropov handpicked him for an appointment in Moscow. Mikhail Gorbachev was the Politburo’s youngest member. Like Romanov, he came from a peasant family—Gorbachev from one in the Stavropol region in southwestern Russia. He also ended up in Moscow in the 1970s with Andropov’s help. Yet just a few years Romanov’s junior, Gorbachev reflected the features of a younger generation. He was the only Politburo member too young to have served in the War. He moved from the countryside to the city just when the Soviet population became predominantly urban for the first time in history. He also reaped the benefits of a flourishing Soviet education system. With a degree in agriculture and a degree in law from the prestigious Moscow State University, he was by far the most highly educated member of the Politburo. After coming to Moscow in the 1970s per Andropov’s request, Gorbachev became the youngest member of the Politburo in 1980.¹

Though Romanov appeared to be the more likely successor of Chernenko throughout 1984, his name had disappeared from the press in the weeks leading up to the

infirm leader’s death. By March 1985, the Politburo had firmly settled on Gorbachev. The factors that tipped their decision remain a matter of speculation. Some suggest alcohol marked the decisive difference between the two candidates: Romanov drank heartily, but Gorbachev was a teetotaler. In the Soviet Union, this difference gave the latter a stronger moral glow, though many former leaders, including Brezhnev and Chernenko, drank heavily at little risk to their public reputation. Yet Gorbachev had an additional edge. He was a true believer in Soviet socialist values as well as a tremendously charismatic and charming speaker. To this day, though memories of Gorbachev in Russia evoke apathy at best and anger at worst, Russians recall how he spoke frankly and freely, without notes. He even had a sense of humor. As the person who would represent the Soviet Union at events like the unveiling of Lenin in November 1985, Gorbachev had the potential to put not only a young face on socialism, but an inspiring one.

Gorbachev’s participation in the ceremonies at October Square in November 1985 raises the question of his relationship to Lenin. His appearance at the event might seem a matter of form. The impression of the event as mere ritual is reinforced by the work of anthropologist Alexei Yurchak, who suggests that the language and practices of Soviet ideology became increasingly performative after the death of Stalin in 1953. As the Soviet leader, he had no choice but to head up the events celebrating the anniversary of the October Revolution. Moreover, the plans to unveil the new Lenin statue developed

---

2 Tat’iana Iur’eva, Dnevnik kul’turnoi devushki (Moscow: Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennii gumanitarinyi universitet, 2003), 78.
before Chernenko died, and the sculptor Lev Kerbel received the commission for the monument over two years before it appeared in north central Moscow. Indeed, the last years of Soviet history are more commonly associated with Lenin statues coming down than going up. Wolfgang Becker’s film “Good Bye, Lenin!” (2003) memorably portraits this trend in a scene in which a Lenin statue, strung up to a helicopter by chain resembling a noose, soars over Karl Marx Allee and across East Berlin. In real life, dismantled Lenin statues accumulated in sculpture graveyards across Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s, including the sizeable Grotus Park in Vilnius, Lithuania.

Though Gorbachev did not initiate plans to unveil Lenin at October Square in November 1985, he readily used the opportunity to reiterate the core message of his agenda since his first day in office—namely, Leninist reinvigoration. In his inaugural address delivered on March 11, 1985, he repeatedly attached Lenin’s name to his vision of the Soviet Union moving forward. When calling for the Party to play the vanguard role in state politics, he stated: “The CPSU [Communist Party of the Soviet Union] has always been and is guided by that Leninist idea that principled policy is the only correct policy.” When addressing Soviet foreign policy, he proclaimed: “We will rigorously follow the Leninist course of peace and peaceful coexistence.”

Gorbachev reiterated his esteem for Lenin’s ideas in his second major public address at the April (1985) Plenum of the Central Committee, which took place the day after the hundred-and-fifteenth anniversary of Lenin’s birth. Standing again under the enormous portrait of Lenin,

---

5 M. Karpov, “Interv’iu. Lev Kerbel’” Sovetskaia kul’tura (19 February 1985), 2. Special thanks to Katherine Zubovich for drawing this article to my attention.
7 Materialy vneocherednogo plenuma tsentral’nogo komiteta KPSS. 11 marta 1985 (Moscow: Izdatel’svo politicheskoi literatury, 1985), 12.
8 Ibid., 11.
Gorbachev acknowledged the holiday and expressed the foundational place of the revolutionary leader’s ideas in Soviet society. “All of life, the entire path of history,” he stated, “convincingly proves the great truth of Lenin’s teachings. It was and remains for us the guide to action, the source of inspiration, the true compass in discerning the strategy and tactics to move forward.”9 He vowed “strict adherence” to the “Leninist tradition.”10

One might argue that Gorbachev’s verbal praise for Lenin was an important political tactic. It might have been important to affirm his commitment to the Revolutionary leader in his first months in office to assure stability in the midst of the changing of the guard, particularly when his youth, education, and unique style of interacting with people left some wondering if the Politburo had drawn the wild card. Yet even Gorbachev’s appearance at the unveiling of the Lenin statue in November 1985 suggests that his praise for the revolutionary leader was no mere lip service. Except for the bowler hat, his long dark overcoat and slacks mirrored the outfit that Lenin donned in the statue. His dress subtly reiterated his identity with the Soviet founder, suggesting that Gorbachev was the breathing, walking, living Lenin.

One might also interpret Gorbachev’s references to Lenin as evidence for the argument that even though Gorbachev is best known for diverging from many Soviet traditions, that striking continuity characterized his first years in office. The political scientist Archie Brown argues that Perestroika became the most dramatic expression of a reform tradition that evolved within the Communist Party apparatus from the Brezhnev

9 Materialy plenuma TsK KPSS 23 aprelia 1985 goda (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1985), 5.
10 Ibid., 6.
era and received its first public soundings under Andropov. Other scholars make similar points, tracing structural continuities across 1985 as well as continuities in reform policies. Evidence for this argument appears side by side with references to Lenin in Gorbachev’s early speeches, in which he also promised to follow the line articulated at the Twenty-Sixth Party Congress established by Brezhnev in 1982 and continue on the path of perfecting what Brezhnev called “developed socialism.”

Yet Gorbachev’s consistent references to Lenin signaled more than continuity in political traditions across 1985. They indicate a central feature of the young Soviet leader’s worldview that animated Perestroika. Every time Gorbachev announced an important policy, including those that came to define late Soviet reform, he hitched it to Lenin’s ideas. He saw the world through Lenin’s works, and saw his own actions as working towards a more perfect realization of Leninism. Lenin, at least as Gorbachev understood him, defined the young leader’s imaginary horizons, how he assessed the place that the Soviet Union was located at the present moment, and where it would go in the future.

12 The arguments on continuities across 1985 fall into two categories. Some scholars note personal and political continuities from the early 1980s across 1985 that are particularly connected to the personal relationship between Gorbachev and the person who brought him to Moscow, Andropov. These scholars include Luc Duhamel on the KGB campaign against corruption and Stephen White on the campaigns against alcoholism. Other scholars emphasize structural continuities, including Stephen Kotkin, who sees global economic shifts shaping the landscape on which the Brezhnev through Gorbachev eras played out, and Moshe Lewin, who sees the Gorbachev era as the product of sociological trends such as education and the urbanization of the Soviet population from the late 1950s onward. See Luc Duhamel, The KGB Campaign against Corruption in Moscow, 1982-1987 (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010); Stephen Kotkin, Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970-2000 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Moshe Lewin, The Gorbachev Phenomenon: A Historical Interpretation (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991 [1988]); Stephen White, Russia Goes Dry: Alcohol, State and Society (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
Gorbachev associated Lenin with every major policy that came to define Perestroika, including glasnost. The origins of this concept are highly contested. Summarizing a common argument, historian Robert Horvath writes that when reformers “extolled the virtues of glasnost or pluralism, they were appropriating terms that had radical connotations, terms which had been shaped by decades of dissident protest.” He argues that dissidents developed the concept of glasnost that came to be enacted during Perestroika. He quotes the dissident economist Lev Timofeev who in a 1988 samizdat essay warned reformers: “you repeat alien words, whilst continuing to hold under lock and key those who pronounced those words, those who pronounced them at the right time.” Timofeev implied that dissidents more steadfastly protected the tradition of glasnost than any representative of the Soviet state.¹⁴

Without disputing the significance of the term glasnost for dissidents, it is also important to underscore the genealogy of the term for reformers. They did not trace the word back to those vocal critics of the Soviet state, but to Lenin. In his inaugural address, Gorbachev stated:

We are further obliged to broaden glasnost in the work of Party, soviet, state, and social organizations. V.I. Lenin said that the state is strengthened by the consciousness of the masses. Our practice fully supports this conclusion. The better people are informed, the more consciously they act, [and] the more actively they support the Party, its plans and programmatic goals.¹⁵

This statement offers a definition of glasnost as Gorbachev understood it when he first came to power. As Gorbachev suggested here, glasnost meant transparency, openness, and frankness about political affairs. It meant properly informing people about the government’s activities.

¹⁵ Materialy vneocherednogo plenuma tsentral’nogo komiteta KPSS. 11 marta 1985, 11.
This definition of glasnost substantially differs from the notion of freedom of speech, with which the term is commonly equated when it is seen as the outcrop of dissident ideology. While freedom of speech aims to empower the individual to speak one’s mind in public, glasnost aimed to impart information on citizens so that they might participate in the life of the state. The two concepts reflect diverging understandings of the subject under liberalism and socialism. Free speech carves out a place for thoughts cultivated in private to enter into the public; glasnost aimed not to reify the divide between public and private, but to integrate the two by providing information that would allow the person to participate in the affairs of the state through their everyday life.

One of the key differences between the argument about continuity across 1985 and the claim that Lenin’s ideas structured reformers’ imaginary horizons is that the latter leaves space for the fact that reformers did not simply take up Lenin’s ideas like boxes and move them forward across time and space. They actively constructed them each step of the way. The concept of glasnost provides an illustration of the creative act of articulating Lenin’s ideas. This point is demonstrated in part by what reformers did not say about the origins of glasnost as a concept. While Gorbachev and his peers consistently cited Lenin as the source of glasnost, sometimes citing Lenin’s use of the word in a 1903 letter to the editor of the social revolutionary journal *Iskra*, the word itself was not in fact a neologism invented by the Soviet founder. The word glasnost gained currency during the period of Great Reforms (1860-1864) before Lenin came of age. According to historians of late Imperial Russia, the concept heralded from the continental European political philosophy rooted in the French Revolution, particularly the idea that

transparency constituted an essential component of the modern political system. Under Tsar Alexander II, glasnost became strongly associated with efforts to liberalize the press, censorship organs, and the legal system. Glasnost became an important part of the legal system in 1864, when revised court statutes opened the doors of the courtroom to audience members, including the press. Formerly, only individuals associated with the trial were allowed in the room. Now anyone could listen to the proceedings, and even more people could read about them in the press. Glasnost in this situation meant transparency in the judiciary processes.¹⁷

Late Soviet reformers never cited the broader usage of the word glasnost in the late Imperial period. Nor did they acknowledge that the word maintained currency under every leader that followed Lenin, including Stalin, when it was used particularly in cases of international relations in order to point out the weaknesses of other countries’ internal judicial system or potential problems in cross-national negotiations. For example, an article published in Pravda on November 24, 1928 stated in its title: “Trial of Japanese Communists. The Prosecution demands Glasnost of the Proceedings.”¹⁸ Even as political purges peaked under Stalin, glasnost maintained its place in the Soviet political vocabulary. An article about the Dnepropetrovskii Parovozremontnyi Factory titled “Grave violations of internal democracy,” published in Pravda in 1937, stated: “Glasnost is the most important condition for the development of internal Party democracy. The Party Committee is required to constantly inform the organization about its activities

That the word glasnost maintained its currency in the Soviet political vocabulary after Lenin’s death helps explain why Gorbachev used the word so casually in even his first speech as General Secretary. For him and his listeners, unlike his Cold War Western audience, the word was already familiar. His failure to acknowledge its origins in the late Imperial period or its wide circulation even after Lenin’s death did not signal a willful forgetting of the past, but rather a conscious construction of Soviet political vocabulary. By tracing glasnost back to Lenin, reformers suggested that they remained committed to carrying out the vision of the first Soviet leader.

That reformers did not simply carry forward Lenin’s ideas but actively constructed them is also evident in the way key concepts changed over time, though reformers continued to site Lenin as the source of the ideas. Glasnost again illustrates this point. The concept initially meant openness and transparency about governmental affairs with the aim of establishing conditions in which Soviet people could graft their own lives onto the life of the state. The core idea of glasnost changed the course of Perestroika, especially after 1988. In an interview with the American historian Stephen Cohen in 1989, the chief ideologist of Perestroika Alexander Yakovlev offered a definition of glasnost. He stated:

Glasnost is the realization of Lenin’s idea that under socialism man should know absolutely everything so as to make conscious judgments about everything. Absolutely everything, about the past and the present.20

The key difference between Yakovlev’s definition in 1989 and Gorbachev’s identification of the concept in 1985 came down to one word: the past. The chief

---

ideologist stressed the significance of openly talking about the events of Soviet history as part of glasnost. His definition reflects the ways in which the national discussion of the Soviet past, including the Stalin era, tempered the idea of glasnost. In 1989, Yakovlev shaped the definition of glasnost specifically in response to conservatives, who asserted that focusing on the problems of Soviet history undermined the strengths of the socialist state. In a political battle with conservatives, Yakovlev asserted the opposite: that one must discuss the past. That he associated this revised definition with Lenin reflects the way in which reformers’ reading of the Soviet founder evolved over time.

The persistent evolution of reformers’ understanding of Lenin highlights the importance of clearly identifying the central tenets of their reading of these foundational texts in 1985-1986 so that the ways in which that reading evolved over time will be clear in the chapters that follow. In their earliest speeches, reformers identified glasnost, meaning equipping the population with information about government discussions, as a central component of Soviet politics moving into the future. A second core concept included demokratizatsiia, or democratization. The New Edition of the Party Program approved by the 27th Party Congress in March 1986 concisely reiterated this concept as reformers had used it throughout the first year of Perestroika. It stated:

The Party will uncompromisingly pursue the policy of democratization of leadership [and] the process of working out and accepting state decisions based on the selection of their optimal versions [and] the registration and accumulation of different opinions and suggestions of laborers. The widening circle of questions can only be resolved after discussion in worker collectives, in established Soviet commissions, [and] in professional, Komsomol, and other social organizations.  

As articulated here, democratization meant the process of tightening the relationship between the government and the people so that the latter participated directly in the

---

process making decisions that impacted the country. In the Cold War West, the process of developing democracy became associated with the creation of representational democracy in which people elected officials to act on their behalf when making decisions at the state level. For reformers in the first years of Perestroika, democracy meant participation not via representatives but through discussions primarily in the workplace and social organizations. As with glasnost, reformers linked this understanding of democratization to Lenin. In a discussion of democratization in his speech at the Twenty-Seventh Party Congress in February 1986, Gorbachev quoted Lenin as having said that “only the uneducated stand outside of politics.” As reformers understood it in the early years of reform, Lenin’s vision of democracy meant that every person would take an active interest in the life of the state, and would participate in state processes through local organizations and discussion groups.

A third core feature of reformers’ reading of Lenin during the first years of Perestroika included the point that the Party would stand at the vanguard of all political processes. Gorbachev stated in his inaugural address in March 1985:

> The times demand the hard, creative work of all Party organizations from the top to the bottom. In all areas, everywhere and in every way, Communists should be the example of fulfilling civic duty, voluntary labor in service of society, in every way support the Leninist style of work. This first and foremost relates to the Party cadres [and] to Party and state leaders. The CPSU will uncompromisingly pursue the line of strengthening dedication [and] increasing responsibilities for the tasks given to them.  

The Party had long been the vanguard of the revolution and, in a one party state, was seen not just as a political authority, but a moral one. Gorbachev’s insistence that the Party would maintain this role marked a core feature of his understanding of the political work

---

22 Ibid., 54.
that lay ahead of him. In identifying the key role of the Party in Soviet development into the future, Gorbachev, as stated in this passage, saw himself drawing on Lenin.

**Spiritual Crisis of the New Soviet Person**

Glasnost, democratization, and Party vanguardism, reformers hoped, would ultimately further the chief objective of reform: the creation of the new Soviet person, an actively engaged person whose life merged the public and private spheres. Gorbachev stated this goal in his inaugural address in March 1985. Continuing the Party line developed by his predecessors, he said, meant “the perfection of social relations, above all economic ones” as well as “the development of the person himself,” including “the quality improvement of the material conditions of his life and labor, [and] its spiritual (dukhovnyi) aspect.”

The first policy that aimed to further the moral objectives of reform was the anti-alcohol campaign. On May 17, 1985 major daily newspapers across the Soviet Union—including *Pravda, Komsomol’skaia pravda, Izvestiia*, and *Sovetskaia Rossiiia*—published a statement by the Central Committee, Council of Ministers, and the Upper Soviet “On the Measures for Eradicating Drunkenness and Alcoholism.” The article acknowledged that despite past actions, “the problem of drunkenness and alcoholism in [this] country has become more acute in recent years.” “The strict observation of the principles of Communist morals and ethics” were more important than ever, and “the abuse of alcohol is frequently not seen as amoral, antisocial behavior.” Even alcohol in small doses was

---

24 Ibid., 9.
bad for health, the announcement claimed, “and also had a negative impact on all sides of social life—economic, everyday, the moral sphere, and consciousness of people.”

The media announcement called on all levels of Party leadership—including national, republic, province, county, city and district—to establish “a complex of well-rounded [and] sound organizational, administrative-legal and educational measures directed towards decisive strengthening of the anti-alcohol campaign and the increase in its effectiveness.” It called specifically on Party members to observe a sober lifestyle and to enforce dry habits on one another while setting “a personal example of active struggle against alcohol” and directed the Komsomol to play a particularly pointed role in the campaign against drinking. It asked each workplace collective to create an “atmosphere of intolerance for drunkenness, for any violation of labor discipline and order.”

As articulated in the May 1985 statement, it requested that vacation spots and sanatoria observe sober conditions and propagate the harms of alcohol; encouraged thought around how free time was spent, especially by youth; requested that all Komsomol activities prohibit alcohol; promoted propaganda campaigns in theaters, cinemas and art venues and on television and radio; and called for more effective use of gyms and stadiums. It asked participants in the upcoming 27th Party Conference to include in the 12th Five-Year Plan decrees on building clubs, palaces and houses of culture and sports facilities in new urban neighborhoods and villages. The statement even called for an increase in production of goods to replace alcohol, including “nonalcoholic drinks,

25 “O merakh po preodoleniiu p’ianstva i alkogolizma,” Komsomol’skaia pravda No. 112 (Friday, May 17, 1985), 1.
26 Ibid.
juices, kvas, fruit preserves, jams, fruits, grapes, [and] berries in fresh, dried and frozen forms.”

The campaign also introduced new laws to further its goals. Already on May 17, 1985 it was announced that the new legal drinking age was 21. By June 1, 1985 the first set of new laws restricting alcohol went into place. The laws included a ban on drinking alcohol in all workplaces and the prohibition of alcohol sales before 2 PM. Stores that sold alcohol to take home faced new restrictions. Alcohol sales on trains were prohibited. In August 1985, prices increased by 25%, with another increase planned for August 1986. It also encouraged new clubs and publications. Per the statement “On the Measures for Eradicating Drunkenness and Alcoholism,” the All-Soviet Voluntary Society for the Struggle for Sobriety was created by September 1985, echoing the Stalin-era voluntary Society for the Struggle against Alcohol. It’s main print organ, Sobriety and Culture (Trezvost’ i kul’tura), also went back into print.

What set the Perestroika-era campaign against alcoholism apart from its predecessors is that it attempted to tackle the problem of drinking at its root: production. The May 17 announcement stated: “Beginning in 1986, [there will be] a yearly decrease of the variety of producers of vodka and hard alcohol, and by the year 1988 [we will] entirely discontinue turning out fruit [and] berry wines.” The attempt to narrow production was taken so far that thousand-year-old vineyards in Georgia, a republic renowned for its wine, were hacked down. Closer to the center, the Red October Chocolate Factory in Moscow cut from production most candies with liqueur. In 1986

---

27 Ibid.
29 “O merakh po preodoleniiu p’ianstva i alkogolizma,” 1.
30 Ibid.
they eliminated “Otktiabrenok,” “Slastena” and “Benediktin” and started making “Neznaika” without liqueur.\textsuperscript{31}

Reformers launched the anti-alcohol campaign in large part to increase production in the workplace. If workers were sober, they were more likely to be active on the job, to avoid injuries at work, and to show up to work in the first place. Yet the campaign targeted far more than rank-and-file workers. It also targeted Party members and people charged with running the government. This point indicated just how pervasive the moral crisis went. After drawing attention to the significant problems facing people in power, leaders had to answer the question of how the situation had gotten so bad. “There are more than a few reasons for it,” Boris Yeltsin stated in his speech at the Twenty-Seventh Party Congress. “All of this became the consequences of perverse practices of managers, above all the result of complacency, ostentation, idleness, and the desire of a number of leaders for a calm life.”\textsuperscript{32}

While aiming to improve the quality of Soviet people, the anti-alcohol campaign gave a dismal impression of the current state of Soviet people. Reformers also set out positive descriptions that they hoped citizens would emulate. The New Edition of the Party Program, drafted in October 1985 by a special commission appointed by the Politburo, included a several page section on the moral standards of reformers. “While gradually advancing towards Communism,” the document stated, “the creative potential of communist morality (kommunisticheskoi moral’i) will continue to unfold—the most humane, just, noble [morality], founded on loyalty to the goals of revolutionary struggle

[and] the ideals of Communism.” It summarized communist morality as “collectivist,” “humanitarian,” “active and professional.”

The New Edition of the Party Program revised the Third Party Program written in 1961 and introduced by Khrushchev at the Twenty-Second Party Congress. The earlier Party Program included the Moral Codex of the Builders of Communism, a list of twelve principles by which every good Soviet citizen lived. The section of the New Edition that described the main points of Communist morality offered an abbreviated version of the Moral Codex. While in content the later version remained largely the same as the earlier, its presentation in narrative form made it more inviting to readers and suggested, perhaps, a greater sense of trust in the population to read and interpret the document. The moral code laid out in the New Edition offered important guidelines for Soviet citizens in the reform period, though ultimately, reformers aimed to create the conditions for the active participation of citizens in the reform process itself, which entailed far more than simply following a list of moral standards.

The sociologist Vladimir Shlapentokh suggests that the dismal image of the Soviet person in crisis showed the vast disparity between the idealized image of the new Soviet person and the people who actually populated the Soviet Union. He further writes that reformers bold admissions of the disparity in the anti-alcohol campaign, for instance, demonstrate that they did not really believe their proclamations about the new Soviet person. It seems, however, that the negative descriptions of Soviet people also expressed an aspiration to achieve the new person. Reformers regarded the crisis,

---

signaled by alcoholism and other ailments, as the problem. They hoped reform would provide the means to overcoming this problem. The moral code articulated in the New Edition served to further that goal.

**Public Letters as a Conduit of Activation**

Reformers regarded the public letter as one of the central means of addressing the pervasive moral crisis, and in so doing, they built on long-standing Soviet traditions of working with citizens’ mail. Throughout the Soviet period, public letters offered a source of public opinion for leaders culled through surveillance or through reports of letter departments to which citizens’ communications were addressed. Yet this form of communication with the state offered far more than a snapshot of public opinion. Letter writing had long constituted a sign of the activated person. In the Soviet Union, the public letter was a highly autobiographical document that, like a memoir or diary, offered an opportunity for the letter writer to reflect on what kind of person she was. For reformers, letters also provided a means by which citizens could participate in the reform process itself, becoming co-producers of Perestroika.

Thus Gorbachev repeatedly emphasized the significance of public letter writing. At the April (1985) Plenum, the general secretary called on party committees “to ensure all channels of communication with the masses, to track the kind of attention devoted to public opinion, critical remarks, suggestions (zaiavleniia) and letters from citizens.”

After the unveiling of the draft of the New Edition of the Party Program in October 1985, he called for the publication of the document and for Soviet people to rigorously discuss it at Party meetings, workplace gatherings, and in letters to public institutions. He deemed

---

these discussions politically significant. “The participation of millions and millions of Soviet people,” Gorbachev stated, “Communists and non-Communists, in all-Party, all-People discussions will result in better regulating the course of the Party into the future [and] more fully take into account the will, interests and needs of all classes, all groups (sloev) of people.”

Institutions developed to work specifically with citizens’ letters reflected the long time significance of the practice of public letter writing in the Soviet Union. Every public organization, from newspapers to state organizations at every level, had a letter department and well established methods of working with written communications. The letter department at the popular daily Komsomol’skaia pravda provided an exemplary model for working with letters throughout the Soviet period.

Komsomol’skaia pravda was founded shortly after the October Revolution in 1925 as the central newspaper of the the Komsomol, and was managed by the Central Committee of that organization. Readers warmly received the newspaper, endearingly calling it Komsomolka and KP. Initially, the newspaper targeted readers of Komsomol age, roughly 15 to 30. The readership of KP grew up with the newspaper. By 1985 readers hailed from all generations, social backgrounds and professional groups. The newspaper served a vast audience, which especially during Perestroika was reflected in its print runs. In 1985, the newspaper printed 13.2 million copies; by 1989, that number

reached 17.6 million. In 1990, Komsomol’skaia pravda set the Guinness World Record for daily newspaper with the largest circulation, running more than 23 million copies a day.

Since late Imperial times, when newspapers first appeared in Russia, letters to the editor constituted a chief form of communication between press workers and readers. After the October Revolution, Lenin, Revolutionary leader and the first editor of Pravda, accredited special status to letters from workers on the grounds that they represented the true voice of the proletariat, while journalism was produced by white-collar employees who embodied the problems of Imperial institutions and mentalities. After World War II, Komsomol’skaia pravda developed one of the best reputations for work with letters. In 1960, the newspaper invited sociologist Boris Grushin to head up the newly created Institute of Public Opinion (Institut obshchestvennogo mneniia) where correspondence from readers became a chief form of assessing public opinion. At the same time Komsomolka launched a sister publication called Sobesednik, which devoted equal space to readers’ letters and journalism.

---


39 On letters to the editor in the imperial period, see James Krukones, To the People: The Russian Government and the Newspaper Sel’skii Vestnik (Village Herald), 1881-1917 (New York: Garland, 1987). In Soviet times, the letter was not the only channel of communication with readers. Periodical presses also communicated with readers by allowing them to come into the periodical headquarters to speak with an office worker and by holding conferences that readers could attend to discuss the hosting periodical. During Perestroika, readers’ conferences were even televised.


41 The history of the IOM as an internal branch of Komsomol’skaia pravda ended in 1966 when, after a survey on the relationship of Komsomol members to the Komsomol that reaped unfavorable results, the Institute and its energetic leader Grushin were relocated to a discreet corner of the Academy of Sciences. B.A. Grushin, Chetyre zhizni Rossii v zerkale oprosov obshchestvennogo mneniia. Zhizn’ 1-aia: Epokha Khruscheva (Moskva: Progress-Traditsia, 2001); B.A. Grushin, Chetyre zhizni Rossii v zerkale oprosov obshchestvennogo mneniia. Zhizn’ 2-aia: Epokha Brezhneva (Moskva: Progress-Traditsia, 2003); Huxtable, “‘This number says a lot’: the Institute of Public Opinion and the Rebirth of Polling in the Soviet Union (1960-1968),” Chapter 4 in “A Compass in the Sea of Life”.
In 1985 KP’s letter department employed roughly fifty people: approximately forty rank-and-file workers, nine correspondents, and one editor. A letter’s movement through the headquarters of Komsomolka began with rank-and-file workers who opened very piece of mail delivered by the postal service. For each letter, they filled out a three-layer index card. The card assigned each letter a number and recorded the letter writer’s name and address, a one-line summary of the missive, the date, and the destination of the letter within KP (Image 1.3-1.4). With the help of carbon paper, the same information appeared on all three cards, each of which had a red, yellow, or green stripe. Letter department workers filed the green-striped card away in a massive card catalogue (Image 1.5). Letter department workers then sent the letter, attached to the remaining two index cards, on to the next reader who would respond to it. Per Soviet law, newspapers and journals were required to respond to every piece of mail they received.42

---

42 Index cards appear in the archive of Komsomol’skaia pravda at RGASPI, but I found out what they are and how they were used institutionally from Kechkina. M.A. Kechkina, Interview with author, 12 June 2014.
The editor and correspondents took on other tasks in the letter department. The editor composed weekly summaries (obzory) of the mail for the editorial board, regular reports that were sent to the Central Committees of the Komsomol and the Communist Party, and a summary that appeared on the second page of the newspaper once a month. Correspondents worked more closely with individual letters. If need be, they made calls to the Party, the Komsomol, or a letter writer’s workplace to investigate the situation. They also traveled to research a dozen situations a year, writing about them in the column “Business-trip on a troubling letter” (Komandirovka po trevozhnomu pis’mu). The staff of the letter department took great pride in the outcome of their work with letters. The last
paragraph of each monthly summary of mail published in the newspaper reported how many people had gotten their jobs or place in school back, how many court decisions had been reversed, how many people had lost their jobs or been demoted, and how many Party or Komsomol members had been reprimanded all thanks to the newspaper’s work with letters.

During Perestroika, Gorbachev’s call for the press to play a key role in reform jolted the staff of Komsomol’skaia pravda into evaluating its methods and work with letters. The Party Committee at KP took up the question of dealing with letters on May 23, 1986. Eighty-six Communist staff members and 1 candidate member convened that afternoon in the Light Blue Hall, where the recently promoted assistant editor in chief V.A. Fronin delivered the keynote speech titled “The Letter in the Newspaper.”43 He framed his presentation as part of the broader effort to meet the goals laid out for the press at the 27th Party Conference, for letters sent to the newspaper were, just like letters sent to the Party directly, a sign of readers’ activation and a measure of the strength of the newspaper’s connection to its readership.

Accomplishing the goals of the conference meant facing long-standing problems in work with letters. Fronin acknowledged that “‘the letter in the newspaper’ is not a new topic, [and] it’s not the first time we’re discussing it in the Light Blue Hall.”44 Indeed, just three years earlier in 1983, the editorial staff of the newspaper had formed a commission to investigate problems facing work with letters.45 As meeting attendees

---

43 Today Fronin is editor in chief of Rossiiskaia gazeta, the newspaper of Vladimir Putin’s party Edinnaia Rossiia. Numerous high ranking press workers from Perestroika-era Komsomol’skaia pravda transferred with him to this newspaper.
44 “Protokol No 7 otkrytogo partiinogo sobraniiia redaksii gazety “Komsomol’skaia pravda” ot 23 maia 1986 g.” TsAOPIM, f. 1968, op. 1, d. 73, l. 63.
45 “Protokol No 2 otkrytogo partiinogo sobraniiia redaksii gazety “Komsomol’skaia prada” ot 22 dekabria 1983 goda,” TsAOPIM, f. 1968, op. 1, d. 67, ll. 128-162.
were quick to point out, few of the decrees of that meeting had actually been carried out.46 In preparation for the May 1986 Party Committee meeting, editors had formed a new commission to study work with letters at KP. The commission comprised the institution’s most prominent members, including G.V. Ianchuk, the newspaper’s assistant responsible secretary.47 That efficient and effective work was more important than ever before was underscored by the fact that in 1983 a minor newspaper worker K.N. Lavrova reported on the work of the commission, while in 1986 the prominent assistant editor in chief Fronin carried out this task.

One of the chief problems detected by the commission, Fronin pointed out, was that “there have been more letters left unprocessed since fall 1985” than ever before.48 If the letter were to become a meaningful practice by which readers worked on themselves, then newspaper workers had to do a better job processing the mail. Fronin insisted KP update its technology for working with letters, mechanize the process of reviewing them, and introduce computers into the letter department.49 He also suggested intermediary measures to carry out in the immediate future, including encouraging readers to write letters on postcards and revising the standards for processing mail.50 Last but not least, he called for personnel changes and, more importantly, changes in the very notion of who even worked with mail. “It probably isn’t right that we assign work with letters exclusively to women,” he noted. “Why can’t a young energetic boy become a correspondent in the letter department? Why, from the letter department, among the ranks

---

46 “Protokol No 7 otkrytogo partiinogo sobrania redaktsii gazety “Komsomol’skaia pravda” ot 23 maia 1986 g.,” TsAOPIM, d. 1968, op. 1, d. 73, l. 52.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid., l. 65.
49 Ibid., l. 63.
50 Ibid., l. 67.
of reviewers (*referenty*), don’t we have special correspondents? Here is something to think about in the future.” The letter to the editor was now so important that young men, too, could work with them.

Work with letters became one of the primary ways in which KP sought to activate its readers and demonstrate its own activation in the months following the 27th Party Conference. On September 16, 1986 a front-page article announced: “EDITORS RECEIVE ONE MILLION LETTERS SINCE THE BEGINNING OF THE YEAR.” The news was announced at the KP headquarters by a worker from the letter department in the Light Blue Hall, where the daily mail was counted up. By comparison, in 1985 KP had received 643,000 letters in twelve months—on average 1,761 letters a day. On September 15 alone, the newspaper received 3,361 letters, and in 1986 it crossed the millionth letter mark in only nine and a half months, thus averaging (according to the millionth-letter report) 3,922 letters per day. According to A. Murtazaev, the author of the announcement, this number included letters in all forms: “complaints and observations, thank you notes and requests, articles and correspondence.” By all measures, the quantity of mail was stunning—even “majestic,” as Murtazaev put it.\(^52\)

Throughout 1986 the quantity of mail pouring into KP received heightened attention, which is further demonstrated by the summaries (*obzory*) of mail that appeared on the pages of the newspaper itself. Every month N. Morzhina, who worked in both the letter department and the department of morality and rights, composed a description of the contents of the mail from readers. Given the volume of letters, the task was monolithic, and she relied on colleagues responsible for reading and responding to

\(^{51}\) Ibid., l. 69.

\(^{52}\) A. Murtazaev, “1 000 000 pisem s nachala nyneshnego goda poluchila redaktsiia,” *Komsomol’skaia pravda* No 211 (16 September 1986), 1.
specific topics taken up in letters to tell her what themes stood out and what letters were particularly valuable.\textsuperscript{53} She often excerpted letters in the summary. In 1986 her summary of mail appeared with impressive regularity: it was printed for every month of the year except February. The report on this month would have been published in March but was crowded out by reportage on the 27\textsuperscript{th} Party Conference. Even more impressive, she included in all eleven summarizes published that year the number of letters received in that month. The regular occurrence of this number underscores heightened attention to the quantity of mail and the significance given to this number at KP in 1986.

But the numbers Morzhina reported in her column raise a problem. She reported the following numbers of letters from January through September: January - 72,922, March - 39,280, April - 62,394, May - 33,704, June - 27,442, July - 21,253, August - 29,308, and September - 100,055.\textsuperscript{54} Added together, the grand total is 386,313. The number for February did not appear in the newspaper, but it is impossible KP received 613,687 in the shortest month of the year. It might be that Morzhina counted the letters differently than the group gathered in the Light Blue Hall on September 15. She might have limited the published number to letters and responses, for example, and not included thank you notes and responses to surveys. But further doubt is cast on the millionth letter announcement by the fact that in an interview, Morzhina had no recollection of this moment in September 1986.\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{53} Interview with N. Morzhina, 15 March 2015.
\textsuperscript{54} N. Morzhina, “Pis’ma, pis’ma,” Komsomol’skaja pravda No 29 (4 February 1986), 2; No 83 (8 April 1986), 2; No 105 (6 May 1986), 2; No 137 (3 June 1986), 2; No 165 (8 July 1986), 2; No 180 (6 August 1986), 2; No 202 (4 September 1986), 2; No 228 (5 October 1986), 2. In the last three months of the year, KP received the following amounts of letters: October - 78, 875, November - 45,871, December - 45,741. See N. Morzhina, “Pis’ma, pis’ma,” Komsomol’skaja pravda No 256 (11 November 1986), 2; No 282 (12 December 1986), 2; No 10 (13 January 1987), 2.
\textsuperscript{55} Interview with N. Morzhina, 15 March 2015.
It is questionable if the millionth letter was real, but even if it was not, claims to its existence were significant in at least two ways. First, it offers new insight to a international fascination with the letter to the editor in the Soviet Union under Gorbachev. Foreign journalists became fixated by the bags of mail slugged into the headquarters of KP on a daily basis. By all means, the bags would have been impressive whether they held a thousand letters or three thousand letters. Many foreign journalists, especially from the Cold War West, were quick to assume that the phenomenon was new to the Gorbachev era, that the letters signified the introduction of liberal-capitalist “freedom of speech” with Gorbachev’s new course. The following chapter on glasnost’ addresses this point in more detail, but here it is appropriate to note that the numbers of letters made public may have been inflated and there may not have been much of an increase at all. The report on the millionth letter is also significant because it illuminates an important degree of coordination between Party and press. Whether or not the numbers were accurate is less important than the attempt on the part of the staff at Komsomol’skai pravda to show a boom in the practice of letter writing. The increase in number intentionally corresponded to Soviet leaders’ attempts to activate the practice of letter writing in step with, and as a means of, addressing the moral crisis ailing Soviet society.
CHAPTER TWO

Activating the Party

Party member and Hero of Socialist Labor D. Motornyj had every reason to celebrate the upcoming Twenty-Seventh Party Congress, scheduled to take place in Moscow from February 25 through March 6, 1986. The S.M. Kirov Collective Farm, where Motornyj presided as chairman, was on schedule to meet all of its production targets for the eleventh five-year plan, which would end when the Congress began. In the last year, its income went up five million rubles, and its profitability reached 94.4 percent. Yet Motornyj recognized that much work remained to be done. He mentioned, for instance, that the new livestock specialist on the farm was knowledgeable, took initiative, and was devoted to his work, but he faced difficulty with the old specialist he replaced. The new specialist’s authority was not great enough, Motornyj complained. He recommended that the Party give collective farms leaders more rights so that they could be more effective leaders. In other words, the future success of the farm as a whole came down primarily to the people who worked there, the nature of the relationships between them, and the authority they were given to determine how to handle matters on hand.¹

Motornyj described these details in a letter to Komsomol’skaia pravda in which he responded to the October 1985 publication of Party documents, drawn up in preparation for the upcoming Party Congress. The printing of the documents, he wrote, made each person on his farm consider how he could achieve the goals articulated in them. Each person was drawing up a personal plan as well as one for their work collective. It was in light of these documents that Motornyj reflected on ways the S.M. Komsomol’skaia pravda, No 277 (18481), Wednesday, 4 December 1985, 1.

¹
Kirov farm could improve. He further suggested to the Revisionary Commission that had drawn up the documents that they revise one line in particular of the New Edition of the Party Program in particular. Specifically, in the sixth paragraph of the document where it stated the importance of working out the mechanism for coordinating supply and demand, he asked that they add a line about the need for proper refrigeration units on farms, without which farmers could not help balance supply and demand.

Motornyí’s letter received a rare honor: editors of Komsomol’skaia pravda published it in the newspaper on December 4, 1985. It appeared side by side with other letters that discussed the pre-Congress documents under the title “The Five Year Plan – A Successful Finish!” These letters contributed to a broad national discussion of three recently drafted Party texts in particular: the New Edition of the Party Program, a statement of the raison d’être of the Communist Party; the Statutes of the Communist Party, a rule manual for Party members; and a document titled “On Foundational Directions of Economic and Social Development of the USSR for the Years 1986-1990 and Perspectives on the Year 2000,” which balanced the theoretical Program with a concrete agenda for achieving Party goals. Gorbachev assigned the Revisionary Commission to redraft these documents. He then invited Soviet citizens to peruse and vigorously discuss them. Public letters like the one from Motornyí became the privileged mode of the discussion: citizens sent their letters to the press and the state, newspapers then printed many of the letters they received in a form the broader population could read and then continue to discuss.

This chapter traces the national discussion of the New Edition of the Party Congress from Party leaders’ call for new editions of the documents through their
response to citizens’ conversation about the texts at the Twenty-Seventh Party Congress. This process provides a rather typical example of a national discussion of state policy in the Soviet period through the early years of Gorbachev’s tenure as General Party Secretary. The discussion started with work in a Party committee, was facilitated by the publication of key documents in the newspaper and the head of state’s call for popular participation in the discussion, and continued with citizens’ written responses to state organs and the press, which sometimes appeared in print in newspapers or even in leaders’ speeches regarding the outcome of the national discussion. Historians frequently use the letter collections generated by such campaigns as sources of public opinion on Party policy, but without necessarily attending to the form of the discussion among Party, press, and citizenry that produced the documents.² This chapter attempts to fill this gap. Tracing the national discussion of the New Edition of the Party Program shows how these discussions played out and the nature of the hinges that bound the state to citizens in the mid-1980s, which reformers considered the basis of Soviet democracy at the time.

Tracing the national discussion of the New Edition of the Party Program also illuminates important characteristics of reformers’ approach to restructuring the Soviet Union in 1985-1986. In the first year and a half of Gorbachev’s tenure as General Party Secretary, the most important events of Perestroika included Party gatherings and discussions of Party documents that followed along a path well trodden in earlier Soviet times. Some scholars read the continuity across 1985 in state practices and policies as evidence that reform did not really begin until Gorbachev’s second or third year in

power. In contrast, this chapter suggests that these traditions set the stage for reform. In 1985-1986, reformers believed Perestroika could be carried out through existing organizations. They intended for the Party to be the vanguard of moral reform. Creating a society of actively engaged citizens, they thought, would begin with activating the Party itself. Revising key Party documents in 1985 constituted a key part of this process.

**Rough around the Edges**

Ahead of the rigorous process of rewriting numerous Party documents, reformers launched another campaign that aimed to further the moral goals of Perestroika: the anti-alcohol campaign. Launched in May 1985, this policy included diverse measures to curtail the problem of drinking among the Soviet population—measures ranging from creating sports clubs in desolate sleeping districts to cutting production to raising the legal drinking age to 21 to increasing the production of suitable alternatives to alcohol, including “nonalcoholic drinks, juices, kvas, fruit preserves, jams, fruits, grapes, [and] berries in fresh, dried and frozen forms.” The statement called on every social group across society to vigilantly implement the measures, including youth groups, neighborhood organizations, and labor cells. Only one social group remained free from criticism in the document—and it was not the Party. It was the intelligentsia, which the government simply asked to study the problem of alcoholism and make suggestions on how to address it. The neutral request implicitly suggested that intellectuals were not infected by the illness that reformers sought to cure.

---

3 “O merakh po preodoleniiu p’ianstva i alkogolizma,” *Komsomol’skaia pravda* No. 112 (Friday, May 17, 1985), 1.
The Party, too, came under fire in the anti-alcohol campaign. The statement introducing the new policy called on Party members to observe a sober lifestyle, enforce dry habits on one another, and set “a personal example of active struggle against alcohol.”\(^4\) This statement is alarming in light of the fact that the Party was supposed to act as society’s moral guide. Article Six of the Soviet Constitution had long guaranteed the Communist Party’s monopoly on power, and prohibited the formation of all other political parties, on the grounds that this organization constituted an invaluable moral force. Scholars sometimes read the calls in the anti-alcohol campaign for even Party members to sober up as an omission of corruption and weakness in the Party. Indeed, commentary on the Party offered in the materials of the anti-alcohol campaign suggests that this organization was rough around the edges. It needed to be shaped up. Yet we might also read such calls as a sign of reformers’ commitment to cleaning up the Party so that it could be the vanguard of moral reform in Soviet society.

The redrafting of key Party documents in 1985 continued the effort to get the Party in top shape and the refine the reasons for its very existence in Soviet society. The idea for the New Edition of the Party Program was first articulated at the 26\(^{th}\) Party Congress under Brezhnev in 1981.\(^5\) Secretary of the Central Committee M.A. Suslov announced the decree “on the preparation of a New Edition of the Program of the CPSU.” Revisions were necessary, he stated, because “twenty years have passed since the adoption of the Program of the CPSU and in this period a great deal of experience in

\(^4\) Ibid.
\(^5\) The New Edition of the Party Program was also not the first revision of the document. The first Party Program had been drawn up before the October Revolution in 1903, the second in March 1919 shortly after the Bolsheviks claimed power, and the third under Khrushchev in 1961, at the same time as the Moral Codex of the Builder of Communism. “Iz istorii sozdaniia Programm Kommunisticheskoi partii Sovetskogo soiuza,” Izvestiia TsK KPSS No 3 (1991), 120-133.
socialist and communist building has accumulated and in the international arena new changes and developments have taken place.” Suslov called for “deep scientific reflection in the life of Soviet society and in global social development [and] in the most important tasks of building communism”—a statement greeted with applause. Brezhnev, Andropov and Chernenko had all come and gone before work on the New Edition of the Party Program began.

In his inauguration address on March 11, 1985, Gorbachev stated that the Revisionary Commission would convene in December 1985. Then at the April (1985) Plenum, the meeting date was moved up to October, which meant that the revised Party Program would be prepared just before the sixty-eighth anniversary of the October Revolution and could be unveiled simultaneously with the Lenin sculpture at October Square. In late June 1985 Politburo members agreed that the New Edition of the Party Program “would outline the characteristic elements of the next stage in development of Soviet society [and] the goals and tasks of the Party for the qualitative transformation of social life.” The New Edition of the Party Program articulated a more concrete vision of uskorenie, or acceleration, the word originally used to describe the reform program. The word was not new. It had been used under Andropov and Chernenko as well. Gorbachev had used this word to describe overall reform at the March (1985) and April (1985) Plenums, but the word at that point was a very broad descriptor of economic change—hardly a program. The New Edition would make it a program. The Politburo hoped the

---

7 **Materialy vneocherednogo plenuma tsentral’nogo komiteta KPSS. 11 marta 1985** (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1985), 13.
revised Party Program would “become one of the most important documents of the Twenty-Seventh Party Congress.”

The Revisionary Commission convened in early October 1985, bringing together two-dozen members chosen among the ranks of the Party elite. Shortly after it concluded its work, the Central Committee convened for a regular plenum on October 15, 1985. The purpose of the meeting: to discuss the New Edition of the Party Program as well as the Statutes of the Communist Party (a sort of law code for the Party that had been revised by the Politburo) and “On Foundational directions of economic and social development of the USSR for the years 1986-1990 and perspectives on the year 2000” (which balanced the high theoretical Program with concrete plans for achieving Party goals). Together these three documents comprised the pre-Congress materials.

After the meeting of the Revisionary Commission, the New Edition, the Statues, and “Foundational Directions” appeared in print in major newspapers across the country on October 26, 1985. In Pravda the document covered pages one through seven in a tiny font—the equivalent of roughly sixty-five book pages. The length required the newspaper to add two pages to the issue. The New Edition included a brief introduction, which provided a short history of the Party Program, and four distinct parts. Part One gave a history of the Soviet Union, emphasizing the country’s vast accomplishments since 1917, especially its victory over fascism in World War II. Part Two addressed the tasks the Party needed to accomplish in order to “perfect socialism” and “transition to Communism.” Part Three addressed Party work in the international sphere, and Part Four underscored the role of the Party in the Soviet Union, calling it the “guiding force of soviet society.”

By far the most important section was Part Two, which presented not merely a list of tasks but an entire philosophy of where the Soviet Union was, how it had gotten there, and what it had to do to move beyond that point. This philosophy was new—at least as the official worldview of the Soviet government and CPSU—and it would become the heart of Gorbachev’s reform policy. The problem, Part Two of the New Edition explained, was that the Soviet Union faced “certain unfortunate tendencies and difficulties” in the 1970s and early 1980s because the Party failed to attend to, let alone evaluate, “the economic situation” and “profound shifts in all spheres of life,” which “hindered the fuller use of the possibilities and advantages of the socialist system [and] held up movement forward.” In a word, the New Edition suggested that the reason the USSR needed a new course into the future was to address “stagnation.” Significantly, the document did not use that word; Gorbachev would be the first to use it in his opening speech at the Twenty-Seventh Party Congress; but the interpretation of history behind the concept was put on paper when the Revisionary Commission convened in October 1985. The CPSU would no longer tolerate “sluggishness in the realization of urgent transformation [and] resolution of new tasks.” The antidote to past “sluggishness” was “acceleration (uskorenie) of socio-economic development of the country.”

The question was how to achieve uskorenie—how to speed things up. The word needed a more concrete agenda. The New Edition laid out plans for developing the economy, including “perfecting socialist industrial relations, the system of guiding [the economy], and methods of economic production.” The majority of Part Two discussed ways to improve social welfare and the quality of life in the USSR. Work conditions

---

would change “to strengthen the creative composition and collective character of labor.” Incomes would go up and the broader system of compensation for work would change. Industries would produce consumer goods. The housing problem would be solved. The New Edition famously promised to provide an apartment for every family by the year 2000—a provision about which members of the Revisionary Commission later stated they were deeply divided. Significant improvements would be made to healthcare, and there would be more opportunities for physical education and sport.

Improving living conditions remained inextricably linked to reformers’ moral objective of transforming Soviet people. In fact improved living conditions would be impossible without Soviet people changing first. The linchpin of economic reform was the “human factor,” or the creative potential of each Soviet person. Economic production would only change if every single person were fully activated and prepared to offer their unique talents and gifts. In order to do so, Part Two of the New Edition suggested, people needed to work on themselves and develop their personality to the fullest extent, and they also needed proper material conditions and incentives to do so. “While gradually advancing towards Communism,” the document stated, “the creative potential of communist morality (kommunisticheskoi morali) will continue to unfold—the most humane, just, noble [morality], founded on loyalty to the goals of revolutionary struggle

---

10 Ibid., 151.
11 Ibid., 152.
12 V.G. Afanas’ev, the editor in chief of Pravda, wrote in his memoir that he strongly opposed the proposal to provide an apartment for every family by the year 2000 because it struck him as mathematically impossible. The Soviet government was barely prepared to build enough apartments just for existing families by that date, but by then, there would also be another generation of families to provide housing for. See V.G. Afanas’ev, “Ot Brezhneva do Gorbacheva (20 let v “Pravde”).” TsMAMLS, f. L-2, op. 1, d. 72, l. 139.
[and] the ideals of Communism.” It summarized communist morality as “collectivist,” “humanitarian,” “active and professional.”

The social welfare agenda articulated in Part Two of the New Edition looked distinctly different from earlier iterations of what in Soviet society needed to change in order to realize communism—different, for example, from attempts to eliminate corruption under Andropov, and even different from the anti-alcohol campaign launched in May 1985 under Gorbachev. As a whole, the New Edition also differed significantly from its direct predecessor, the Party Program approved at the 22nd Party Congress under Khrushchev in 1961. The weighty new document was only half the length of the heftier hundred-and-eight page earlier version. The New Edition was also conveniently divided into four relatively equal parts, while the old one had two unwieldy parts. Both changes appeared to make the document more accessible. In terms of content, the discussion of the social program completely departed from the 1961 edition. From a distance, the two Party Programs looked so different that one wonders why the latter was not simply the Fourth Party Program. Indeed, this question picqued interest among Soviet people, who posed it in letters to the newspapers, Revisionary Commission, and General Secretary himself.

Summarizing the New Edition for a Kazakh audience, the Party scholar A.P. Plotnikov suggested that the revised edition was not called the Fourth Party Program

\[\text{\footnotesize\textsuperscript{14}}\text{Ibid., 164.}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize\textsuperscript{15}}\text{For the Third Party Program, see “Programma Kommunisticheskoi Partii Sovetskogo Soiuza,”} \textit{Materialy XXII S’ezda KPSS} (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1961), 320-428.\]
\[\text{\footnotesize\textsuperscript{16}}\text{Gorbachev mentioned that the Commission received a significant number of letters on this very question. See \textit{Materialy XXVII S’ezda Kommunisticheskoi Partii Sovetskogo Soiuza} (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1986), 93.}\]
because it really did not differ that much from its predecessor. A more satisfying explanation might be that Soviet leaders wanted to maintain a firm connection to the Third Party Program and the 22\textsuperscript{nd} Party Congress under Khrushchev when it was created. More than introducing the “Moral Codex of the Builders of Communism,” the 1961 Congress embodied a broader quest to rejuvenate socialism. This agenda developed in the wake of Stalin’s death in 1953 and admissions to Stalin’s Cult of Personality at the 20\textsuperscript{th} Party Congress in 1956. Khrushchev had no intentions of discarding socialism; it continued to provide a salient ideological compass; but the goal was to reform it, and the goal provoked widespread enthusiasm across Khrushchev’s Soviet Union. Gorbachev entertained similar goals. Far from deviating from traditional Soviet ideology, he hoped that by improving the quality of life and providing the right conditions for each person to fully realize him or herself, socialism would provide the most inspiring example of life on earth.

**Launching the Discussion**

In his speech, Gorbachev praised the Revisionary Commission’s work and announced that the “Politburo recommended publishing the documents and widely discussing them at Party meetings on the regional, city, county and krai levels, at Party conferences in the Soviet republics, and [to have] the project “On the Foundational directions” evaluated also in labor collective meetings, scholarly institutions, military units and social organizations.” In short, discussions were to take place across society in anticipation of the Twenty-Seventh Party Congress, involving broad swaths of the

population in the political process. “The participation of millions and millions of Soviet people,” Gorbachev stated, “Communists and non-Communists, in all-Party, all-People discussions will result in better regulating the course of the Party into the future [and] more fully take into account the will, interests and needs of all classes, all groups (sloev) of people.”¹⁸ In 1985 this was Soviet democracy, and it had precedents throughout the Soviet period. The Party often called for popular feedback on laws and state documents before putting them into effect. They did so, for example, with the 1936 family law, the 1956 pension law, and even the Moral Codex of the Builder of Communism in 1961.

The national discussion of the New Edition of the Party Program from October 1985 through the Twenty-Seventh Party Congress provides an opportunity to look closely at how these orchestrated conversations played out. In his speech before the October (1985) Plenum Gorbachev not only called for these conversations to take place, but described how they should be carried out. The most important thing in these meetings was “professionalism and focus on solving concrete practical questions.”¹⁹ The day following the October (1985) Plenum, the Politburo met to discuss the New Edition of the Party Program. The speed with which the most powerful political and Party organization convened set an example for the rest of the country. The Politburo met to discuss the new Party documents in a timely fashion, and so should everyone else. A press report on the meeting then added to Gorbachev’s statement specific questions for discussion. It “recommended that Party committees put at the center of attention questions of economic development, intensification of production, acceleration (uskoreniia) of scientific-technological progress, strengthening of economic regulations,

¹⁹ Ibid., 13.
and] increase in organization and discipline.” Last but not least, it called on those committees to address moral-humanistic concerns as well, namely “the core improvement of the style of work, ideological-political and ethical (nравственного) education of people.”

As requested from above, the pre-Congress materials became the topic of discussion in workplaces across the country within days. The discussions among staff at the headquarters of Komsomol’skaia pravda provide an example of how these discussions played out. In late October and early November, the newspaper staff met within individual departments, political-educational groups (politizaniatii), and worker gatherings to discuss the New Edition of the Party Program. The Party Committee then devoted an entire meeting to the material on November 19, 1985. The event called together roughly 80 people in the Light Blue Hall, the well-known conference room at KP. In his speech, Responsible Secretary Iu.P. Lepskii highlighted the significance of the New Edition of the Party Program for the newspaper. He acknowledged that the document was above all a “program of acceleration (ускорение), a program of profound reconstruction (rekonsruksiia), [and] restructuring (perestroika) of production power [and] production relations.” But it was also about “the sphere of ideological activities, which is to say, the kind of work we do.” He clarified: “To reach the intended frontiers the Party is asking [us] to accomplish a fundamental revolution (перелом) in the economy and what’s no less important—in thought, in the psychology of people.”

21 “Protokol No 1 zakrytogo partinogo sobrania redaktsii gazety “Komsomol’skaia pravda” to 19 noiabria 1985 g.” TsAOPIM, f. P-1968, op. 1, d. 71, l. 144.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., l. 145.
Thus, the moral-humanistic aims of the New Edition of the Party Program were not lost on Lepskii. Neither were the stunning new characterizations of the recent Soviet past. He cited lengthy passages that indicted the Party for “sluggishness” in the 1970s and early 1980s. His speech suggests that these words, buried towards the middle of a dense Party document, had a strong effect on their audience. He wondered out loud what went wrong over the last decade and took personal responsibility for it. If people weren’t working their hardest, he said, it was because the newspapers failed to motivate them. “Naturally, not everything depended on us,” he qualified. “But you have to agree that the newspaper,” Komsomol’skaia pravda specifically, “with the potential to ideologically impact 14 million [people], can do more than a little.”24 Far from disengaging the long-standing Soviet tradition of shaping people, he was promising that from now on the newspaper staff would work on this task ever harder.25

Citizens Respond

In his October 1985 address, Gorbachev called on the press to mediate citizens discussion of the new Party documents. The press, he urged, “is positioned (prizvony) to become the all-People tribune of discussion, to accumulate ideas, opinions [and] the experiences of the masses, to form that high working (trudovoi) and ideological-ethical (ideino-nravstvennyi) mindset (nastroi), without which realizing any plans is inconceivable.”26 Newspapers across the country swiftly responded by establishing

24 Ibid., 146.
25 For the argument that by 1985 journalists were no longer interested in the Soviet project of creating new people, see Thomas C. Wolfe, “Perestroika and the End of Government by Journalism,” Chapter 4 in Governing Soviet Journalism. The Press and the Socialist Person after Stalin (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).
26 Materialy Plenuma Tsentral’nogo Komiteta KPSS. 15 oktiabria 1985 goda, 14.
special committees to process mail responding to pre-Congress documents (Image 2.1).

In late October 1985 Komsomol’skaia pravda launched a joint project with the Institute of Sociological Research at the Academy of Sciences in Moscow to study public opinion on the New Edition. At the same time editors decided to publish “the letters of our readers with concrete suggestions on the pre-Congress documents” and repeatedly encouraged Soviet people to submit their reflections. “Each [person] has the right to express his or her observations and suggestions on the pre-Congress documents,” noted the editors of the Department of Komsomol Life. “In this is the great strength of our Soviet democracy.”

Between October 30, 1985 and January 18, 1986 no fewer than 48 letters on the pre-Congress documents appeared in KP. 43 addressed the New Edition of the Party Program specifically, and 5 responded to “Foundational Directions.” In the absence of an

---

27 Komsomol’skaia pravda No 273 (29 November 1985), 1.
28 “Protokol No 2 zakrytogo partiinogo sobraniiu redaktsii gazety “Komsomol’skaia pravda” to 18 dekabria 1985 g.,” TsAOPIM, f. 1968, op. 1, d. 71, l. 165.
29 Komsomol’skaia pravda No 249 (30 October 30, 1985), 1.
archive of unpublished letters from 1985 and 1986, published letters provide the only opportunity to trace the discussion facilitated by this newspaper. Letters on the pre-Congress documents came from readers of all ages—the youngest, V. Petrovich, a 10th grader, was 15 or 16 years old, and the oldest, A. Guseinov, a Party member since 1943, was at least 68 in 1986. In terms of the wide range of ages of letter writers, those who responded to pre-Congress materials resembled those whose letters on the anti-alcohol campaign, but in other ways the two sets of letters were different. In terms of geography, letters on the pre-Congress documents were even more diverse. Letters came from every Soviet region—the Baltics and Ukraine/Belarus, the Caucasus and Central Asia, the Urals and Siberia—and from big cities, small villages, and everything in between. In terms of gender, this group was vastly more male. At least 37 of 48 letter writers were men, while only 9 were women. (The gender of 2 letter writers is unclear based on names, content and grammar.)

In publication, letters responding to pre-Congress materials exhibited a very particular form. Some letters were very long—often five or six paragraphs, sometimes even longer. But by far the majority of published letters were short and crisp—just a few sentences long. This was the case with 34 of 48 published letters. The letters themselves were likely much longer, but in these cases editors published just the sentences in which the author made a specific suggestion for the pre-Congress documents. The sentences usually quoted a line or referenced a paragraph in the Party materials and then advised on specific word changes or content additions. The short excerpts usually appeared under the editors’ title “I have a suggestion” or “Let me say a word.” The form of published letters

---

30 Komsomol’skaia pravda No 273 (29 November 1985), 1.
31 Komsomol’skaia pravda No 288 (18 December 1985), 2.
left a deep impression on the discussion of pre-Congress documents. Just as Gorbachev requested, the tone was “professional” and the content oriented towards “solving concrete practical questions.”\textsuperscript{32} In contrast to letters many letters published in Soviet newspapers, details of letter writers’ personal lives were mostly absent from the excerpts. Editors might have left such details out to heighten the “professional” tone of the letter or simply to highlight the specific recommendation for the documents.

In terms of content, every single one of the 43 published letters responding to the New Edition focused on Part Two. At least 13 letters addressed education—discussed in Section Five of Part Two—making this the most pervasive trope. Some letter writers focused on the content of education in the Soviet Union and the statements in the New Edition relevant to it. A. Piskun from Kharkov (Ukraine) recommended adding a sentence to the section on technical education about the necessity of working with people and cultivating organizational, leadership and teaching skills.\textsuperscript{33} Iu. Razovskii, an engineer and educational researcher, suggested noting the importance of fostering “ethical culture” in a sentence on “ideological-political maturity.”\textsuperscript{34} A. Solomonov, doctor of technical sciences in Minsk, wrote in with two suggestions on education. First, he advised that the New Edition emphasize the level of knowledge that students should master as well as the importance of cultivating “an elevated civil quality in line with communist ideals” and preparing “future specialists to constantly develop and renew their knowledge, to

\textsuperscript{32} Materialy Plenumа Tsентрального Комитета КПСС. 15 октября 1985 года (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1985), 13.
\textsuperscript{33} Komsomol’skaia pravda No 288 (18 December 1985), 2.
\textsuperscript{34} Komsomol’skaia pravda No 257 (10 November 1985), 1.
creatively apply it in line with the demands of the accelerating influence of scientific-technical progress.”

A. Solomonov’s second suggestion concerned the structure and organization of education—another subtrope in the broader discussion of education. He recommended adding a paragraph to the statement on the role of higher education on the importance of carrying out reforms to the education system in a timely fashion and creating incentives for students to study harder. Iu. Vaitkus, doctor of physics and mathematics, professor, and delegate to the Council of Young Scholars in Vilnius (Lithuania), wrote that improving the structure of education would begin by making a clearer distinction between the level of “experimentation” and the “material-technical basis” of the sciences in particular. A. Sizonenko from Kustinai (Kazakhstan) believed that improving the education system required closing the gap between technical schools and general education, and he approved of the New Edition’s proposal to do so. Relatedly, he recommended underscoring the importance of primary education in the “well-rounded development of the person (личности).” “Without such development it is impossible to build a communist society,” he wrote.

The second-most pervasive trope in the published letters was economic policy. Some letter writers offered general suggestions. A. Ershov, an academic consultant at the Institute of Economics of the World Socialist System at the Academy of Sciences in Moscow, wrote in detail about economic planning in the GDR, Czechoslovakia and Poland, and advised Soviet economic planners to use the example of other socialist

---

37 Komsomolskaia pravda No 283 (12 December 1985), 2.
38 Komsomolskaia pravda No 288 (18 December 1985), 2.
countries to improve the distribution mechanism. He recommended adding a statement to this effect in Section Five of Part Two of the New Edition.\textsuperscript{39} In contrast to Ershov’s global thinking, A. Poberezhnyi from Kirovogradkaia oblast’ described the fate of materials scrapped from production in Soviet industrial villages. You often see it lying around factories, polluting the environment, he wrote. He argued that these materials were an important resource, that it was important to find ways to use them, and requested that the New Edition address this issue more fully.\textsuperscript{40} Relatedly, A. Kisilev from Sumy (Ukraine) described the costs associated with replacing damaged or outdated technology. He advised that the costs associated with economic production would be more manageable if cars and other items were of higher quality and cared for better.\textsuperscript{41}

Kisilev’s letter points to a subtrope within the broader discussion of economic policy in these letters: the use of technology. Writing from the industrial city Frunze, Murat Sulaiamanov, secretary of the Komsomol organization at the factory “Ainur,” stated that his workplace would install 25 new “progressive technologies” by the end of 1985. “I’ve perused the New Edition of the Party Program,” he wrote, “and I think that our collective is on the right path.”\textsuperscript{42} In a similar spirit, A. Skripkin from Krasnoiarsk suggested that the New Edition “include a statement on the necessity of industrial concentration, which lends itself to quicker automatization and robotization.”\textsuperscript{43} Those in the countryside also welcomed attention to technological advancement. E. Demeter from the collective farm “Nove zhittia” in Zakarpatskaia oblast’ (Ukraine) wrote that “accelerated development of the agroindustrial complex” required “further

\textsuperscript{39} Komsomol’skaia pravda No 288 (18 December 1985), 2.  
\textsuperscript{40} Komsomol’skaia pravda No 10 (12 January 1986), 1.  
\textsuperscript{41} Komsomol’skaia pravda No 10 (12 January 1986), 1.  
\textsuperscript{42} Komsomol’skaia pravda No 249 (30 October 1985), 1.  
\textsuperscript{43} Komsomol’skaia pravda No 260 (14 November 1985), 2.
chemicalization of farming”—a point he said should be added to the New Edition. A. Motorny, member of the Central Revisionary Commission of the CPSU, a hero of socialist labor, and chairman of the collective farm “S.M. Kirova” in Khersonskaia oblast’ (Ukraine), noted the importance of refrigeration and other storage technologies to the success of agriculture. He suggested adding the phrase “perfect the economic relationship between storing perishable products and the organizations that sell them” to the section of the New Edition on agriculture.

Another subtrope in the discussion of economic policy was the role of the Komsomol in production. M. Verzhba from Volgrograd wrote in about the discussion of the New Edition in her workplace. She and her colleagues agreed that the section of the document that discussed improved conditions for young people should also underscore that the Komsomol needs to play a stronger role in economic production. S. Gestas, an engineer, argued that the Party had to encourage more than simply letting the Komsomol play a greater role in production. What follows from this point?, he asked. “Trusting the Komsomol with difficult tasks. Trusting them! And speaking loudly about this trust.”

K. Lisetskii, a teacher at SPTU-24 in Kuibyshev, also took the question of Komsomol and general youth involvement in production further. He described the problems facing many of his students, who were able and willing to work during their vacations but could rarely find anyone willing to hire them for just a few weeks at a time. He suggested that

44 Komsomol’skaia pravda No 257 (10 November 1985), 1.
45 Komsomol’skaia pravda No 277 (4 December 1985), 1.
46 Komsomol’skaia pravda No 287 (17 December 1985), 1.
47 Komsomol’skaia pravda No 273 (29 November 1985), 1.
the New Edition call for an office responsible for coordinating short-term work for youth.\textsuperscript{48}

A third trope in the letters on the Party Program is morality and ethics, a topic that often bordered on and intersected with discussions of education and economic policy and that no less than 8 letter writers addressed. More than half of these letters focused specifically on work ethic and labor discipline. Letter writers were particularly eager to pose solutions to perceived weaknesses in how hard people worked. N. Riabov, a lecturer at the Kazan Institute of Finances and Economics and vice secretary of the institutional Party Committee, believed that improving work ethic began with education. He recommended that the New Edition underscore the importance of imparting on students “a responsible relationship with labor” in addition to cultivating “high professional preparation, ideological-political maturity, organizational and leadership skills,” which the document already mentioned.\textsuperscript{49} Similarly, Iu. Shakhtarin, a doctor from Vladimirskai Oblast’, believed a good work ethic started with how children were shaped from a young age. He debated the merit of paying children for work, complaining that now days kids seemed to get money even for regular chores like taking out the trash. He acknowledged they needed some money for movies, for example, but believed the goal of giving them work at a young age should be to cultivate a good work ethic.\textsuperscript{50}

N. Gorncharenko, an educator in the dormitory at the industrial complex “Khimprom” in Sumy (Ukraine), believed in a simpler solution: the stick. He lamented that “leftovers of the past,” including “drunkenness, hooliganism, parasitism, [and] embezzlement” existed at all in the Soviet Union and argued that the problem would

\textsuperscript{48} Komsomol’skaia pravda No 276 (3 December 1985), 2.
\textsuperscript{49} Komsomol’skaia pravda No 260 (29 November 1985), 2.
\textsuperscript{50} Komsomol’skaia pravda No 288 (18 December 1985), 2.
finally recede if law enforcement agents apply the laws more strictly.\textsuperscript{51} N. Blokhin, a Party member, advocated for the opposite solution: the carrot. His two part solution to improving work ethic first included cutting the sources of so-called “unearned income,” which was not necessarily unearned but was money made from any work not officially noted on one’s work card. The second part was to increase incentives for good work and making sure they’re proportional to the amount of work each person does, so if they work harder, as he noted he had, then they make more.\textsuperscript{52}

Another subtrope within the discussion of morality and ethics concerned atheism, to which the New Edition devoted one long paragraph. Academics took a particular interest in this topic. D. Kshibekov, a member-corrrespondent of the Academy of Sciences in Kazakhstan, wrote that “Marxist-leninist ethics and aesthetics are the foundations of scientific atheism—that’s what you read in textbooks.” But it wasn’t enough, he argued. “I would like a discussion of the New Edition to help perfect the important matter of teaching social discipline at the level of higher education.”\textsuperscript{53} Iu. Radianskii, the editor in chief of the publishing house “Maiak” in Odessa (Ukraine), wrote that the paragraph on atheism needed to discuss the relationship between Communists and religious ideology. The first section of this section, he stated, should read: “In accordance with the rigorous observation of the Constitutional guarantee of freedom of conscience, the Party acknowledge the deep-seated contradiction and irreconcilability of scientific and religious worldviews [and] condemns attempts to use religion to the detriment of the interests of society and the person.”\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{51} Komsomol’skaia pravda No 283 (12 December 1985), 2. 
\textsuperscript{52} Komsomol’skaia pravda No 273 (29 November 1985), 1. 
\textsuperscript{53} Komsomol’skaia pravda No 273 (29 November 1985), 1. 
\textsuperscript{54} Komsomol’skaia pravda No 283 (12 December 1985), 2.
A fourth trope in letters responding to the New Edition was youth culture and problems facing youth—a topic that may have been more pronounced on the pages of Komsomol’skaia pravda. At least 8 letters addressed this topic. Marina from Groznyi wrote a long letter about the ennui facing young people. She was unplussed by school and work. Television was boring. Her city didn’t have a lively theater or music scene. But the real problem, she suggested, was that nobody trusted young people, and that a higher level of society in general would give young people more to aspire to. S. Lebed’, a World War II veteran from Turkmenistan, was several generations older than Marina, but still followed the problems facing youth closely, he wrote. The problem was that in Central Asia, everyone discussed the fate of girls. “Girls—to school!,” “Girls—to the plough!,” “Girls—to the counter!”—Komsomol committees chanted. “Do our Komsomol leaders forget about … boys?,” he asked. “While girls sit behind the steering wheel of the plough, […] boys—healthy, strong—stand in shops, behind the bar, at the shashlik counter.” Boys needed attention, too, he wrote. Editors often bolstered the discussion of problems facing youth with additional commentary. This was the case with both letters summarized above. In response to Lebed’, for example, editors promised that “the Party will undertake necessary work to increase the prestige of certain professions [and] educate the next generation in the renowned labor traditions of the Soviet working class.”

Among the letters discussing youth culture and problems peculiar to young people, at least two addressed wards of the state. Ia. Stepanova from Leningradskaja oblast’ wrote that the conditions at boarding schools and orphanages needed to improved.

55 Komsomol’skaia pravda No 250 (1 November 1985), 2.
56 Komsomol’skaia pravda No 257 (10 November 1985), 1.
57 Komsomol’skaia pravda No 257 (10 November 1985), 1.
She asked that the New Edition promise to increase the amount spent on children in these institutions, improve the training of those who worked at them, and ensure additional “spiritual and ethical” (dukhovnoe i nравственное) education for children in state care.\textsuperscript{58}

A. Zamareva, a retired librarian from Moscow, generally supported the New Edition but also recommended increasing benefits to orphans.\textsuperscript{59}

The sixth and final trope in letters responding to the New Edition addressed social welfare more broadly, including healthcare and housing. L. Struchkova from Tula and G. Skvirskaja, who oversaw the department of dispensation at the Ministry of Health for the Russian Federation, had both heard about a promise to ensure yearly physicals for all Soviet people and supported the proposal. Skvirskaja wrote that Russia was the only Soviet republic in which 70 percent of the population had yearly access to physicals. She called access for the entire Soviet population “one of the most humanitarian aspects of the social program of the CPSU.”\textsuperscript{60} L. Pavlov from Severodvinsk and M. Baklashkin from Penzenskaja oblast’ responded to the New Edition’s promise to provide an apartment for every family by the year 2000. Pavlov wrote that the document must underscore that young families, too, needed an apartment of their own.\textsuperscript{61} Baklashkin wrote skeptically that if the Soviet Union wanted to realize this goal, the government must revamp funding for housing and give property for building to those who didn’t have any.\textsuperscript{62} V. Efremov from Chernigovskaja oblast’ turned his attention from the structure of

\textsuperscript{58} Komsmol’skaia pravda No 280 (7 December 1985), 1.
\textsuperscript{59} Komsmol’skaia pravda No 288 (18 December 1985), 2.
\textsuperscript{60} Komsmol’skaia pravda No 250 (1 November 1985), 2.
\textsuperscript{61} Komsmol’skaia pravda No 260 (41 November 1985), 2.
\textsuperscript{62} Komsmol’skaia pravda No 11 (14 January 1986), 1.
the house to inside the home. He suggested adding to the New Edition a statement that shortening the workday for mothers was of the utmost importance.\textsuperscript{63}

When speaking at the October (1985) Plenum, Gorbachev said that pre-Congress documents would “call forth a wave of responses, suggestions, [and] letters.” Newspapers like \textit{Komsomol’skaia pravda} made clear that such a wave occurred. The question is what we should make of this occurrence. Was the wave a mere mirage of a press hinged to the Party? If newspapers had published letters only on topics that received the most letters from readers, would the published letters have touched on the new Party documents at all? Perhaps not. Yet what the newspaper printed is nonetheless important. Readers saw the printed letters. For them, the selections created an impression of how their fellow citizens regarded the New Edition. The printed letters also reaffirmed what a public discussion of Soviet politics sanctioned by the Party looked like. Furthermore, these letters make an important point about the state of Party language in 1985-1986. Scholars often argue that by the time Gorbachev came to power, the language of the regime was empty of meaning and merely rote performance. These letters suggest otherwise. The New Edition was erudite, detail-oriented, and dry. Yet a significant number of people found meaning in the document, took the time to it, and articulated very specific responses to it. The epistolary discussion of the New Edition thus suggests that to some extent, Soviet leaders and citizens shared a common political language.

It is important to note that the national discussion surrounding the New Edition between October 1985 to January 1986 did not necessarily look so different from the national discussion of other topics staged at earlier times—for instance, the discussion of abortion in the 1930s or the discussion of the Constitution of 1977. Not only did the letter

\textsuperscript{63} \textit{Komsomol’skaia pravda} No 288 (18 December 1985), 2.
campaigns resemble one another, but those who wrote letters clearly had already cultivated skills for participation in the 1985 discussion before that discussion took place. The ability to read a dense document closely and mastery of this particular form of responding would have required practice and exposure to a long tradition of doing so. These points are important to understanding the first years of Perestroika. Gorbachev-era reform remained indebted to practices and traditions that came before it. In leading the country towards reform, the new General secretary hoped to create something new in the country; and yet his ability to imagine was that new world would look like took shape in the language and practices that colored his world before 1985.

The Twenty-Seventh Party Congress

As the discussion of the pre-Congress documents created a buzz across the country, noticeable changes began to take place in the upper echelons of Soviet power, where new faces began to appear in new positions on seemingly a daily basis. In the Politburo alone changes were vast. Gorbachev’s arch-competitor for the position of General Secretary Grigorii Romanov was dismissed on July 1, 1985 and the aged Nikolai Tikhonov was sent into retirement on October 15, 1985. Yegor Ligachev and Victor Ryzhkov joined the Politburo on April 23, 1985, Edvard Sheverdnadze was brought in on July 1, 1985, and Viktor Chebrikov was promoted from candidate to full member of the Politburo on April 23, 1985. Most notably of all, Boris Yeltsin ascended to candidate member of the Politburo on February 18, 1986 and then full member at the Twenty-Seventh Party Congress.
While at work in his office on January 31, 1986, A. S. Cherniaev received a life changing phone call. Born in 1921, Cherniaev served in World War II before earning a degree in history at the prestigious Moscow State University. From 1958-1961 he went to Prague to work on the theoretical journal *The Problems of Peace and Socialism*, and upon his return, took accepted a position in the vast Party apparatus. Cherniaev worked under the influential Boris Ponomarev in the International Department of the CPSU, which oversaw relations between the Communist Party in the Soviet Union and Communist Parties in all other countries. He worked specifically with the Communist Parties of Western Europe. When the phone rang in his office on February 3, he answered it and heard the voice of the General Secretary himself on the other end of the line. Gorbachev asked Cherniaev to come to work for him as an advisor on foreign affairs.⁶⁴

The Soviet leader still on the line, Cheriaev tried to deflect the question. He said that he was not sure the General Secretary wanted someone with such unorthodox views on politics and the Soviet Union. Gorbachev assured him he did, and promptly made arrangements for him to move offices. Cherniaev’s indecision belied his extraordinary enthusiasm for this opportunity. Diary entries from 1985 show that he was an unabashed Gorbachev supporter. Once his career in the service began he had little time to write anything in his extensive diary for months. In the published version of this document—and this is what is really important about Cherniaev here—the Soviet bureaucrat inserted excerpts from Gorbachev’s speeches in lieu of his own reflections. While he explained the departure from his own rumination by stating that there was no time to write—which is fully believable—the montage of voices has a curious effect: he does not merely align

---

himself with Gorbachev but grafts the Soviet reformer onto his very person. Rather than inscribing himself on the reform process, he literally inscribed the reform process on himself. Though the effect may have been unintentional, it is undeniable that Cherniaev was activated in the days leading up to the Twenty-Seventh Party Congress. He had not even a second to write about the events. And his enthusiasm for social change reached unprecedented (in his own life) heights—exactly how Gorbachev hoped the Twenty-Seventh Party Congress would transform the entire country.65

Cherniaev’s reaction was not unique. In the days leading up to the Twenty-Seventh Party Congress much of the country buzzed with anticipation. On the Golden Island in Moscow, within eyeshot of the Kremlin, the Red October Chocolate Factory instated a Saturday workday (subbotnik) on February 15, 1986 in honor of the Congress. All the chocolates and candies produced that day were packed in special boxes adorned with the insignia of the Twenty-Seventh Party Congress,66 and the chocolate workshop prepared special edition confectionaries for the delegates and guests to the upcoming Congress.67 According to P. Andreev, a reporter for the factory newspaper, “it was clear on the faces of the workers that the mood [of the subbotnik] was celebratory.” Throughout the day statisticians called the office of the factory newspaper to announce new records set in various workshops. T. Ivanova’s brigade overfilled the norm by 149% in the first two hours of the workday.68 Red October was not unusual in its valiant pre-Congress activities. Since the main task of the Party Congress was to approve the new five-year

68 Ibid.
plan for economic production, all industries would have been acutely aware of the activities and offered symbolic gestures of support for the meeting.

The momentous and long-awaited Twenty-Seventh Party Congress opened at the Kremlin State Palace on Tuesday, February 25, 1986. At 10 AM nearly five thousand delegates descended on the auditorium. Sitting before the vast audience on the stage, M.S. Gorbachev, G.A. Aliev, V.I. Vorotnikov, A.A. Gromyko, D.A. Kunaev, E.K. Ligachev, N.I. Ryzhkov, M.S. Solomentsev, V.M. Chebrikov, E.A. Sheverdnadze, V.V. Shcherbitskii along with leaders of the delegations of foreign Communists, workers, revolutionary-democratic and socialist parties were greeted by pulsing applause. Gorbachev, Ligachev, Ryzhkov, Chebrikov and Sheverdnadze had all in the year before the Congress received new governmental appointments. They were the faces of the new course. The day began with the introduction and election of the Congress Presidium, Secretariat, Editorial Commission, and Mandate Commission. After Ligachev delivered a short presentation and the daily agenda and guidelines of the Congress were approved, Gorbachev approached the podium to deliver the General Secretarial address, similar to the US Presidential State of the Union address, but magnified by five for the fact that it took place only once every five years. The speech indeed lasted at least as five times as long, too. Gorbachev’s speech took up most of the first eight-hour day of meetings, save a break for lunch and time for the opening and closing ceremonies.

Beyond the auditorium of the Kremlin State Palace, Soviet people across the country, including Moscow intellectual Tatiana Yurieva, sat in their kitchens, ears glued to the radio for Gorbachev’s long speech.\textsuperscript{69} The General Secretary gave an overview of the ideas and plans laid out in the New Edition of the Party Program in late October 1985,

\textsuperscript{69} Iur’eva, \textit{Dnevnik kul’turnoi devushki}, 111.
which would have been new for those who had not squinted their eyes to peruse the small type of the document in national newspapers. The sixth and final section of his speech, delivered as the dull winter sun receded beyond the horizon, addressed letters from Soviet people on the New Edition of the Party Program. This section of his speech brought the conversation full circle and constituted the final part of the nation-wide discussion of the pre-Congress documents: the report back to the people. He spoke to the nearly six-thousand letters from Soviet citizens that poured into the Letter Department of the Central Committee between October 1985 and February 1986.70

Gorbachev would not have had time to read all six-thousand letters from his constituents. For an analysis of the mail, he was depended on the excruciatingly detail-oriented work of the Letter Department of the Central Committee. The office staff of likely three dozen people would have opened the mail, read it, and composed summaries of each letter. They would have typed up letters that stood out in their entirety. Then the mail would be subject to various analyses. For letters responding to the New Edition, staff of the letter department drew up charts that indicated where the letter writer lived, their name, profession and Party status; the Part and section of the New Edition the letter addressed; and brief summaries, with quotations from the letter, of each suggestion made.71 The letter department also would have composed narrative summaries of the mail. The charts and summaries were then sent to the General Secretary and Politburo, who perused letters in these forms at the end of each month and on the eve of the Twenty-Seventh Party Congress.

---

70 It is unclear if this number included all the letters sent to newspaper like Komsomol’skaja pravda and other press organs, but it would not be surprising if—particularly for this important political discussion—editorial boards forwarded letters with specific responses to and recommendations for the New Edition directly to the Letter Department of the Central Committee.

71 See RGANI, f. 100, op. 1, d. 156.
Overall, the popular response to the New Edition was positive. “Communists, Soviet people,” Gorbachev stated, “support the Party line on acceleration (uskorenie) of socio-economic development of the country, the Program’s decisive orientation towards Communist perspectives, [and] the strengthening of peace on Earth.” He went on to analyze the contents of the letters, focusing on tropes in the letters and responding to the questions, concerns and suggestions that turned up most frequently. According to the General Secretary, the first notable suggestion from letter-writers was to call the New Edition the Fourth Party Program. Gorbachev rejected the suggestion. He stated that the situation was unlike previous Programs, each of which had just one edition. He suggested that as in the Third Party Program, the Soviet Union maintained its commitment to socialism and to achieving Communism and insisted that the New Edition merely accounted for the ways the USSR and the world at larger had changed since 1961. A second point on which letters focused was the language around “developed socialism,” which the New Edition left out. Some people approved of the absence, implying that the language was outdated, while others supported its use. Gorbachev argued that the USSR had already achieved “developed socialism,” and that what they now needed to do was set their sights not on what had been accomplished but what was still left to do: namely, “establishing the paths and methods of acceleration (uskorenie) of socio-economic progress, to which qualitative changes in variegated spheres of life were connected.” Finally, letter writers commented on the length of the New Edition. Some wanted more

---

73 Ibid., 92-93.
74 Ibid., 93-94.
details, others wanted far fewer and a crisp concise statement of the ideals and purpose of the CPSU. Gorbachev defended all sixty-six pages, saying it was just the right length.\footnote{Ibid., 94.}

The letters served a significant purpose for the government: they shed light on public opinion and gave a sense of popular response to the documents that would guide the Party into the future. Political leaders and press workers also claimed that letters were a critical part of Soviet democracy. But did letters actually impact the documents they discussed? Certainly, there is evidence that letter writers believed their words made a difference. I.D. Fainerman, doctor of technical sciences from Ukraine, wrote in his letter to the Central Committee that his words expressed in a letter on Party documents before the 26th Party Congress in 1981 impacted those documents and he hoped that his thoughts on the New Edition would do so as well.\footnote{RGANI, f. 100, op. 1, d. 156, l. 6-7.} A side-by-side reading of the draft of the New Edition published in Pravda on October 26, 1985 and the New Edition approved by and published after the Twenty-Seventh Party Congress suggests that there were indeed changes between the two drafts. Most of them were minor edits, but nearly every substantive change was located in Part Two. It is impossible to establish what directly caused the changes, but there is some correlation between even minor changes and the points raised by even by those who wrote in to Komsomol’skaia pravda.

There are at least three examples of such correlation. The most significant change was to the statement on atheism, discussed in letters from D. Kshibekov and Iu. Radianskii. In the October 1985 draft, the paragraph stated: “In support of the rigorous observation of the constitutional guarantee of freedom of conscience, the Party condemns attempts to use religion to the detriment of the interests of society and the person
(lichnost’). The true path of the eradication of religious superstitions is the heightening of labor and social activity of people, their enlightenment, creation, and broad distribution of new Soviet rituals.”77 The paragraph following “Atheistic education” in the final draft of the New Edition added the importance of “the scientific-materialist worldview” and of not allowing the prejudices of believers to influence the Soviet position on religion—precisely the points that Iu. Radianskii had made in his letter.78 Other changes that correlated to the discussion in letters—at least those published in Komsomol’skaia—were much more minor. As Ia. Stepanova and A. Zamareva had suggested, a special note on orphanages was included in the final draft. In the October 1985 draft, a paragraph on the general welfare of youth said nothing about orphans, but in the final draft, that paragraph was edited to mention this groups specifically as a youth group worthy of special attention.79 As V. Efremov suggested, the approved draft also added a note on working mothers, noting the importance of balance between work carried out inside and outside the home.80

As the first day of the Twenty-Seventh Party Congress drew to a close, delegates gathered outside the Kremlin State Palace. In a line headed up by Gorbachev they moved east across the inner sanctum of the Kremlin through a gate passing onto Red Square. Turning to their right, they walked towards the Mausoleum. They entered the building and filed past the embalmed body of Vladimir Lenin. The highly ceremonious end to the first day of the Congress reiterated the same point Gorbachev made throughout his long

---

77 Pravda No 299 (26 October 1985), 5.
78 Materialy XXVII S’ezda Kommunisticheskoi Partii Sovetskogo Soiuza, 165.
79 Compare Pravda No 299 (26 October 1985), 4 and Materialy XXVII S’ezda Kommunisticheskoi Partii Sovetskogo Soiuza, 154.
80 Compare Pravda No 299 (26 October 1985), 4 and Materialy XXVII S’ezda Kommunisticheskoi Partii Sovetskogo Soiuza, 154.
speech and the capstone of the New Edition: the Soviet Union would undergo acceleration of socio-economic development while maintaining a steadfast commitment to the ideals of socialism and the Leninist vision.

Over the course of the ten-day conference, Party leaders from across the Soviet Union and around the world addressed their Soviet audience. Yeltsin summarized the mood of the gathering in his speech. He reminded his listeners of a Party conference in Lenin’s day, where the revolutionary leader inspired bold speeches and rigorous discussion. Some were skeptical of Lenin’s agenda, but the Soviet founder recognized, as Yeltsin quoted, “This I understand! This is life!” The up-and-coming Party leader compared the present day to the historical conference. “Many years have passed since then,” he stated, “[but] with satisfaction, it is possible to remark: at our congress, there is again the atmosphere of that Bolshevik spirit, Leninist optimism, the call to struggle against the old [and] expired in the name of the new.”81 Yeltsin’s choice of historical comparison served the dual purpose of drawing a parallel between the present time and Lenin’s day and of bolster the foundation on which reformers launched Perestroika: Leninist renewal. His statement further suggested that already in early 1986, Gorbachev-era leaders had achieved an excitement about socialism that matched the enthusiasm only of the period of revolution.

The Congress adjourned on March 6, 1986. All forms of media were used in days following the end of the Congress to propagate information about it. The Komsomol even organized an agitation flight of a helicopter in Iakutia and other hard to reach regions to

---

ensure news of the Congress landed everywhere.\textsuperscript{82} Gorbachev hoped that the Twenty-Seventh Party Congress, including the discussion of pre-Congress materials in the days before and during the Congress would propel the Soviet population to action. He dreamed the Congress would further the moral aims at the heart of reform—namely, that it would inspire Soviet people to become actively engaged in political and social affairs.

In some places, Gorbachev’s dreams came true. In the small town of Malaia Viska, participants in the high school debate team (\textit{politklub}) “Youth” soaked up the Congress materials like sponges. Throughout the Congress, they paid special attention to A.N. Yakovlev, who was, like many others, brought into the upper echelons of Soviet power under Gorbachev. By February 1986 he was head of the Department of Propaganda and played a leading role in generating the ideology of Perestroika. Yakovlev’s relationship to “Youth” appeared to be even older than his work in Moscow. A decade earlier, he had sent the student members of the group at that time a letter encouraging their debate team activities. Since then, the students considered him a kind of patron saint.

On March 15, 1986 club participants wrote Yakovlev to express their enthusiasm for the Twenty-Seventh Party Congress. They begged him to “send our school one copy of the Program and Statutes of the CPSU with your signature, several photos showing the work of the Twenty-Seventh Party Congress for our bulletin board in our ideological complex, and, if possible, a description of your personal experience (\textit{vospominaniia}) as a delegate and even one of your many books for our library.”\textsuperscript{83} In return, they sent him three photographs of them. One showed two club members reading the March 10, 1986

\textsuperscript{82} RGAPSI, f. M-1, op. 136, d. 224s, l. 142.
\textsuperscript{83} GARF, f. R-10063, op. 2, d. 522, l. 7 (back).
issue of *Pravda* in front of the bulletin board where a teacher hung newspaper articles. A bold headline stretched across the page one girl held in her hands: “In a Sudden Revolution” (*Na krutom perelome*), it read. They could have picked any page, yet by deciding on this one, and photographing themselves together with the headline, they inscribed themselves on the momentous events of the day (Images 2.2-2.3).⁸⁴

At the Red October Chocolate Factory, rank and file workers were similarly propelled into action. Chairman of the local trade union L.S. Kolodii reported that the number of sick days went down 10.2% in the first eight months of 1986 by comparison with the same time period the previous year.⁸⁵ V. Tretiakova, chairman of the People’s Control in the chocolate workshop, observed fewer instances of lateness among chocolatiers. While there were 25 instances of lateness in her workshop in January 1986, she reported that after the Twenty-Seventh Party Congress there were only 2 in March

---

⁸⁴ GARF, f. R-10063, op. 2, d. 522, l. 8-10.
⁸⁵ “Protokol zasedaniia partkoma No 25 ot 28 avgusta 1986 g.” TsAOPIM, f. 395, op. 3, d. 12, l. 21.
and none in April. Furthermore, workers repeatedly published articles in the factory newspaper *Nasha Pravda*, calling their fellow laborers “to think and act in new ways” and “to work on their conscience.” The statistics and other materials reported by Kolodii in a meeting and others in the factory newspaper do not definitively show that rank and file workers were transformed by the Twenty-Seventh Party Congress, but they suggest that they perceived the period as transformative.

But not everyone was as inspired as Gorbachev had hoped. Moscow intellectual Tatiana Yurieva listened to the nearly all conference proceedings on the radio. On the first day of the Congress she noted in her diary: “They [delegates] just took a break—we were thrown into a flutter (vspanosilis’): nothing has happened—at all. But no, just now he [Gorbachev] started up again. He just said that the most important thing for the present moment are the lessons of truth. . .” The ellipsis communicated just as much as her words: they embodied disbelief and curiosity, suspicion and hope. On February 28, 1986 she commented again on the Congress: “The Congress continues where everyone’s talking about changes. Will they actually affect our lives—that is the question. Is anyone capable of saying the thing that needs to be said? Is anyone capable of doing anything?” Finally, on March 1, 1986, she wrote: “It’s spring, but nothing in nature is in bloom. And here at the Congress they suggest that new winds are blowing at full strength, but for some reason we don’t feel them. Everything’s the same outside, everything the same. Flags just flutter and radios cluck.” Though she remained skeptical of the Party’s

---

88 Iur’eva, *Dnevnik kul’turnoi devushki*, 111.
89 Ibid., 112.
90 Ibid., 112.
promises, the fact that she listened to ten days of long speeches so closely suggests she was remarkably engaged in contemporary Soviet political discourse. As Yeltsin said of Lenin’s day, even the skeptics were listening.

Sociologically speaking, Yurieva differed significantly from the youthful participants in Malaia Viska’s debate team and the rank-and-file workers at the chocolate factory. She was a scholar and intellectual and floated in skeptically engaged circles in the largest city in Eurasia. But her response to the conference is equally important. The debate team in Malaia Viska and Yurieva illuminate two ends of a spectrum of enthusiasm. Both are equally true—along with a whole range between. This range helps make at least one thing clear: 1986 was an important year in the course of reform, particularly in terms of peaking attention, turning heads. It did not mark the peak of enthusiasm or activation, but growing interest in the reform project surrounding the New Edition of the Party Program and the Twenty-Seventh Party Congress helps understand the years that followed. This is the case not despite the fact that but because reformers attempted to work through the Party and reinvigorate the socialist vision.

Conclusion

The Party stood at the center of Gorbachev’s early plan to put the Soviet Union on a new course. If he could activate its members, then their energy could inspire the rest of the country to action. To what extent was this plan realistic? There is the sense in many studies of the Soviet Union that by the time Gorbachev came to power, the Communist Party was already waning, if not in strength than certainly in the level of interest it could inspire across society. Yet the fact that the Party documents drafted in late 1985 and the
Twenty-Seventh Party Congress turned out such engagement suggests just the opposite. The same is true when looking at the number of people affiliated with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. According to a report published by the Central Committee, the Party had 16,732,408 members and 698,005 candidate members in 1981, for a total of 17,430,413 Communists. By 1986, the number of members had risen to 18,288,786 and the number of candidate members to 715,592, equaling 19,004,378 members total. By 1988, the number of members had gone up 464,408 to a total of 19,486,786 members. By 1989, the Party ranks increased by 19,036 from its 1988 membership to a total of 19,487,822 members.\(^91\)

These numbers tell us, on the one hand, that the rate of increase in Party membership waned from 1981 to 1989; but, on the other hand, they suggest that four years into Gorbachev’s rule the Party was larger than ever. After the February Revolution in 1917, Social Democrats could only dream of such membership. In May 1917 that Party member P. Smilga, wrote in Pravda that membership was increasing at an unprecedented level. Whereas before February-March 1917 the Party included mere thousands, in the few months after it exceeded a hundred thousand.\(^92\) By 1989, there were nearly 20 million Party members. The Soviet Communist Party was finally a mass organization. According to the 1989 Soviet census, the population that year included 286,730,817 people across all the republics.\(^93\) Thus roughly 6.8 percent of the entire population carried Party cards. The number is large considering the process for entering the Party was a

---

92 P. Smilga, “Kak stroit’ organizatsiiu,” Pravda, No 60 (31 May 1917), 5.
taxing process. It required years of participation in the Komsomol, then getting the support of one’s workplace, and passing an interview administered by one’s colleagues.

While it seems unlikely from the post-Soviet perspective that the Party could be the vanguard of far-reaching change in the Soviet Union, at the time it like a legitimate possibility. In the wake of the Twenty-Seventh Party Congress, it even appeared to be reality. Party members seemed to respond well to the anti-alcohol campaign. Gorbachev himself did not drink, putting a sober face on Party leadership. New appointments to key Party positions and a rash of retirements further suggested that change within the Party was possible. Young active appointees put a youthful face on socialism and suggested that the Party had infinite possibilities. At least for the moment, it seemed that the Party really could inspire Soviet people from Riga to Tashkent to become actively engaged members of Soviet society. In short, it seemed as if the Party, slightly cleaned up, would carry out the moral revolution about which reformers dreamed.
CHAPTER THREE
Intelligentsia as Truth Teller

As delegates convened in the State Kremlin Palace for the Twenty-Seventh Party Conference, another group congregated several blocks away at the Leninskii Komsomolskii Theater on Chekhov Street in Moscow. Feverishly discussing politics, spectators lined up to see Mikhail Shatrov’s new play “Dictatorship of Conscience,” one of the most hotly contested and fiercely discussed cultural productions of 1986.1 The play was set in the editorial board office of an unnamed national youth newspaper. In the opening scene, newspaper staff met to discuss the content of the most recent issue. As editor-in-chief Ivan Batashov ended the meeting, the journalist Svetlana Savel’eva approached him with a request. Young readers had recently forwarded her an article from 1920 that described a “trial against Lenin” in a small town where inhabitants were eager to sort out the ideas of the revolutionary leader for themselves.2 Svetlana said she found a corresponding script in the archive and asked to publish it in the upcoming issue. Batashov unequivocally ruled it out, but suggested she explore the script with colleagues.

In another room, Svetlana and her colleagues doled out parts to act out the script. Some became members of the prosecution, others the defense. Coincidentally entering at this point, Batashov was convinced to play the judge. Prosecutors and defenders then

---


2 This article did in fact appear in Pravda on April 22, 1920. See Pravda No 85 (22 April 1920), 2.
called witnesses to the stand to testify to the content, quality, and consequences of
Lenin’s ideas. Blurring the lines between past and present, history and fiction, witnesses
included the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill; the fictional character
Verkhovenskii from Dostoyevskii’s *Devils*; Andre Marty, a French Communist and
Stalinist involved in the Spanish Civil War; and the author Ernest Hemingway along with
four characters from his novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. The trial concluded with the
testimony of Natasha Davydova, a schoolgirl living in Gorbachev’s Soviet Union. She
had written a letter to *Komsomolskaia pravda* about classmates who constantly engaged
in doublespeak and called for more honest engagement of Soviet values. Witnesses
illuminated a variety of positions on Lenin’s ideas, but Natasha’s carried the trial: Lenin’s
ideas were still worthwhile if correctly engaged, she suggested. In the closing scene,
Svetlana approached Batashov and asked again to publish the play in the newspaper.
Finally, he acquiesced.3

Shatrov’s “Dictatorship of Conscience” symbolized the great changes taking
place in the Soviet Union around the Twenty-Seventh Party Conference with respect to
one segment of the population in particular: the intelligentsia. In an attempt to make the
population at large co-producers of Perestroika, reformers reserved a prominent place for
members of this group. Traditionally, the intelligentsia acted as a moral guide for Russian
society. In the late Imperial period, the identity of the intelligentsia took shape around the
idea that members of this group should strive to improve the quality of society. Though
the role of intellectuals undoubtedly changed in the Soviet period, Soviet leaders even in
the 1930s recognized the importance of this group when calling writers “engineers of the
human soul.” During Perestroika, reformers continued to assign a position of moral guide

to the intelligentsia. In the anti-alcohol campaign, only members of this group remained un tarnished by accusations of drunken lifestyles. Reformers asked that intellectuals play a part in curing Soviet society of the problem of alcoholism by studying the issue and offering suggestions for addressing it. While reformers invited the intelligentsia to participate in reform process, plays like Shatrov’s “Dictatorship of Conscience” offer another important perspective: intellectuals required very little prodding from reformers to become co-producers of social change. The intelligentsia largely mobilized itself for Perestroika.

Activating the Press

Among the first members of the intelligentsia to be called on to further reform were press workers. Published periodicals, the radio and television had long been closely intertwined with state power. The connection seemed natural, for, on the one hand, the press was an important means of acting on the consciousness and conscience of the population, and, on the other, the Party had long been seen as the moral authority of the country and the press as its mouthpiece. As early as the April (1985) Plenum, Gorbachev stated that the media would play an important role in guiding the country. At the 27th Party Conference he took this point even further. “The activities of the media have now taken on an even bigger significance,” he stated. “The Central Committee sees in it an instrument of creation, a mouthpiece of an all-party perspective that is incompatible with regionalism.” His point on the unifying role of the press was not that new. But he went

---

4 “O merakh po preodoleniu p’ianstva i alkogolizma,” Komsomol’skaia pravda No. 112 (Friday, May 17, 1985), 1.
5 Materialy plenuma TsK KPSS 23 aprelia 1985 goda (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1985), 21-22.
“The more fertile the work of the media is,” he said, “the more thought-provoking and efficient it is [for readers] and the less [readers] search for coincidental sensations.”

The General Secretary’s words were matched by significant action at the 27th Party Conference, as swift personnel changes spilled over from the upper echelons of power to the organs of mass information. There was a slew of new appointments to the editorial staffs of numerous major national periodicals. The boundlessly energetic I.T. Frolov replaced R.N. Kosolapov as editor in chief of Kommunist, a theoretical journal of the Central Committee of the CPSU. The influential V.V. Chikin replaced M.F. Nenashev at Sovetskaia Rossiia, a national daily newspaper of the Central Committee of the Russian Republic. A few months later in May 1986 V.A. Korotich replaced A.V. Safronov as editor in chief of the glossy magazine Ogonek, and under his tutelage this publication would become the most popular reading material in the USSR. The numerous editorial appointments underscored Gorbachev’s attempt to use the press to get the country moving on the new course.

Directly following the 27th Party Conference on March 14, 1986, Gorbachev met with leading members of the media to explain in further depth how he wanted the press, radio and television to participate in reform. “The number one task for party committees and the media,” he stated, is to preserve “the atmosphere leading up to the Conference and that reigned at the Conference.” Indeed, as the upbeat tempo of work at the Red October Chocolate Factory and the letter from the debate team at Malaia Viska demonstrated, the Conference did invoke an unusually enthusiastic atmosphere. But as Yurieva’s diary suggests, there were people who remained unmoved, too. Gorbachev

---

6 “Soveshchanie v TsK KPSS s rukovoditeliami sredstv massovoi informatsii (14 marta 1986 g.),” RGANI, f. 9, op. 5, d. 43, l. 12.
encouraged press workers to act on everyone. “We need a burst of energy,” he announced. “We need to search near and far, like bees drawing nectar and turning it to honey, for new cutting-edge phenomena, synthesizing and publicizing them.” He continued: “It’s important that the people […] see support for good work of collectives, brigades, the worker, the collective farmer, engineer, scholar. You have to convey all this in the media so that people see that here’s how you have to work.”

Gorbachev was talking about changing average Soviet citizens (“nectar”) into activated, enthusiastic people—the new Soviet person (“honey”). The transformation mechanism was plentiful examples of the kind of person they should aspire to be(e).

The full transcript of the meeting sheds light on the range of relationships between the government and the press in early 1986. In response to Gorbachev’s call for journalists and media workers to activate people and generate deeply interesting materials, an unnamed attendee called out from the audience, “The censors here are strong.” Several other voices spoke out acknowledged the general ineffectiveness of the press. In response to the anonymous media worker that interrupted him, Gorbachev stated “our censor is Party-mindedness, citizen-mindedness, [and] the conscience of the editor.”

In a reconciliatory tone, V.G. Afanasiev, editor in chief of Pravda, called for a broad new law on the press. He said that one had long been in the works—that he himself helped draft it. But nobody could say what happened to it. To Afanasiev, Gorbachev responded that “a far-reaching document on criticism and self-criticism” was still on the

---

7 Ibid., ll. 19-20.
8 Ibid., l. 36.
9 Ibid., l. 41.
10 Ibid., l. 36.
11 Ibid., l. 40.
Without knowing more about the unnamed critics in Gorbachev’s audience, it’s difficult to know exactly how to interpret their remarks, but it would be wrong to assume their words were masked demands for liberal-capitalist “freedom of the press.” Perhaps just the opposite. Especially in the case of Afanasiev, his response suggests he was genuinely excited about Gorbachev’s invitation to change the press and was thinking through the preconditions for doing so.

Ivan Frolov becomes energetic editor in chief of Kommunist, the theoretical mouthpiece of the Communist Party. Shortly after his appointment, Frolov green-lighted a controversial article by the Novosibirsk economist Tatiana Zaslavskaiia.\(^\text{13}\) Titled “The Human Factor in Economic Development and Social Justice,” her essay proposed charging based on use for education, housing, and even medical care, which were largely free for Soviet citizens. She also recommended eliminating state subsidies on meat and milk products.\(^\text{14}\) To cover the higher cost of living, she suggested increasing incomes. She offered these suggestions in the spirit of reform: she argued they would activate the person, making each one more disciplined, responsible, and engaged in the workplace and in private life. Originally, she even titled her essay “Activation of the Person and Social Justice.” Records of editorial board meetings suggest many did not want to publish her essay because it was too controversial. Frolov argued to publish it precisely for that

---

\(^\text{12}\) Ibid., l. 40.

\(^\text{13}\) Zaslavskaiia was best known for the “Novosibirsk Report,” a document written up by a group of economists outside of the city Novosibirsk that included recommendations for improving the Soviet economy, especially the agricultural sector. Brezhnev had requested the study shortly before his death. The report was leaked to the Cold-War Western press, which used it to great propagandistic ends, suggesting (inaccurately) that the Soviet economy was on its death bed.

\(^\text{14}\) Zaslavskaiia, “Chelovecheskii faktor razvitiia ekonomiki i sotsial’naia spravedlivost’,” Kommunist 13 (September 1986), 68-69, 72.
reason. “Why publish anything,” he asked, “if it does not generate conversation?”

Indeed, letters from readers poured into the editorial offices of Kommunist. The letter department archived more than 800 pages of written responses, which Frolov interpreted as a sign that the article in part accomplished his goal and the aim of reform in general: it made readers actively engaged.

Readers’ letters show that they vehemently opposed Zaslavskaiia’s proposal to charge for basic social services, which they saw not as gifts but entitlements at the heart of the social contract. Yet by and large, readers did not criticize her proposal on the grounds that it was objectively immoral. Rather, they got down to the more basic point she was making about whether or not charging for social services would effectively activate the population. A.N. Kondrashev, an expert on the Soviet near abroad, suggested that Zaslavskaiia’s proposal would give way to the wrong kind of activation. He pointed out in his letter that Czechoslovakia and Poland were forced to raise milk and meat prices in the 1970s and 1980s, and that in each case popular protests nearly dismantled the state. Was that the kind of activation the state wanted?, he asked. Another letter from M.P. Bundin, Party member and veteran of war and labor, disputed the means Zaslavskaiia proposed for activating the citizen. “For the Soviet person,” he wrote, “as a fully developed person (lichenost’) and sincere caretaker of a country built on the foundations of developed socialism and communism, the most important thing, in my opinion, is not the global-individual material interest [. . .], but the ideological-political level (consciousness) of the person, as well as moral stimulants, which express the primacy of

---

15 “Protokol № 30 zasedaniia redaktsionnoi kollegii zhurnala ‘Kommunist’ ot 16 iiulia 1986,” RGASPI, f. 599, op. 1, d. 941, l. 103.
16 A. N. Kondrashev to Kommunist, received 12 November 1986, RGASPI, f. 599, op. 1, d. 1018, l. 182.
the social over the individual (lichnyi).”\textsuperscript{17} While readers by and large disagreed with Zaslavskaya, their letters suggest they shared her political vision and the vision at the heart of reform itself.

In order for Gorbachev to work through the Party to activate society at large, press workers were among the most important Party workers he could recruited to his cause. Kommunist undoubtedly differed from other Soviet periodicals, but the point the case study makes is nonetheless significant and representative: it suggests that in the wake of the 27\textsuperscript{th} Party Conference, the Soviet press became a fierce advocate of reform.

\textbf{From the Letter Department to the Stage}

Shatrov’s “Dictatorship of Conscience” became one of the most talked about cultural productions of 1986. The playwright came from a privileged family of engineers in Moscow. Born Mikhail Sharmak, he adopted the pseudonym Shatrov in the mid-1950s when he took his first job at the Central Children’s Theater in Moscow under the director O.N. Efremov. Shatrov began his career in the years surrounding the Twentieth Party Conference, where Khruschev denounced Stalin’s cult of personality. He wrote “Clean Hands” in 1955 and the Leninist play “By the Name of Revolution” in 1957. Lenin frequently figured as the main subject of his plays, including “July Sixth” (1964), “Bolsheviks” (1968), “Blue Horses on Red Grass” (1979), “So We will Victor!” (1982), “Dictatorship of Conscience” (1986), “The World of Brest” (1987), and “Onward… Onward… Onward!” (1988). These works were often commissioned, as was “Bolsheviks” in the 1960s by the journal Sovremennik.

\textsuperscript{17} M. P. Bundin to Kommunist, received 18 December 1986, RGASPI, f. 599, op., 1, d. 1017, l. 80.
The topic of “Dictatorship of Conscience” demonstrates that Shatrov’s plays were not always easy. The production generated great controversy, which the playwright anticipated in the play itself. When the journalists Svetlana Savel’eva presented the idea of publishing the script to Batashov in the opening scene, an assistant to the editor-in-chief cringed. “For me personally,” she said, “the very combination of words ‘trial against Lenin’ is offensive.” Many theaters banned the production from their stages. The play challenged Soviet sensibilities about the extent to which it was okay to question Lenin. Since the Twentieth Party Conference (1956), it was more common to question Stalin’s rule, but Lenin remained untouchable. Many believed the play threatened the ideological foundations of the Soviet Union. Perhaps for this reason, Shatrov became a symbol of cultural glasnost in the Cold-War West, where glasnost was often equated with freedom of speech.

Despite the controversy, it appears that Shatrov sought not to subvert but to engage the heightened political discourse engulfing the Soviet Union—a position he shows through the character Natasha Davydova, who wrote a letter to Komsomol’skaia pravda. In her letter, Natasha described classmates who engaged in “double thinking”—that is, of speaking Party language at Komsomol meetings but then saying and doing otherwise in their free time. Natasha called for more sincere engagement of Leninism. When she was called to the stand, the defense asked her about her letter. “What did you feel when you saw your letter in the newspaper?,” asked Romanenko. “Fear,” said Natasha, “but I wasn’t afraid.” “What would you like to encourage young people to do?,” asked the defender. Natasha responded: “My letter is not a call to write a letter. My letter is a call to not be silent (ne molchat’).” Here her words resonated with Gorbachev’s

appeal to glasnost. “It seems to me that your question is weak, out of place,” Natasha told Romanenko. “Such things each [person] decides for himself in line with his understanding of responsibility.” Also in line with the discourse of reform, she called for originality and creativity from each person, and demonstrated her own by challenging the defender’s questions.19

She also called for responsibility, which was not the only way that Shatrov used the character Natasha to engage the moral language of reform. Romanenko said he did not understand her point on how she wanted her peers to respond to her letter, to which she replied, “I’ll say it differently: by conscience.” She went on to describe her grandmother, a worker who became a Bolshevik in 1916 and had lived nearly an entire century. The grandmother recalled a particularly troubling situation in her youth, where one of her colleagues was verbally attacked in a workplace meeting. She doubted the veracity of the attack, but she was silent (somnevalas’; no promolchala). Natasha’s grandmother regretted not speaking up and resolved to work on herself. She told her granddaughter: “in the future there will remain only one dictatorship—the dictatorship of conscience.” Natasha asked her where to begin. “Don’t say things you don’t believe in, don’t say things you don’t [really] think,” her grandmother advised. “It’s that simple?,” asked Romanenko. “Just the opposite,” said Natasha, “it’s very difficult. But there is no other path.” 20

When Natasha was brought to the stand, she advised the defender: “Relax, don’t play the role of a lawyer, be yourself, then it will be easier for me.” “Umnitsa!,”

Romanenko replied, “Smart!” After Natasha described her grandmother, the journalists

20 Ibid., 31.
playing members of the court then became the actors playing the journalists. It was a moment of unmasking. The actors (speaking as themselves) then discussed their relationship to the roles they enacted in the play within the play. In the script printed in *Teatr* in June 1986, Shatrov designated this section an area for improvisation, but the scripted lines of the characters—just one variation on what they might have said—provides insight into what the playwright imagined. In the script, the actor playing Batashov (editor in chief, judge) said, “I like the play, but to hell with my part!” The actor playing Winston Churchill (a witness called on by the prosecution) stated, “I would gladly speak the truth, if nothing threatened me. The government needs to put all its strength towards cultivating the safety of the person who speaks the truth.”

Thus, “Dictatorship of Conscience” rigorously engaged the reform agenda. While the play was controversial, the character Natasha leaves little doubt about Shatrov’s intentions with the play. Hardly an attempt to subvert the Soviet government, he engaged the discourse of reform and encouraged it to go further—the “perfection of Perestroika,” as Gorbachev would have put it. The play also made an important point about letter writing and letters to *Komsomol’skaia pravda* in particular. It is unclear if Shatrov based the character Natasha Davydova on a real person or a letter that was really published in KP. Either way, the embodiment of the play’s main message in a person who wrote a letter to this newspaper underscores the cultural, social, and political significance of letter writing during Perestroika and of letters to *Komsomol’skaia pravda* in particular.

There are no traces of KP’s overt response to the production of “Dictatorship of Conscience,” but it appears that important cultural works left an impression on the newspaper. Shatrov’s play was likely foremost among them, given its dramatization of
the work life a national youth newspaper and the inclusion of a character who wrote a letter to KP. In the days following the Twenty-Seventh Party Conference, editors and journalists at *Komsomol'skaia pravda* noted their stiff competition for peaking the attention of the Soviet population. At a meeting on March 27, 1986, editor in chief G.N. Seleznev berated the department of literature and arts in particular for lackluster publications. “There’s no good material, no submissions,” he stated. V. S. Lipatov, the editor of the department of literature and art, accepted the criticism. “The creativity of the department needed to be activated,” he stated.

Shatrov’s play was widely interpreted as support for the events unfolding in the Soviet government. “Shatrov completed his assignment in full: to make us debate and ruminate upon the most essential problems of the year 1986,” stated Mikhail Kozhkin, graduate student in history at Moscow State University, in a roundtable discussion. Arts critic A. Svobodin wrote in *Literaturnaia gazeta* that “the performance responds to the spirit of the straight-forward, open discussions that the Party began at the April (1985) Plenum and continued at the Twenty-Seventh [Party] Conference.” G.A. Borovik, head of the Soviet Writers Union and editor-in-chief of *Teatr*, concurred. The play “artistically supported the undying, unusually relevant meaning of Lenin’s ideas.” It showed that “Lenin’s philosophic-political, socio-economic program demands that to be implemented in life requires not so many pledges in loyalty as innovation, courage, maturity of thought, [and] intensive, courageous creativity.” It appeared that even Gorbachev

---

21 TsAOPIM, f. P-1968, op. 1, d. 73, l. 29.
22 Ibid., l. 30.
23 “’Spory i razmyshlenia’ prodolzhaiutsia,” *Teatr* No 11 (November 1986), 74.
agreed with this assessment, as he met Shatrov at a meeting following the Twenty-Seventh Party Conference.26

The meeting was likely the gathering of theater workers in the Central Committee in April 1986. Participants in the meeting included the artists O.N. Efremov (Shatrov’s first boss), K.Iu Lavrov, P.L. Monastyrskii, and V.N. Pluchek; the Minister of Culture of Ukraine Iu.A. Olenenko; the Georgian artist T.N. Chkheidze; the Belorussian artist M.G. Zakharevich; head of the Writers’ Union G.A. Borovik; and Shatrov. Politburo member and Central Committee Secretary E.K. Ligachev delivered the keynote speech, which grew out of the conviction that “we need as much socialism as possible, maximum socialism! I think that this is important for all spheres of life, including the spiritual (dukhovnyi).”27 He underscored the moral dimension of Perestroika and the potential of theater to “lay bare [and] highlight the conflicts along the path of perestroika [and] showing the process of restructuring (perestroika) the consciousness of people.” He noted that he had seen Shatrov’s “Dictatorship of Conscience,” among several other new productions, and praised it for the way it acted on people’s minds.28 Yet he warned that not all theater did so. He reminded his audience of the Twenty-Seventh Party Conference. There, “the Party called literature and art to reflect the truth and only the truth. Truth of that kind exists even in the theater. But we need not one-sided truth, we need the whole truth. This is of principle importance.”29

26 Shatrov mentioned the meeting in his speech at Writers Union Conference. “Govoriat uchastniki zasedania,” Teatr No 11 (November 1986), 44.
28 Ibid., 4.
29 Ibid., 3.
Unhinging the Creative Unions

As the year marched on, reformers continued to look to intellectuals and the arts in particular to encourage reform along. To this end the personnel shifts that took place over the previous year in the highest ranks of political leadership and throughout 1986 in the editorial boards of national periodicals spilled over into the creative unions. At Politburo meeting on June 3, 1986, Soviet leaders focused on restructuring the Soviet Writers’ Union. A.N. Yakovlev offered suggestions for its leadership: “We should move Markov (First Secretary of the Writers’ Union) up to Chairman. And make Bondarev First Secretary,” he stated. “An emergency variation: make Zalygin Chairman and Karpov First Secretary. And staff the cabinet with mainly young people: Evtushenko, Voznesenskii. Also Rozov, Zalygin, Baklanov. From the critics, D’iakov, Nikolaev.” “Markov as Chairman. . .” Gorbachev pensively replied, “in order not to play up to demagogues. In the cabinet: Zalygin, Bykov, Baklanov, Bondarev, Aitmatov, Evtushenko.” They continued to discuss. Medvedv didn’t approve of Karpov. Ligachev thought it too early to make Bondarev Chairman. Bobkov, the First Assistant Chairman of the KGB, pointed out that installing Bondarev would cause an affront. In the face of indecision, Gorbachev concluded the meeting: “Let them decide for themselves.”

It is unclear to what extent the creative unions were left to change up their leadership during Perestroika, yet events signaled that significant changes did indeed take place. While Shatrov’s “Dictatorship of Conscience” might, like his other Leninist plays, have appeared before Perestroika, there were works that were explicitly banned in earlier years that began to appear under new leadership in the creative unions. One such work included the novel Children of the Arbat by Anatolii Rybakov. Born in a Ukrainian
village in 1911, Rybakov’s family moved to Moscow during a period of warfare and famine in 1919. They received housing on the Arbat Street, traditionally home to the Russian intelligentsia and the setting that inspired *Children of the Arbat*. He received part of his secondary education at the Moscow [opytno-pokazatel’noi] School-Commune, started by Komsomol members who had returned from the Civil War. In the early 1930s he studied at the Moscow Institute of Transportation Engineering until November 5, 1933, when he was arrested for “counterrevolutionary agitation and propaganda” and sentenced to 3 years in prison. After his release he lived in exile, where he worked as an engineer. He began his writing career after serving in World War II, his first pieces of fiction coming out in literary journals in the 1950s. He was rehabilitated on in 1960, the same decade in which he wrote *Children of the Arbat*.

Set in Stalin’s Soviet Union in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the novel was a collective fictional biography that traced the lives of young people growing up on the Arbat Street in Moscow, all of them children of Russian intellectuals except for one, Yuri Sharok. He came from a family of artisans who received an apartment on the Arbat in the late 1920s. Somewhat of an outcast among his friends and an outlier in the high school Komsomol cell, Yuri was nonetheless brought into the Party apparatus and accelerated through the ranks. Rybakov juxtaposed his careerism with Sasha Pankratov, a dedicated student and active leader of the school Komsomol cell. After a confrontation with one teacher whom he accused of not supporting the Revolution enough, Sasha was dismissed from his position in the Komsomol, expelled from school, and eventually imprisoned and exiled.30

The lives of the children of the Arbat were spliced with the drama in the upper echelons of the state, which culminated in the murder of Sergei Kirov, Leningrad Party Chairman, in 1934—the event that typically marks the onset of the bloodiest period of purges in Soviet history that peaked in 1937-1938. Under Khrushchev in the early 1960s, a commission was established to ascertain the causes of Kirov’s death and to investigate who in particular was responsible. There were multiple theories, but in the end, the commission never reached an official conclusion. Its work simply disappeared from national media.\footnote{Matthew E. Lenoe, \textit{The Kirov Murder and Soviet History} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).} In \textit{Children of the Arbat}, Rybakov contentiously linked Kirov’s death to Stalin himself. The novel ultimately suggested that the vision behind the October Revolution was deeply worthy, but Stalin had thrown its development off course. In the final scene, Sasha Pankratov came to realize his own strength in preserving the human goals of the Revolution in his own reading and writing. Thus, Rybakov provided a glimmer of hope for the future—hope embodied in the intelligentsia.

It appears Rybakov identified himself with the subject and conclusions of \textit{Children of the Arbat}. The book was heavily based on his own biography, including his childhood on the Arbat and his life in prison and then exile. Many of the characters were based on the lives of his family, friends, and acquaintances. He also appeared to align himself with the book’s conclusion about the history of the Revolution in the 1930s. In his memoir, finished in 1997, the year before his death, he wrote: “Lenin provided the formula that saved [us]: ‘Morality (\textit{nravstvennost’}) is subject to the interests of the class struggle of the proletariat’, assuming its validity only in a time of civil war. But Stalin raised this formula to an absolute social principle (\textit{absoliutnaia obshchestvennuiu moral’}). What’s useful for the proletariat? Comrade Stalin will decide. All that follows
from it, all that’s legal, moral (nравственno), ethical (etichno): murder, lies, betrayal, swindling – if Comrade Stalin approves of it, you’re clean and innocent. If you don’t inform on someone else, they’ll inform on you. Informing became a way of life.” His point was that there was something to the Revolution. In other parts of his memoir his describes its humanitarian goals. But under Stalin, it had gone gravely wrong.32

Though denied publication under Brezhnev and Andropov, the manuscript of Rybakov’s Children of the Arbat surfaced again in the months before Gorbachev came to power. The book crossed Anatoly Cherniaev’s desk in late 1984-early 1985, a full year before he became a close aid to Gorbachev. On January 4, 1985, he noted in his diary that he “talked on and on about the soulful (духовныi) impact Rybakov’s novel Children of the Arbat had on [him].” He described the book as “the ‘artistic research’ of the epoch. Next to it, “the practically ingenious Upturned Soil [a novel by M.A. Sholokhov], based on the same years, becomes provincial commentary.” “What an ethical cleansing of society (нравственnoe очищение общества) there would be, if this book were allowed to be printed!,” he concluded.33 Over the next few months, the manuscript passed through the hands of members of the Writers’ Union, who composed reports on the novel for high-ranking officials. Perusing the reports in July 1985, Cherniaev wrote that they recommended publishing the book (in the words of the Writers’ Union) “in the name of our ethical health (нравственного здоровья).” He more than agreed. “It would be something like the ‘moral (мoral’ного) Twentieth Conference,’” he wrote, referring to Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin’s cult of personality. “It would bring the discussion

32 Anatolii Rybakov, Roman-Vospominanie (Moscow: Vargui, 2005), 79.
of Stalin to an end (postavit’ na Staline posledniiu tochku).” Yet even while Cherniaev had fallen in love with the book, he anticipated as early as June 1985 that it would be contentious among the highest-ranking members of the government. He thought Gorbachev would like the novel but expected Yakovlev to be more critical. “We’ll see what kind of anti-Stalinist he is,” Cherniaev wrote, “when he has to take responsibility on himself!”

In September 1986, the literary thick journal Druzhba narodov (Friendship of the People) announced that they would serialize Children of the Arbat on the pages of their periodical in spring 1987. The fact of its future publication came up at a Politburo meeting on October 27, 1986, the transcript of which suggests the decision was not made on high—at least not in the Politburo itself. The most vocal critic of the novel, it turned out, was E.K. Ligachev, who had called for “the whole truth” earlier that year at the meeting of theater workers in the Central Committee. He stated: “The crux of this enormous manuscript of 1500 pages tends towards denunciation (oblicheniiu) of Stalin and all our pre-war politicians. Stalin is portrayed here as condemning Lenin for mistakes (oblichaiushcheim Lenina v obshibkakh), impermissibly speaking about the Russian, Georgian, [and] European peoples, offers a perverse version of the murder of Kirov, praises the life of “golden” youth of the pre-war period and, finally, in every possible way forces all problems connected with repressions of the period of the cult of personality.”

---

34 Ibid., 641.
35 Ibid.
37 V Politbiuro TsK KPSS, 94-95.
Several years later in an interview with the American Sovietologist Stephen Cohen, Yakovlev further explained the conflict over the novel. To Cohen’s question about why the book was not published until 1987, Yakovlev answered: “it shouldn’t even be published now. I will tell you why. No historical documents have been discovered, nor do they exist, attesting to Stalin’s participation in the assassination of Sergei Kirov [. . .]. Under our regulations, if something is published on a Soviet historical subject, the Institute of Marxism-Leninism must rule as to whether it corresponds to historical truth.”

Yakovlev’s personal views were in line with his interpretation of Soviet law. “Works on modern and controversial historical subjects such as the 1930s,” he stated, “should be written on the basis of actual history, established facts, not on the basis of an author’s imagination. Everything must be verified. Soviet readers have an interest in this and expect the truth. And in this respect I have no evidence to confirm the version of Kirov’s assassination presented in Rybakov’s novel.”

It is unclear how Children of the Arbat made it to publication. In October 1986, even Ligachev asked: “who gave permission to Druzhba narodov to publish an announcement that the novel […] will be published in this journal?” To this day it remains unclear how it made its way into print. It might have been that individuals at the Institute for Marxism-Leninism finally let it through. Or that new people had come to power in other positions that allowed the manuscript to move down the road to publication. Or perhaps it was key members of the central government itself. It is clear that Gorbachev himself approved of the book. He vehemently argued for leaving

39 Ibid., 44.
decisions about the production of cultural works to creative unions, “not the KGB,” as he stated in October 1986, though just four months earlier he had fully considered stacking the leadership of the Writers’ Union to his liking—a conversation that played out even with the First Assistant Chairman of the KGB in the room.\footnote{\textit{V Politbiuro TsK KPSS}, 95.}

The debate over Rybakov’s novel in high politics demonstrates the way in which cultural glasnost left a deep impression on the moral project of Perestroika. The conflict boiled down to different perspectives on the truth. Cherniaev, Gorbachev, Ligachev and Yakovlev all believed the truth would inspire moral development and strength—and they certainly agreed that moral regeneration was a precondition for broad restructuring of the economy, politics, and society. Yet Cherniaev and Gorbachev appeared to believe that truth was bigger than facts, while Ligachev and Yakovlev equated truth and facts. For them, only truth based on facts could further moral growth. When Gorbachev came to office in March 1985, the language of Soviet socialist morality was broad enough to encompass a variety of visions of moral regeneration and the future of the Soviet Union. By October 1986, it became clear that even while working with the same language, there were tensions between the moral visions. At this point, at least, those tensions were like a hairline fracture: they hardly drove the bone apart. Soviet leadership continued to function as a whole.

**Accommodating Dissidents**

As Rybakov’s \textit{Children of the Arbat} was serialized in \textit{Druzhba Narodov} in spring 1987, glasnost in cultural production reached new heights in another periodical: \textit{Moskovskie novosti}, better known as \textit{Moscow News}. The daily newspaper was printed for
foreigners and could most easily be acquired at Sheremetevo Airport in English, German, French and other foreign languages. In 1987 only 350,000 copies a day were printed in Russian. On March 8, 1987 the Parisian daily *Le Figaro* published an open letter to Gorbachev signed by ten Russian intellectuals living in immigration: Vasilii Aksenov, Vladimir Bukovskii, Eduard Kuznetsov, Yurii Liubimov, Vladimir Maksimov, Ernst Neizvestnyi, Yurii Orlov, Leonid Pliushch, Aleksandr Zinov’ev, and his wife Ol’ga (the only woman signatory). The statement appeared in other Western European newspapers and then, on March 22, 1987, in the *New York Times* under the title “Is ‘Glasnost’ a Game of Mirrors?” On March [date], 1987 it appeared in Russian translation in *Moscow News*.

Known in the Soviet Union as “A Declaration to the Press” or the “Letter of Ten,” the statement called into question the sincerity and effectiveness of reform in the Soviet Union. Its authors called glasnost “perhaps the greatest puzzlement of all.” They interpreted it as leaders’ attempt to do away with “a huge and costly internal propaganda machine whose products are believed by a few” and to “regain the attention of the Soviet public while at the same time enhancing their image abroad.” “Real glasnost,” they wrote, would go further. It “would involve public debate in which everyone could take part without fear of punishment. It would, in other words, be a public guarantee against the abuse of power.” In counter to the official discourse on truth evident in Ligachev’s 1986 address to theater workers and many, many other Party statements, the émigré intellectuals argued that “what we are seeing is only the same old party monopoly on the truth, with the order being that for the moment truth must be critical of the regime itself.” They called for the end of the USSR itself, asserting that real change was impossible
under the existing Soviet structures. The “Letter of Ten” thus went far beyond the criticism offered in any other media statement or cultural production up to that point in time.42

The “Letter of Ten” transformed the reputation of *Moscow News*. “The thirteenth issue of Moscow New with the ‘Letter’,” one reader noted, “is being snatched up. This kind of thing has never happened here before.”43 The newspaper immediately became one of the most sought-out periodicals, and it became a symbol of glasnost in the Soviet Union. It is almost certain that editors in conjunction with members of the Central Committee planted the “Letter” in *Moscow News*. Even under Gorbachev, this kind of material would have required prior approval for publication from those on high. In the absence of transcripts of Central Committee and Politburo meetings where this decision would have been made, we can only speculate on the reasons why this critical statement in particular would have been supported.

One reason is that even though all signatories were born in the Soviet Union, they now lived beyond its borders. The statement thus reinforced the ways that those who did not live in the USSR could not understand the reform project unfolding there. This was a theme in the periodical press. “Various powers in the West attentively follow this phenomenon [i.e. glasnost],” an editorial published in *Komsomol’skaia pravda* on February 26, 1987 stated, yet more often than not they misunderstood it. “Certain people see glasnost as a propagandistic flare used clumsily (*ne sposobnoi*) to change the social system, or in the best case as a temporary deviation, as a specter of how ‘they’ [i.e. the

---

Soviet Union] are starting to look more like ‘us’ [i.e. the West].”

“The Western press has identified only those new winds associated with past instances of corruption, bureaucracy, [and] infringements of freedom in Soviet matters.” “Bourgeois propaganda” dismissed one important thing: continuity in Soviet policies. “New policies are the qualitative development of socialism, and not a departure from it, as it seems to some in the ‘West’.”

The “Letter” also provided the opportunity for a provocation. Particularly among intellectuals, it provoked a response that demonstrated to what extent they approved of glasnost as reformers articulated it. Provoked as they might have been, these responses shed light on how various cultural producers responded to the claims made by the émigré intellectuals. Moscow News was among the first to publish responses. On April 5, 1987, an excerpted letter from the writer Grigorii Baklanov called it “an embarrassing letter.” He articulated what the publication said about the signatories themselves: “not only are they a product of times gone by” who “cannot imagine changes being achieved here,” but “they don’t even want changes to happen here. And with this letter they also said that they left for freedom, but ended up with pathetic dependence.” In a letter excerpted on April 12, 1987 in Moscow News, the dramaturge O.N. Efremov (Shatrov’s first boss) also reflected on the psychology of the letter writers. He imagined that “leaving the country, these people in their arrogance hoped that their departure would become movement of an almost national scale: things in [this] country will get worse immediately, and then [those

---

44 Original text: “Кое-кем гласность рассматривается как пропагандистский флёр, используемый не способной измениться общественной системой, или в лучшем случае как временное отклонение, как признак того, что “они” становятся-де более похожими на “нас”.”


46 The Komsomol’skaia pravda archive includes no letters from 1987, and no letters responding to the “Letter of Ten” appeared in the printed newspaper.

who stayed in the country] would realize their worth. But having left, they saw: we are
doing serious things here today, even without them. We are managing to do everything
ourselves [i.e. without outside help]. That’s why they are spiteful. But in their spite they
are forming ties with those who hadn’t experienced good feelings towards us before…
All the signatories of the letter are on the path of political war with us.” The important
commonality in the letters was that change in the Soviet Union was not only possible, but
actually happening.

Most responses published in Moscow News resembled Efremov and Baklanov
with one exception: the letter from the dramaturge Mikhail Ul’ianov, who wrote: “For
some reason the relationship to this letter forming in public opinion is like towards
treason.” It might have been that he did not see the letter as treason because he agreed
with the authors. Much more likely, he did not support the letter, but believed that
glasnost should allow for the expression of even this opinion. Thus the letter was not
“treasonous” but simply a sign that glasnost was real. In this sense, his statement fell in
line with others quoted in the newspaper. Ul’ianov, Efremov, and Baklanov differed from
the authors of the “Letter of Ten” in that they believed change was possible without
wiping away the Soviet Union in its entirety. They took hope not least of all from the fact
that the letter was published in the USSR—which might have been another reason editors
of Moscow News and reformers conspired to publish the “Letter.”

Responses published in Moscow News jibed with those published across
mainstream Soviet periodicals. On April 11, 1987, a statement in Sovetskaia kul’tura
questioned why émigré intellectuals of such different stripes came together to write the letter to Gorbachev. “If the slogan ‘democratization of society’ was first used for underground organizations, [and] illegal [and] anti-Soviet activity,” it read, “then democratic slogans were secondly pulled out for covering [their] inner discomfort with socialism.” It asserted that the labels taken up by all of these people—“dissidents,” “other-thinkers,” “rights-protectors”—all “originated at the very moment the western press was ‘bored’…” “A melancholic, but more so a vile spectacle,” it concluded, “to see how a swamp sucks into its inescapable quagmire those who have made a profession of slandering [their] Homeland.” On April 15, 1987, Literaturnaia gazeta published a similar view. New York correspondent Ione Andronov reported on an exhibit of work by the émigré artist Shemiakin, which had recently opened in the US. The artist was quoted calling the “Letter of Ten” a “foolish undertaking.” “I never would have signed such a letter,” he said. He also reported knowing one of the signatories—Ernst Neizvestnyi—who supposedly did not read the letter before adding his name and did not support its views at all. Andronov’s report underscored the lack of support for the letter even among Soviet émigrés.

Yet the question remains: why did no letters vehemently supporting the émigré intellectuals’ statement appear in print? After all, they, too, would have spoken to the strength of glasnost in the Soviet Union—glasnost in the sense that Lenin used the word, i.e. publicity of a plurality of views. At least one letter writer believed that many Soviet people did agree with the “Letter.” “But then, those who agree with the authors of the ‘Letter’ are unlikely to write to Moscow News: many think that glasnost has been allowed

---

only for show, in order to ‘let off steam,’” wrote Tatiana Kotliar in May 1987. “People have been taught not to write to our newspapers when they disagree with the official point of view.” The archive of letters at Komsomol’skaia pravda suggests Kotliar was wrong about people not writing to newspapers when they disagreed with the official point of view. Historians suggest that even under Stalin critical letters appeared in mailrooms across the country. Perspectives that rubbed against the grain of the official point of view could in fact show the extent to which people were activated and engaged citizens.

Yet Kotliar had a point about letters in Moscow News: even though readers might have sent letters that disagreed with editors’ perspective to the newspaper, they were unlikely to appear in print—even in this age of glasnost. The position of this newspaper was obvious on its printed pages. “Time and life always separate those who lead revolutionary perestroika in our country from former citizens of the USSR who slander her [the country],” read the title above the letters published on April 5, 1987. On April 12, 1987, one headline read: “Vladimir Bukovskii is using the CIA for active subversion against the USSR.” Another: “Leonid Pliushch supports terrorist methods of war against Soviet society.” A third: “Vladimir Maksimov went abroad in 1974, where he headed up the anticommmunist journal Kontinent, created under the auspices of the CIA.”

---

52 Letter from Tatiana Kotliar to Yegor Yakovlev, published in Glasnost. Information Bulletin Nos. 5 & 6 (Moscow, October 1987), 30.
53 A particularly good example of letters that contradicted both the official perspective and the newspaper’s perspective are letters from Armenians written in the first month of bloody conflict between Azeris and Armenians in Sumgait and Nagorno-Karabakh, where Armenians were the target of Azeri violence. In Armenia, too, Azeris became the target of violence instigated by Armenians. The official position held Armenians alone responsible for the conflict, which Armenian readers of Komsomol’skaia pravda vehemently countered in their letters. See RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2, d. 2.
55 Ibid.
Kotliar herself chose to send a letter, addressed to Yegor Yakovlev, editor-in-chief of *Moscow News*, to a self-published print organ called *Glasnost, Informational Bulletin* (hereafter *Glasnost*). This publication points to an important development in late-Soviet print culture encouraged by glasnost: the rapid development of an off-center press, of newspapers, journals, and bulletins published in people’s homes and studios in relatively small numbers.\(^{56}\) It was *samizdat* on a vastly larger scale, except whereas *samizdat* often had the reputation of dissident material, the Perestroika off-center press did not. Without exactly supporting the phenomenon, the Soviet government under Gorbachev did not attempt to extinguish it, either. In a way, the explosion of self-published materials testified to the success of glasnost as reformers understood it: the off-center press in large part represented an attempt across a broad population to participate in socially significant debates and discussions.

This was certainly the case with *Glasnost*. The bulletin was launched in late spring 1987 by Sergei Grigoryants, who even by the strictest definition of “dissident” in the Soviet context could be labeled such in the period leading up to 1987. Born in Kiev in 1941, he was educated in Kiev and Moscow in prestigious Department of Journalism at Moscow State University. In 1975 he was arrested for “anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda” and sentenced to five years of political exclusion. Promptly upon his release in 1982 he began to distribute *samizdat* information about rights violations in the Soviet Union. He was arrested and sentenced again in 1983. Grigoryants was freed again under a more general amnesty under Gorbachev in late-1986-early-1987—which was, like glasnost, another olive branch extended from reformers to intellectuals. Again

immediately upon his release, he set to work publishing *Glasnost*, which appeared in Russian as well as other languages. It was translated into English in New York thanks to funding from the National Endowment for Democracy.

The outlook of the bulletin was critical, but it was not a dissident enterprise. Grigoryants expressed overt support for the recent Soviet reforms. “Gorbachev’s speeches have not been simply hot air,” he wrote in the introductory note to the second issue. “Not everything is working well for the reasons he speaks of, but more is being done than could have been expected.”\(^{57}\) This statement was far more positive even than letters that landed on the desk of Gorbachev himself. There is “a lack of visible obvious results of perestroika (with the exception, if you will, of work in the central press, radio and television),” stated one letter that Gorbachev read to the Politburo on October 27, 1986.\(^{58}\) More importantly than overt expressions of support for the reform program, *Glasnost* revealed its nature in its form. Many of the publications were specifically addressed to public figures, and all of the materials concerned socially, politically, and economically urgent matters, including topics underrepresented in national media. These points suggest that the bulletin was meant not for subversion but engagement.

Grigoryants took reformers at their word.

The first issues of *Glasnost* published in summer 1987 staged a discussion of the “Letter of Ten,” which included the response of Tatiana Kotliar, a mathematician from Obninsk, a small city outside of Moscow in Kaluga Oblast. She lived with her husband Anton Neverovskii, a computer programmer who had an uneasy relationship with the local police. On June 26, 1982 the police searched their home and confiscated written


\(^{58}\) *V Politbiuro TsK KPSS*, 91.
materials. “You’re a programmer, so write programs,” they threatened him. “And if you write anything else, we’ll come and take away everything you’ve written one more time, and we’ll put you in jail!” Kotliar took a far more sympathetic stance on the “Letter of Ten” than other intellectuals published in national media. In response to Literaturnaia gazeta’s New York correspondent Ione Andronov, she wrote that it’s easy not to be critical of the situation for intellectuals in the Soviet Union when you have so many privileges. “I,” she wrote, “will never be allowed to go to New York or Paris.” She could not even get her hands on reading materials she wanted in the USSR. As a graduate student in mathematics, she tried to order works by Vasilii Rozanov and Sigmund Freud at the Lenin Library in Moscow, where she was told she needed a letter from her supervisor stating that she needed the works for scientific reasons. As a result, she lamented, she had never had the chance to read “Freud and Adorno, Heidegger, Jaspers, Husserl, and the philosophical works of Sartre!”

She stood up for the signatories of the “Letter of Ten” also in the name of the lives they led in the Soviet Union—the lives that forced them to emigrate. Some of them came under attack by authorities for the books they kept at home, for writings they circulated in samizdat, or for insisting on certain publications, as Aksenov did with the anthology Metropol. Echoing Natasha Davydova’s grandmother in Shatrov’s “Dictatorship of Conscience,” Kotliar wrote: “I personally did not have enough courage to stand up for Yuri Orlov when he was persecuted for practicing glasnost ‘without prior permission.’ One can console oneself with the thought that the majority of people

---

60 Ibid., 30.
61 Ibid., 31.
remained quiet. As the poet said: ‘we silenced ourselves—waiting for better weather.’"

She admired the signatories for the lives they led in the Soviet Union, and even credited them with the renewed place of glasnost in Soviet society. “And now,” she continued, “the silent majority’ has spoken. And some have started by denouncing those who **did not** remain silent! Now glasnost and democracy look like something that fell from the sky—with no merits on our part. And there is such a strong desire to forget about the heroism of those who fought for this very glasnost and democracy, for creative freedom, who came out publically against illegalities.”

Some Soviet intellectuals, like Lev Timofeev (quoted above on page 5) did not forget. Nor did some historians, who have elevated dissidents to the position of creators of the kind of glasnost that became prominent under Gorbachev. Namely, they had in mind glasnost as freedom of conscience. Yet even Kotliar’s notion of glasnost was not simply freedom of conscience. It included a broader perspective on improving the whole, which for her was the Soviet state and society at large. In this way, her view on the “Letter of Ten” was not so different from other Soviet intellectuals published in national media. “For the first time hope has appeared,” she wrote. She went on to criticize the extent of Perestroika, noting in particular that it had not yet reached Obninsk. “The national theater was prohibited from putting on Gubarev’s play,” she noted, “the writer Tatiana Toltsaia was prohibited from giving a lecture,” and “I have still not been able to find a library that receives *Moscow News* in Russian.”

She offered these criticisms not to damn the reform process, but to encourage it further. “There will be democracy in our country,” she stated by way of closing. “But if the forces of reaction are victorious now,

---

62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
then the country will be submerged in a deep freeze for another twenty years. For historians, that’s an instant, but for us, it’s our whole lives.” The question for her was not “if” but “when.” Not least of all, editors noted at the end of her letter that the materials confiscated from her husband in June 1982 were returned in June 1987.

The answer to the question why no letters vehemently supporting the position of the “Letter of Ten” were published might very well be that few intellectuals agreed with it. From Moscow News to Literaturnaia gazeta and Sovetskaia kul’tura to Glasnost, publications across the board suggest that by and large Soviet intellectuals did not agree that the Soviet Union itself and socialism had to be scratched for reform to succeed. They were all far more hopeful, inspired not least of all by the fact that the “Letter of Ten” appeared in Russian translation in the Soviet national media. The discussions surrounding Shatrov’s “Dictatorship of Conscience,” Rybakov’s Children of the Arbat, and the “Letter of Ten” in particular suggest that at least in 1987, reformers’ plan to bring intellectuals into the fold and get them on board with Perestroika was working. They became actively engaged in the debates that broke out across Soviet society, spurred particularly by the press and other cultural productions.
CHAPTER FOUR

Conservative Re-Action

On March 13, 1988, the national Soviet daily Sovetskaia Rossiia published a letter from Nina Aleksandrovna Andreeva, a chemistry professor at Leningrad Polytechnic Institute. The letter reflected on many debates unleashed by activated members of the intelligentsia, including the playwright Mikhail Shatrov and the novelist Anatoly Rybakov, whose artworks launched a prominent conversation on Soviet history in 1986-1987. Andreeva emphasized that the discussion had negative consequences, which manifested themselves above all in her students. She recounted a meeting between the young people she worked with and two World War Two veterans. Her students grilled the men about Stalin-era repression. When the former soldiers said they had not seen signs of repression themselves, their young interlocutors accused them of lying.

Andreeva claimed that the national discussion of the Soviet past turned her students into “nihilists” who could no longer judge history “objectively.” It also undermined the image of Stalin, who she regarded as a great statesman and responsible for many Soviet achievements.¹

Andreeva’s letter touched off debate across the USSR and garnered significant political attention as well. Everyone who lived through Perestroika in the Soviet Union knows the name Nina Andreeva. The Nina Andreeva Affair, as the incident came to be known, is well known among Soviet scholars as well: nearly every monograph on

Perestroika includes the letter on the timeline of the era’s most important events. ²

Among scholars, the major questions about the letter include whether Andreeva wrote it herself and to what extent it was edited by newspaper editors or even politicians, the usefulness of the scandal surrounding the letter to reformers like Gorbachev and the degree to which its publication drove a wedge between factions in the Politburo, and the impact the letter had on the course of glasnost. In short, scholars place the letter in a framework of high politics. This interpretation obscures the many people involved in the affair, who were not organized by politicians and did not have high-political ambitions. These people included Andreeva herself and many conservatives across the USSR who agreed with Andreeva’s views, and those who responded critically to Andreeva in their diaries, conversations with friends and colleagues, and especially letters to public figures.

To this day, Andreeva claims the letter published in Sovetskaia Rossiia as her own and is proud of the statement it made. Taking her seriously as the document’s author gives way to a new understanding of Andreeva and her letter. She appears not merely as a pawn in a battle between Politburo members, and not as someone who aimed to undermine reform, but as an actively engaged Soviet person. She wrote letters to public figures, dedicated herself to her work, sought to further the moral education of her students, followed political events closely, and was a fiercely independent thinker. In the first years of Perestroika, reformers set out to heal what they viewed as a broken

relationship between state and citizen and to creation the conditions that would give each
citizen the opportunity to become the new Soviet person, defined above all to the active
pursuit of the good of society as a whole. Andreeva, at least as she saw herself, had
become this person. She penned the letter published in Sovetskaia Rossiia in part in an
effort to show her active engagement.

Read against the grain in this way, Andreeva’s letter shed light on an important
juncture in the development of Perestroika as an attempt to produce the new Soviet
person. It shows, first, the new heights of public letter writing under Gorbachev. In 1985-
1986, reformers regarded the public letter as a conduit of activation as well as a sign that
one had become engaged in the life of the state. That a single public letter could provoke
a national scandal the powerful status achieved by this form of writing by 1988. Secondly,
Andreeva’s letter demonstrated the unforeseen paradoxes of reform. At the start of
Perestroika, reformers hoped the reform process would create the conditions that would
allow each individual to become an actively engaged citizen. The Leningrad chemistry
instructor demonstrated that the activated citizen did not always want what reformers had
taken as the natural aim of reform. Andreeva demanded the very child-parent relationship
between citizen and state that Gorbachev sought to do away with. Her letter further
demonstrated how an activated subject could use the moral language of Perestroika and
the championed medium of implementing reform to question reformers’ chief goals.

**Andreeva’s Activation**

Nina Aleksandrovna Andreeva was born on October 12, 1938 in Leningrad. Her
father worked at the Leningrad harbor, and her mother was a metalworker at the Kirov
Metallurgy Factory. During World War Two, her father, older brother, and sister were called to the front, where they died in battle. Raised by her mother alone, Andreeva’s small family struggled to make ends meet. In school Andreeva’s broad interests spanned the sciences and humanities. She excelled in her classes and graduated with a gold medal. She could have selected any major in college, but chose chemistry because of the stipend. She received 49 rubles per month, as opposed to the standard 23. She and her mother could just get by. Andreeva entered college in the 1950s, when she met the young philosophy teacher Vladimir Kliushin, whom she married.3

While Andreeva studied, tumultuous political changes swept across the Soviet Union. After Stalin’s death in 1953, Nikita Khrushchev rose to power and set out to renew the struggle to build Communism. At the 20th Party Conference in 1956, he denounced Stalin’s cult of personality and encouraged the rejuvenation of Soviet socialism along new lines. The speech, delivered behind closed doors to elite Party members from across the country, touched off a long process of Rehabilitating many who had been repressed under Stalin. Andreeva had one relative who had been repressed who was rehabilitated under Khrushchev. The speech marked a moderate but significant shift in the public relationship to Stalin. Several years later in 1961, the leader’s body was removed from the Mausoleum on Red Square, where it had laid next to Lenin, and interred in the wall of the Kremlin along with other prominent, though lesser, state servants. Khrushchev’s speech launched a debate across Soviet society on “the year 1938,” which flourished in literature in particular. Solzhenitsyn’s One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich appeared in 1961 in the prominent literary thick journal Novyi mir, where

readers sent letters en masse that discussed political repression under Stalin. Following Khrushchev’s ousting in 1964, these debates slipped below the surface of prominent public discourse but continued in a lower profile fashion throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.  

Andreeva joined the Communist Party in 1966, and after defending her dissertation, she received her first job at the Quartz Research Institute (NII kvartsovogo stekla) in Leningrad in the late 1960s. It was not all smooth sailing. At a Party meeting, she criticized insufficiencies in her workplace, for which her superiors tried to expunge her from the Party. In the end, they did not receive support from other colleagues, but the tension forced her to find a new position. She became an assistant in the department of physical chemistry at Leningrad Technical Institute. Before long she ran into trouble there, too. As head of the committee for people’s control, she reported on “crass violations of state and Party discipline.” Her superiors again tried to oust her from the Party, but again without success. In 1981, the Central Committee’s Committee of Party Control cleared her of any blame and restored her Party card. She was still teaching at Leningrad Technical Institute when Gorbachev came to power in 1985.

Gorbachev’s ascent to power brought the years of political repression under Stalin into the public spotlight again. The topic emerged in 1986 with the announcement that cultural works that had been finished before Gorbachev came to power, but had not yet seen the light of day in publication, exhibition, or public showing, would finally become available. One example included Georgian filmmaker Tengiz Abuladze’s film

---

“Repentance.” Set in a small Georgian town, the film describes the peculiar situation following the death of the town’s mayor. His corpse is buried in the local cemetery, but several times turns up in the garden of his son’s house. A woman is accused of digging up the corpse and put on trial, where she defends herself by arguing that the mayor was responsible for Stalin-like repression, had the blood of her parents and friends on his hands, and did not deserve burial in the town cemetery. At the end of the film, a woman approaches an open window to a kitchen, asking if the road leads to the temple. The cook answers no. The woman responds: “What good is a road if it does not lead to the temple?”

The allegorical film was originally finished in 1984, showing that historical themes remained under discussion after Khrushchev’s ousting. Yet the film was elevated to the status of public discourse only after Gorbachev’s election. The premier of “Repentance” was announced on national television in September 1986. Many Soviet people awaited its arrival in theaters. Moscow intellectual Tatiana Yurieva noted the anticipation in her diary. On March 5, 1987, she finally got to see it at the Udarnik cinema with a friend. “It’s strange to say, but I didn’t like the film. It was boring, pretentious, and overextended,” she wrote. She was disappointed, but the film left a deep impression on viewers across the USSR. “Repentance” and other cultural works came out in part because of Gorbachev’s commitment to autonomy for creative unions, in part because of new leadership in those organizations.

---

6 Diary entry from December 8, 1986 in Tatiana Iureva, Dnevnik kul’turnoi devushki (Moskva: RGGU, 2003), 126.
7 Diary entry from March 5, 1987 in Iureva, Dnevnik kul’turnoi devushki, 130.
8 My argument here differs from those who suggest that dissidents or liberal intellectuals alone thrust this topic into the public spotlight. See, for example, Philip Boobbyer, Conscience, Dissent, and Reform in Soviet Russia (London: Routledge, 2005), and Robert Horvath, Legacy of Soviet Dissent. Dissidents, Democratization, and Radical Nationalism in Russia (New York: Routledge, 2005).
The discussion of the Soviet past touched off by cultural figures buzzed across the USSR in 1987. On July 24, 1987, one article in particular caught Andreeva’s attention: an interview in the minor weekly newspaper *Leningradskii rabochii* with Aleksandr Prokhanov, head of the Russian Writers Union and well known for his conservative nationalist political leanings. The article moved Andreeva to written response, marking the start of her career as commentator on current events. Prokhanov’s interview began with his reflections on the national discussion of Soviet history. “All passions in social consciousness and the press are connected with attacks on Stalin,” he stated. He described the violence carried out under Stalin, which to his mind ruined Soviet society. He believed reform could undo the damage that Stalin brought about, though he also qualified his reflections on the past, stating that not all damage could have been prevented in order to achieve the kind of state that Stalin successfully created.9

The interview left no aspect of reform untouched. He praised the moral potential of socialism and traced the ethical ideas at the heart of the ideology—“social justice, fraternity, cooperation, compassion, collectivism, appreciation of the fact of each individual person”—back to Russian Orthodoxy. He asserted that these values would have triumphed even without a socialist revolution. The Bolshevik Revolution, however, made it possible for a state embodying these values to last beyond World War Two. He claimed that a state founded on socialist values without socialism would have disintegrated like the French and British empires in the middle of the twentieth century. Socialism was the integrating force of the Soviet state.10

10 Ibid.
While praising the integration of “hundreds of peoples,” he criticized the Soviet Union for being “a country that did not read Marx.” He also was skeptical of processes unleashed by economic reforms. Gorbachev had long been encouraging the “self-direction” of enterprises and of workers in the workplace. Prokhanov argued that this policy gave way to many small groups, each thinking for themselves, each with their own agenda, including, for example, the ultra-nationalist political club “Pamiat”. He argued that these organizations were really like parties, and they were undermining the strength of the Communist Party and therefore the integrity of Soviet society as a whole. He disclosed that he did not belong to the Party, but he believed the organization was the only one with the power to potentially integrate a diverse Soviet society. He condemned forces undermining its authority.11

Prokhanov’s interview caught Andreeva’s attention because years earlier, when her husband faced the prospect of moving to Afghanistan, she read his novel A Tree in the Center of Kabul (1982). She considered the book “one of the best in Russian literature in the 1980s,” but found the ideas in his interview contentious.12 She discussed them with her family and friends and then wrote a lengthy response to Leningradskii rabochii. She was not the only one to do so. The newspaper received hundreds of letters on Prokhanov’s interview.13 Seeing one’s letter published in the newspaper was like winning the lottery. Andreeva, it turned out, had a lucky ticket. Her response appeared under editors’ title “Memoirs of the Future?” on October 9, 1987.14 In an interview in 1998, she

11 Ibid.
13 See editorial remarks, Leningradskii rabochii (9 Oktiabr 1987), 4.
called Prokhanov’s ideas “absurd,” but the tone of her earlier letter was far more conciliatory.\textsuperscript{15}

She concurred with his comments on the weakening role of the Party, on factors undermining the integrity and moral-political unity of society, and on the destruction of the Soviet “ship of state.”\textsuperscript{16} She agreed with his statement on Stalin, writing that “perhaps there is no better thing to occupy us than reflecting on events that do not have a single meaning and are full of contradictions that took place over half a century ago? We are simultaneously casting a shadow on the most complex period of transition to socialism, and the immeasurable sacrifices of an entire generation.” Perhaps in an effort of diplomacy, she stated that she and Prokhanov thought similarly on this issue, but she did not acknowledge Prokhanov’s qualifying claim that Stalin also destroyed Soviet society.\textsuperscript{17}

She also agreed with his statement that Soviet people knew Marx poorly. She went on to criticize the scripts of Soviet political discourse. She observed that it’s easy to quote Marx and Lenin, but they were always taken out of context. The nuances and important ideas of their works were lost. Meanwhile, one could “prove” anything with their words precisely by decontextualizing quotations. The most important part of their works has been forgotten, she wrote, namely the “universal-historical mission of the working class.” Here, too, she took the opportunity to go beyond the content of Prokhanov’s article. She suggested that without the rigid centralization of the Soviet

\textsuperscript{16} N.A. Andreeva, “Vospominaniiia o budushchem?,” Leningradskii rabochii (9 Oktiabr 1987), 4.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
economy and ideological-political consolidation, the Soviet Union would not have been able to defeat fascism.  

On other points, Andreeva related more critically to Prokhanov’s interview. While she praised his denunciation of contemporary nationalist extremists, like those in “Pamiat,” she supported Russian nationalists. She claimed that the Russian proletariat carried out three Russian revolutions in the twentieth century. She also called Stalin’s toast “to the Russian people” at the conclusion of World War Two a “historical justice,” even though, as she wrote, other groups suffered greater losses. Andreeva most strongly disagreed with Prokhanov on his notion of a “market” of ideas and open discussion including socialist and non-socialist ideas, which for him was the central characteristic of society that Stalin destroyed. “I believe that ideological pluralism (the innermost dream of all anti-Communists) will bring nothing,” she wrote. “Without ideological consolidation there will be little moral-political unity of society [and] friendship of the peoples, which means little socialism as well.”

Andreeva’s letter received the most prominent place of all published responses in Leningradskii rabochii: it covered the entire upper half of the page. Below hers appeared two snippets of letters from P. Bobylev and A. Sungurov and a brief response-interview with A. Kozlov. Bobylev, an economist, stated that there was already an organization serving as a “market” of ideas in the Soviet Union: the Central Committee of the Communist Party. Sungurov drew Prokhanov’s attention to the social-political club

---

18 Ibid.
19 These comments were contentious in the Soviet Union, where the federalization of republics representing distinct nationality groups in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was supposed to provide an alternative and corrective to imperialism. Andreeva’s comments could be interpreted not only as nationalism but as “great Russian chauvinism.”
“Perestroika,” which debated many of the ideas in the fashion that the author recommended. Kozlov responded to the interview most critically, saying he would give a student who upheld Prokhanov’s ideas a “D,” particularly for the comment that the Soviet Union was a country that knew Marx poorly. Yet he defended the publication of the interview in the name of glasnost.21

The page of published responses reflected not just readers’ reactions to glasnost, but the newspapers’ attempt to enact it. To editors of Leningradskii rabochii glasnost meant representing debate that included a range of opinions. In this case, the published letters presented different opinions on the very notion of debate. Andreeva explicitly argued against plurality of ideas, while Kozlov praised the appearance of a variety of opinions in print. Leningradskii rabochii was not the only publication to stage such debates. In 1987, newspapers across the country more earnestly did the same thing. At Komsomol’skaia pravda, for example, editors organized the section “What to debate?,” which included letters representing at least two opposed sides of any issue, including issues that had been little discussed in the Soviet press, such as whether or not God existed.22 Such debates marked the golden age of the Soviet press remembered by so many who lived through Perestroika.

Prokhanov’s interview in Leningradskii rabochii went unnoticed across the USSR. It was a fairly typical publication in an insignificant newspaper. Yet it was representative of discussions that were happening in every corner of the Soviet Union in mid-1987.

People across the country, across social backgrounds, across age groups had contracted

21 Leningradskii rabochii (9 Oktiabr 1987), 4.
22 See, for example, “Vokrug chego spor?,” Komsomol’skaia pravda No 59 (18859), Thursday, 12 March 1987, 2.
“graphomania.”

They incessantly discussed reform, and the long historical trajectory of the Soviet project had become part of the discussion. Insignificant in the life of the USSR, Prokhanov’s article was nonetheless a turning point in the life of Nina Andreeva. It gave her the opportunity to articulate ideas central to her later article, “I cannot forsake my principles.” She experienced the publication of her response to Prokhanov as real encouragement. It suggested that she had a natural talent for commentary on current events.

State Response to the National Debate on the Soviet 1930s

Just as Leningradskii rabochii published Andreeva’s response to Prokhanov in October 1987, the Politburo met to discuss what would be the most thorough intervention from above in the national discussion of Soviet history: Gorbachev’s speech for November 1987, which would mark the 70th anniversary of the October Revolution. In light of the occasion, Gorbachev could have delivered a speech that waxed poetic on Soviet accomplishments—eliminating unemployment, forging a new path to industrialization, defeating fascism, bolstering gender equality in the workplace, sending the first satellite into space—but instead the weight of his speech fell on the 1930s. His speech marked the most important intervention in the broad social discussion of the Soviet past during Perestroika.

The roots of state intervention under Gorbachev in the discussion had roots going back to the beginning of that year. On February 14, 1987, Pravda published a report on recent business in the Central Committee, stating that neither literature nor history should

---

permit “forgotten names.” With the approach “of the 70th anniversary of our great revolution,” it continued, “it is unnecessary to cast into the shadows those who made our revolution. It’s essential to remember those who gave their lives for the revolution into socialism.”

The statement was ambiguous. By “those who gave their lives” it might have meant those who were repressed under Stalin or, alternately, the common heroes of Soviet history, such as Andreeva’s father and others who died during World War Two, or even the most prominent leaders like Lenin and Stalin. Enigmatic and reserved, the report nonetheless marked an important turning point. Up until 1987, leaders discussed only the very recent past—the period of “stagnation” under Leonid Brezhnev. The report signaled that reformers now planned to address what was commonly referred to as the “distant” history of the USSR.

That summer Gorbachev wrote *Perestroika and New Thinking for Our Country and for the Whole World*, the so-called “Perestroika Manifesto,” which included a 7-page section (out of 269 pages) titled the “Lessons of History.”

“What’s most important for us right now in the history of the past,” he wrote, “is that by comprehending it we come to understand the preconditions for restructuring (*perestroika*). Our history has taken shape under the influence of external factors. But this is how it [history] is. And in it are located the sources of restructuring (*perestroika*).”

Evaluating history was becoming an integral part of the new vision of Perestroika. Moreover, the book came out in the

---

languages of the Soviet republics and English, signaling an attempt to frame the reform agenda for a global audience.\textsuperscript{27}

By “history,” Gorbachev had in mind the late 1920s and 1930s in particular. The brief section focused mainly on forced industrialization and collectivization, which he called “inescapable,” though “the methods and means of implementation did not always and in all instances account for socialist principles, [and] socialist ideology and theory.”\textsuperscript{28} He also emphasized the aspect of this period “often ignored in the West”: that there was “new life, enthusiasm of the builders of the new world, inspiration by the new and unusual, sharp pride because we [did it] alone, without outside help.”\textsuperscript{29} Finally, he mentioned Khrushchev’s notable contribution—denouncing Stalin’s cult of personality at the 20\textsuperscript{th} Party Congress—and the problems of the Brezhnev era which Soviet society now had to address.

Gorbachev extended his discussion of history in his speech honoring the 70\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the October Revolution. With the help of a committee, he drafted his speech over the summer of 1987. Unlike “Lessons on History,” Gorbachev’s speech constituted not an attempt to broaden and redefine the horizons of Perestroika, but to intervene specifically in the discussion of the Soviet 1930s. The Politburo met to discuss the draft on October 15, 1987, devoting the entire meeting to discussing the past. History was clearly of paramount significance to Soviet leaders. The transcript of the meeting illuminates why the highest political organ in the USSR came to support publicly

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 37.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 33. Text in original: “…было острое ощущение гордости за то, что мы один, без посторонней помощи, в который уж раз на своих плечах поднимаем страну.”
intervening in the debate on the Soviet past and what they expected to come of their intervention.

For Politburo members, discussing Soviet history raised important questions about how to frame reforms aiming to reinvigorate socialism for the Soviet population. Some Politburo members worried that there had already been too many attempts to do so, summarized by the list of adjectives used to describe socialism in different phases of its historical development. “How many terms have there been?,” asked I.G. Aliev, Politburo member and First Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR. “‘Mature’, ‘developed’ socialism… Now what?” Asking if he meant the question rhetorically, Gorbachev offered “at the start of development,” “developing socialism,” and “the start of the transition stage to Communism.” The middle term ultimately gained greatest currency.30

Discussing the past also raised questions about periodization of the future of reform. Aliev and others warned against specifying a date by which reform would be complete and socialism would be achieved. “There was already an attempt…with Khrushchev,” he stated, referring to Khrushchev’s declaration that the USSR would achieve Communism by 1980. Even in the first few years under Gorbachev the mention of dates sparked great disagreement. This was the case with the year 2000, which, according to the New Edition of the Party Program drawn up in 1985 (see Chapter Two), marked not only the millennium, but the date when the bulk of reforms would be carried out, including fulfillment of the promise of a separate apartment for each Soviet family. Pravda editor V.G. Afanasiev argued that the housing promise was mathematically

30 V Politbiuro TsK KPSS..., 254.
impossible. For the 70th anniversary speech, Gorbachev settled on naming short-term goals and longer term goals of reform, while leaning away from definitive dates by which the process would be complete.

What did leaders believe their intervention would lead to? The meeting transcript suggests they believed it would set the record straight. As Yeltsin stated, “[The speech] will complete textbooks and for many become a textbook. [People] will study its every word, especially in relationship to its historical judgments.” His comment suggests that Soviet leaders intervened to provide the “correct” view of history. It also implies that Politburo members believed the population at large looked to them for answers about the past, that they trusted them enough to take answers about the past from them. In other words, they seemed to expect that the official intervention in the discussion of the Soviet past would wrap up the broad debate across society. It did not cross their minds that it could unleash a raging debate across society that undermined the credentials of Soviet socialism.

They also believed it would have a positive impact on the USSR’s foreign audience. This consideration influenced even word choice. E.A. Shevardnadze, Minister of Foreign Affairs, honed in on the phrase “liquidation of the kulaks as a class.” “In the West the phrase is associated with physical annihilation. This happened, too. But maybe it’s not the right word? Otherwise it will be associated only with lawlessness. Keep the idea. But the word… find another.” KGB Chairman V.M. Chebrikov reiterated the importance of mentioning dekulakization, explaining it as the removal of the last class of

---

31 V.G. Afanasiev, editor-in-chief of Pravda from 1976-1989, noted this controversy in his memoir. TsMAMLS, f. L-2, op. 1, d. 72, l. 139.
32 V Politbiuro TsK KPSS, 249.
33 Ibid., 252.
exploiters in Soviet history. Politburo members had big hopes for the influence their speech would have on their foreign audience. “The presentation will become an essential phenomenon in our Party and on the international stage,” stated Ryzhkov. “The entire world is waiting for this speech,” said Ligachev. “It will have an enormous influence on our country and on the international Communist movement.”

The Politburo’s ruminations on their domestic and international audiences came together on one point. Ultimately, and most importantly, they believed that by addressing the Stalinist past, they could cleanse the reputation of socialism on the world stage. As Shevardnadze stated, “You get the feeling that we are showing responsibility before future generations in our judgments of the past. The people will value this.” They believed that ethical socialism was still possible, but that achieving it required acknowledging the darker pages of Soviet history. They were on the same path as Abuladze, so to speak, thinking about which road would lead to the Temple.

In the midst of discussing Gorbachev’s speech on Soviet history and preparing for the 70th anniversary of the October Revolution, one of the most stunning political scandals in the lifetime of the Soviet Union unfolded. On October 21, 1987, the Central Committee met to discuss the speech that the Politburo had approved. Gorbachev described the content of the speech, and then Ligachev, chairman of the meeting, motioned to open the floor for debate. “It’s not necessary! Approve [the speech]!,” said a

34 Ibid.
35 Ibid., 246.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid., 252.
38 Here the reference to Abuladze’s film is starkly opposed to the way Leon Aron references it. For him, the only “road to the Temple” is one that leads away from socialism. See Leon Aron, Roads to the Temple: Truth, Memory, Ideas, and Ideals in the Making of the Russian Revolution, 1987-1991 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).
voice from the hall. At the same time, Yeltsin stood and raised his hand.\textsuperscript{39} A candidate member of the Politburo, Yeltsin was, like Gorbachev, born in 1931 in the provinces. He grew up in Sverdlovsk, joined the Party in 1961, advanced through the ranks of the local apparatus, and was brought to Moscow in 1985 by Gorbachev to head up the Communist Party’s Moscow City Committee, essentially making him mayor of the capital. In February 1986 he became a candidate member of the Politburo.\textsuperscript{40}

Gorbachev permitted Yeltsin to approach the podium. The mood was serious. He began with a personal attack on Ligachev, criticizing him for not having worked on himself hard enough and not changing his style of work. “Taking lessons from the past,” he stated, “it is necessary above all not to permit that which was. Not to permit discreditation of Leninist norms of Party life.” He went on to say that since the 27\textsuperscript{th} Party Conference, not enough had changed in the Soviet Union. “People have not received anything real.” He said that the 70-year history of the Soviet Union was marked by “heavy, heavy defeats.” He argued that the problem had everything to do with the country’s leadership. For many years, the USSR was led by a single leader untouched by criticism. Though the situation had changed, Yeltsin accused some of his colleagues of “flattery.”

Yeltsin ended by requesting to be released from his candidacy for full membership in the Politburo and for the Moscow City Committee to reconsider his position there as well.\textsuperscript{41} It was the first time in Soviet history that anyone requested to be released from the Politburo before retirement. The fact that Yeltsin’s outburst erupted in

\textsuperscript{39} V Politbiuro TsK KPSS, 258.
\textsuperscript{41} For an excerpted transcript of his speech, see \textit{V Politbiuro TsK KPSS}, 258-259. For the full transcript, see the meeting transcript in \textit{Izvestiia TsK KPSS} 2 (1989).
the midst of these lengthy discussions of Soviet history goes overlooked in nearly every account of this dramatic moment. A long list of Politburo and Central Committee members responded to Yeltsin’s speech. Gorbachev then scolded Yeltsin, asking if he needed to be reminded of political etiquette, belittling him for making the entire meeting just about him, criticizing his words for lack of theoretical foundations. He attempted to return to discussing the anniversary speech, but found his way back to Yeltsin.

Gorbachev confessed that he had received a letter from him in September warning that if the General Secretary failed to speed up Perestroika, Yeltsin himself would carve a new path. Perhaps, the disrespectful outburst is what Yeltsin had in mind?, he asked, attempting to further undermine him.42

The scandal under wraps, Gorbachev delivered his speech “October and Perestroika: The Revolution Continues” on November 2, 1987 at the Ceremonial Session of the Upper Soviet of the USSR in Moscow. As in “Lessons of History,” Gorbachev acknowledged excesses in political violence under Stalin, including the enormous death rate in the countryside during collectivization and forced industrialization. Yet for the first time, he explicitly addressed political repression. His words: “mass repression touched many thousands of Party members and non-Party [people].”43 In an effort to explain what made this violence possible, he cited the “administrative-command system” and “burgeoning bureaucracy.”44 “It’s perfectly obvious,” he said, “that the lack of

42 *V Politbiuro TsK KPSS*, 260-262. October 21, 1987, the same day, Gorbachev forced Aliev into retirement. Planned well before the meeting, it may have been an attempt to appease different political extremes of the Politburo without bringing up Yeltsin’s letter. Aliev was still quite young and robust. In the early 1990s, he became President of Azerbaijan.


necessary level of democratization of Soviet society made possible the cult of personality as well as the violation of legality, and brought about the repression of the 1930s.\textsuperscript{45}

At the October 15, 1987 Politburo meeting, Soviet leaders had commended this explanation. After Gorbachev delivered the speech on November 4, 1987, they thought it came off brilliantly and commended his work. The national press underscored the significance of Gorbachev’s speech to the entire world by privileging the publication of praiseful responses from abroad. On November 5, 1987, \textit{Pravda} printed a report on the response to the address in different parts of the world. On November 7 and 8, 1987, \textit{Komsomol’skaia pravda} published letters from foreign leaders in the near abroad and West celebrating the speech. Neither of these newspapers published responses from Soviet people in the week following the holiday.

In the months following the 70\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the October Revolution, Gorbachev increasingly promoted widespread discussions of the Soviet past and reiterated the points of his November speech at numerous meetings with the country’s most important media figures. He seamlessly incorporated the discussion of the past into the campaign to democratize Soviet politics that dated back to the January 1987 Plenum. In light of his speech, the Politburo initiated educational reforms, so that curriculum at all levels would incorporate the new lessons on history. The Central Committee focused on educational reforms at the February 1988 Plenum, which also marked the public dismissal of Yeltsin from the Politburo.

\textsuperscript{45}Ibid., 422.
“I will not forsake my principles”

Throughout 1987, Nina Andreeva remained an insatiable reader of the press. On January 1, 1988, *Leningradskii rabochii* published another interview with Prokhanov, in which he discussed the letters the newspaper received in response to his first interview, including published and unpublished letters. Encouraged by the publication of her first letter, Andreeva sent another letter to the newspaper. She wrote about the debt the younger generation had to their fathers and grandfathers who fought “for a better future and the maintenance of socialist values,” about the “enormous price” Soviet people paid to “save all humanity from fascist slavery and many nations from complete extinction, including, in particular, the Jews.” She criticized the society created by Perestroika for bringing the USSR to the “brink of the abyss.” This time her letter was not published.

Andreeva remained persistent. Following the February 1988 Plenum, she thought the ideas she articulated in her letters to Prokhanov were relevant to discussion in central political organs. She sent both letters she had submitted to *Leningradskii rabochii* to the prominent Soviet dailies *Pravda*, *Smena*, *Izvestiia*, and *Sovetskaia Rossiia*. Andreeva did not hear back from any of the editors. Then, on February 23, 1988, D.N. Denisov of *Sovetskaia Rossiia* called her on the phone. “We received your two letters, but the length is too long,” he said. The two missives added up to 30 typed pages. “We can publish

48 Responses to Prokhanov’s second interview were published in *Leningradskii rabochii* (19 February 1988), 10.
them,” he continued, “but you have to shorten the material. Can you do this?” Andreeva answered: “Yes, I can.” On March 8, 1988, International Women’s Day, Denisov paid Andreeva a visit at her institute in Leningrad. Employees of major letter departments traveled several times a year to meet those who wrote to them, usually to corroborate the circumstances described in the letter. Denisov’s visit was thus not unheard of, but certainly unusual. He reviewed the abbreviated materials with her. He also asked her to add a paragraph about the repression. Otherwise, they would not send it to print.

51 Ibid.
52 Interview with M.A. Kechkina, editor in the letter department at Komsomol’skaia Pravda, 12 June 2014.
53 “Zhenshchina, priostanovivshaia Perestroiku. Interv’iu s Ninoi Andreevoi.”
Andreeva’s composition appeared as a single letter to the editor in Sovetskaia Rossiia on March 13, 1988. The front page spotlighted her contribution. It included a large picture of Andreeva in a black leather jacket, striking an authoritative pose. Students captivated by her words surrounded her (Image 4.1). A caption written by Denisov introduced Andreeva as a lecturer in physical chemistry at Leningrad Technical Institute and curator of a student discussion club. It stated that she was concerned about Perestroika because the activation of society had been accompanied by “a nihilistic mood” that cast doubt on the achievements of socialism and the Soviet Union. The editor directed readers to her letter about “contemporary problems in political and ideological education [and] the necessity of being guided by our marxist-leninist principles in solving them.”

Andreeva’s letter covered the entirety of page three, appearing under the title “I cannot forsake my principles” (Image 4.2). Following the traditional form of the genre, she began by introducing herself, her work, and her concern for society at large. Recently, she wrote, topics ranging from sex to freedom of “religious propaganda” had come up in the press, but the most explosive discussions concerned history. Here she turned to her work with students. One of her favorite activities was walking with them in the gardens of Peterhof, the summer estate of the Romanovs. Of late, students did not merely discuss history, they fought about it. She described a heated conversation with two veterans of World War Two. The students asked them about political repression during the war. When the soldiers responded they did not witness it themselves, students accused them of hiding the past. Andreeva was incensed. Not only were they rude, but

54 Sovetskaia Rossiia No. 60 (Sunday, March 13, 1988), 1.
they were blinded by their expectations of history rather than seeing it in all of its complexity. She worried that robust discussion that broke out across the Soviet Union since Gorbachev had come to power, which included “political anecdotes, low-grade gossip, [and] hot-topic fantasies,” undermined the political-ideological objectives of Perestroika.

Andreeva traced the problem back to novels, films, and plays that discussed historical themes. She singled out the dramaturge M.F. Shatrov, who in his play “The World of Brest” had Lenin bow before Trotsky, and in “Onward, onward, onward!” blamed Stalin for the deaths of Trotsky and Kirov. Rybakov did the same in Children of the Arbat. Noting the positive reviews of Shatrov’s plays in Pravda and Sovetskaia Rossiia, she took the opportunity to voice her own. In her opinion, the plays failed to reflect the tenets of socialist realism and “distorted” history. Reviewers did not point out that Shatrov and Rybakov took their views of Kirov’s death from enemy historians in the Cold War West. They intimated that only ardent nationalists criticized Shatrov. Andreeva asked how they could make such a comment if they really wanted a heated and open debate about Soviet history? “More than a few defects and instances of one-sidedness have cropped up around us, which are clearly in need of correction,” she wrote.

The example most important to Andreeva was the image of Stalin. Collectivization, industrialization and the cultural revolution had all been “forcefully squeezed into” the notion of the cult of personality, obliterating the ways in which Stalin turned the USSR into a world power. She noted that she personally had no familial connection to Stalin, and that one family member had been repressed but then rehabilitated under Khrushchev. She was also “angry” and “indignant” over the mass
repressions in the 1930s and 1940s, for which she blamed the Party apparatus. These were the lines she added at the request of Denisov. “But the sensible response,” she wrote, “is decisive protest against painting the paradoxical events in a single color.” She cited Churchill’s praise for Stalin’s acumen and boundless energy. She named specific memoirs by Stalin’s contemporaries that those intervening in the debates on the Stalin era always ignored. She compared Stalin to Peter the Great, who had also resorted to violence to built a great state, though people now focused on Peter’s accomplishments. That was ultimately her greatest worry: that in the midst of uncovering the dark moments in Soviet history, people overlooked the country’s great achievements.

Andreeva reflected on different trends in the broad social discussion of Soviet history that she found problematic. The first included the “left-liberal intellectual socialists,” influenced in Andreeva’s opinion by the West. She accused them of falsifying history by focusing only on past mistakes and crimes and failing to mention the country’s accomplishments. “Where has the passion for squandering the authority and worth of leaders of the first socialist country on earth come from?,” she asked. She also faulted these thinkers for “a certain nationless internationalism.” Their “militant cosmopolitanism” encouraged the “rejection” of socialism by making it possible to overlook the role of Russians and Slavs in creating and defending the first socialist country on earth. As in her letter published in Leningradskii rabochii, she quoted Lenin’s admission of three Russian revolutions brought about by the Russian proletariat.

---

56 Her classification of “neoliberals” and “neoslavophiles” came from Prokhanov’s second interview published in Leningradskii rabochii on January 1, 1988. This part of the letter in Sovetskaia Rossiia, roughly the second half of her long statement, was probably based on the second letter she wrote to LR which that newspaper refused to publish.
Additional problematic strands in the discussion grew out of proponents of “peasant socialism,” who believed that the October Revolution undid hundreds of years of accumulation of socialist values on the peasant commune. This group falsified history by focusing on “tyranny” over the peasantry, an “uncritical view of religious-mythical Russian philosophy,” and “old tsarist conceptions of the study of history.” Meanwhile, they ignored the “post-revolutionary stratification of the peasantry,” including the kulaks, and the “revolutionary role of the working class.” Andreeva also noted the equally alarming rise in informal organizations and associations, including the political club “Perestroika” in Leningrad, mentioned in the letter from A. Sungurov published alongside Andreeva’s in Leningradskii rabochii in October 1987, and the informational bulletin “Glasnost” edited by S. Grigoryants (see Chapter Three). The year 1988 witnessed the explosion of such groups, which cropped up as reformers called for the Soviet population to become active in political and social discussions. Andreeva criticized these groups for promoting “socialist pluralism” and “parliamentarianism.” All of this raised one question for Andreeva: “to acknowledge or not acknowledge the role of the Party [and] the working class in building socialism, which also means in Perestroika itself?”

More than ruminating on the national discussion of the Soviet past, Andreeva’s letter meditated on the scripts of Soviet political discourse, just as her first letter to Leningradskii rabochii had done. Her letter was fundamentally an expression of her disappointment with what had happened in the Soviet Union since reformers encouraged glasnost and invited reconsideration of established political scripts. The force of her letter in part derived from her own mastery of the scripts. The document exhibited the
conventions of the genre of the letter to the editor. It also skillfully incorporated recent political texts, including the proceedings of the February (1988) Plenum, which suggested she was politically astute and well-informed. Andreeva also turned reformers’ core statements back on themselves. Throughout the letter, she evoked the words Gorbachev frequently stated since writing “Lessons of History” in summer 1987 that the country should not overlook any aspect of its past. For Andreeva, that included the accomplishments of Stalin and Russians.

Equally as important as Andreeva’s commentary on political scripts was her engagement with Perestroika as a moral venture. Her language leaves no doubt that she perceived ethical development as a core dimension of the reform program. The title itself, “I cannot forsake my principles,” directly referenced Gorbachev. “Even in the spiritual sphere, and perhaps, here above all else, we should act in accordance with our Marxist-Leninist principles,” he stated at the February (1988) Plenum. Andreeva quoted this line in her conclusion. Throughout her letter she insinuated that the moral language of reform had been directed against people like her. She put the “humanism” of the “liberal” intelligentsia in scare quotes. Referencing Abuladze’s film, she wrote that those talking about political repression were demanding “repentance” from Stalinists. For her the language was insidious and hypocritical. It undermined the principles of Marxism-Leninism and socialism as she understood them.

The central ideas of Andreeva’s letter were not new. They had appeared in her own words in Leningradskii rabochii in October 1987 and were on the papers locked up in the safe of that newspaper’s editor-in-chief. This was true of her ruminations on political scripts, her attack on the publication of ideas that contradicted socialism as she
understood it, and her opposition to a broad reconsideration of Stalin’s role in the
development of the Soviet Union. She was a consistent Stalinist, but she was not the only
one left in the Soviet Union. The archive of the letter department of Komsomol’skaia
pravda includes a rich collection of missives from other Gorbachev-era Stalinists. What
changed the message of her letter in Sovetskaia Rossiia was the medium. Published in a
national daily with a large print run, “I cannot forsake my principles” reached hundreds
of thousands more people. This newspaper was also the mouthpiece of the Soviet Central
Committee, meaning her words could have been taken as an articulation of the views
from above. This point is underscored by the fact that local newspapers from Donbass to
Omsk quickly reprinted her letter in full. It was reprinted in 937 periodicals across the
country.\textsuperscript{57}

The day her letter appeared in Sovetskaia Rossiia, Andreeva was not aware of its
publication. She did not subscribe to the newspaper. She entered the doors of her institute
to students clamoring to greet her. “Nina Aleksandrovna!,” they announced. “They
published your article. . .” They gave her a copy that they had bought at a kiosk. She read
the publication, and everything was fine: no unexpected changes or distortions.\textsuperscript{58}

**Responding to Andreeva’s Letter**

The first to respond to Andreeva’s letter were those who read it in Sovetskaia
Rossiia as soon as it came out. This response was not staged from above. The day of its
publication, Yurii Mikhailovich Nesterov was out of town. Born in Siberia to a family of
Leningraders on “the last day of Zhukov’s offensive” (Berlin, 1945), as he stated in an

\textsuperscript{57} “Iz interv’iu 2008 goda,” Obshchestvennaia zhizn ’ Leningrada v gody perestroiki, 1985-1991, 403. This
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 403.
interview, his life was from the start entwined with history. His family had been evacuated from Leningrad during the war, though not before the death of his brother and sister in the blockade. The family returned to Leningrad when he was an infant. He was trained as an engineer and in 1988 worked at the Institute Gidroproekt. He was part of the scientific-technological intelligentsia and since 1987 participated in the political club “Perestroika.” He returned to the office a week after Andreeva’s letter had come out.⁵⁹

Upon his return, he was greeted by colleagues who showed him Andreeva’s publication. They all actively followed the political developments since Gorbachev had come to power, but one thing set Nesterov apart. During one of Gorbachev’s first two years in power, Nesterov wrote a letter to the General Secretary voicing support for greater democratization and popular elections. He was lucky. An employee of the letter department called him at home, said the General Secretary had read his letter, and while the Soviet leader agreed with him and reforms were in the works, they could not be rushed. Nesterov was ecstatic—not just because Mikhail Sergeevich agreed with him, but because he had gotten a personal response. The call made him a celebrity at work. In light of his “active communication” with Gorbachev, Nesterov joked when he recalled the event, his colleagues believed he was just the one to pen a response to Sovetskaia Rossiia about Andreeva’s letter.⁶⁰

Reading her letter, Nesterov was incensed primarily by the politics of the piece. The ideas Andreeva criticized were printed in self-published newspapers with tiny print runs, but her ideas came out in a national daily “with a print run of ten million.” The prominent placement of her letter generated enormous attention. In Leningrad, he noted,  

⁵⁹ Interview with Iu.M. Nesterov, 14 October 2014, St. Petersburg.  
⁶⁰ Ibid.
participants in regional Party committees held conferences that took up Andreeva’s agenda. They denounced Shatrov and “muckrakers” who “blackened” Soviet history. These conferences were even aired on television. To his mind, this was not glasnost.\footnote{Iu. Nesterov, “Otkrytoe pis’mo N.A. Andreevoi,” Archiv Museia politicheskoi istorii, f. 2, Inv. No. VS-7430-1, ll. 1-2.}

His remarks speak to the enormous publicity that made Andreeva’s letter a national event. The programmatic nature of her letter also pained him. He asked if future historians would consider her letter the “beginning of the end of a period of liberalization.”

His letter addressed Andreeva’s discussion of the past. He identified with a small group of people who, keeping the achievements and tragedies of Soviet history in view, concluded in a direct reference to Abuladze’s “Repentance”: “It’s not this road that leads to the Temple.” Nesterov argued that forced industrialization was only possible in an administrative-command state that ultimately sowed the problems of the Gorbachev-era economy. Even with the “Victory” in the Great Patriotic War—which he considered “holy,” “which not even the most malicious ‘muckrakers’ […] mention with a trifling of irony”—he believed it was necessary to ask hard questions, like whether the Soviet government had done all it could to prevent war. He connected himself to the critical stance on the Stalin era cultivated by certain cultural figures. He also aligned himself with reformers who sought moral rejuvenation through an open discussion of the Soviet past.\footnote{Ibid., ll. 3-4.}

Nesterov hesitated to touch the subject of Stalin, for criticisms of the leader were perpetually attached to “this or that class, social group, or political party.” For him, it was important to ask about the responsibility of the Party, “but our glasnost has still not developed to the point [of asking this question],” he wrote. He addressed Andreeva’s use
of Churchill’s words to show Stalin’s strengths, stating that the two world leaders were equally “cynical and unethical politicians.” He asked what exactly Stalin should be praised for, since it had been shown his role in the October Revolution was small, that he routed out opposition at the expense of turning creative unions into robots, that he collectivized the countryside and industrialized the cities in such a way that the USSR continued to pay the price for the process. Then there was the “bacchanalia of murder,” too. He turned to Gorbachev’s seventieth-anniversary speech: “the exact number they’ll never be able to establish, but the more or less believable number, I am certain, will at some point be pronounced by a high council, and it will not be ‘thousands and thousands,’ as M.S. Gorbachev spoke in November of last year but many, many millions.”63

For Nesterov, the history of Stalin was bound up with the moral development of socialism and the moral aims of Perestroika. He ended the long line of “accomplishments” that Stalin might take credit for with the USSR’s international reputation as the “Evil Empire”. The moniker “does not correspond to today’s activities,” he wrote, “but is engrained in the consciousness of people by virtue of its horror, [and] is one of the barriers on the path to achieving peace on earth.” He called Stalin “a great evildoer” and “a genius of evil deeds.” Yet the problem was not Stalin alone. Responsibility also lay “with the Party, which created god, was executed by god, and nonetheless continued to glorify god.” Responsibility belonged to the entire country, as well, to all the people who inherited the Soviet past.

Discussing the Soviet past in all its colors brought Nesterov to the question of the future of socialism. He asked whether or not the USSR had really built it, and if they built it right or not. He answered:

63 Ibid., ll. 4-5.
The path that our country has taken, in my opinion is one of the possible branches of socialism, but, as has been shown, the branch is a dead end. But this need not lead us to grief, need not bring us to the conclusion that socialism has already demonstrated its historical failure, need not try to return us to the “starting point” of 1917, 1929, or 1956 and “start with a clean slate;” moreover, such attempts are absolutely meaningless, but it is necessary with wisdom and perseverance, which is entirely in the nature of our people, to achieve a real transition of our country on different rails of the socialist path.\textsuperscript{64}

This passage suggests that for him, like the Soviet leaders themselves, the discussion of the Soviet past need not explode the Soviet project. Just the opposite. He anticipated that it would put the country on firmer ground, clarifying the reputation of the USSR on the world stage and increasing the moral legitimacy of socialism.

The qualification of his scathing exploration of Soviet history was not an attempt to fit within the bounds of the Soviet political script or make his letter “politically correct,” in the Soviet sense. One of the outstanding characteristics of his letter is its sincerity. The sharp imagery, originality of argumentation, and dexterity of rhetoric suggest the author produced it with the force of his entire being. Rather, for him the socialist project was alive with potential. In interview, Nesterov called history “kerosene and milk in one cup.” This is true for the United States as well as the Soviet Union, he stressed; every country bears a moral responsibility for examining its past. His attempt to do so under Gorbachev was intended not a destructive attempt to criticize the project as a whole, but as a generative corrective.

Nesterov’s essay also meditated on the question of political scripts. Andreeva’s criticism of representing a plurality of political opinions in the media went hand in hand with her mastery of Soviet political discourse, knowing how to deploy quotations from recent political presentations and criticizing political developments using the logic of

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., l. 8.
reformers themselves. Nesterov fully supported plurality of ideas. The last section of his letter discussed the possibility of a multi-party state, reviving the Congress of People’s Deputies on all levels, and having free and open elections. He did not state his opinion on any of these topics, but supported broad discussion of them across society. His commitment to a plurality of ideas manifested itself in his relationship to political scripts. In his discussion of Gorbachev, for instance, he did not flatter or pander. He directly criticized Gorbachev’s statement that only “thousands and thousands” were victims of Stalin-era political repression. Yet he liked Gorbachev. From the day he first saw him on Nevsky Prospect during his visit to Leningrad, he admired that the young leader spoke “without notes” and “even made [people] laugh.” He explored these ideas while remaining committed to the socialist project.65

On April 4, 1988, Nesterov signed his letter and sent it off to Sovetskaia Rossia, Pravda, Literaturnaia gazeta, and other major Soviet newspapers. Thousands of Soviet people joined him in writing immediate responses to Andreeva’s publication. How did his letter compare to other response? Unpublished letters from the archive of Komsomol’skaia pravda exhibit a number of similarities to Nesterov’s response. Government bureaucrat V. Bolshakov from Tula and M.V. Parfenov from Omsk both took issue with her relationship to the past. “In our country, history is an indictment of the past by the present,” wrote Bolshakov.66 Both criticized Andreeva’s portrait of Stalin. What would his image look like from the perspective of “innocent victims of repression?” asked Parfenov. “She does not mention destruction of the best Party cadres, scholars, and

65 Interview with Iu.M. Nesterov, 14 October 2014, St. Petersburg.
66 RGANI, f. M-98, op. 2, d. 28, l. 8.
then how they threw into prison who were, as is their right, far from politics.”

Both took issue with her reference to Churchill, Bolshakov going so far to compare Andreeva to the British wartime leader for having a “weak argument” and nonetheless “speaking loudly.” Like Nesterov, Bolshakov took issue with her treatment of dissidents and emigres. Arguing in favor of those who had left the country, he asked why no Nobel laureates were rushing to the USSR. Regarding dissidents, he believed the connection between dissidents and Perestroika was unfounded, as was her treatment of Shatrov’s “Onward, Onward, Onward…” as if it were “Two Thousand Words” by the Czech writer Ludvik Vaculik, a manifesto of the Prague Spring in 1967-1968. Bolshakov traced the origins of Perestroika to the unrealized visions of the Soviet shestidesiatniki, the generation that came to age in the 1960s—ironic given his attempt to distance recent reform from the Prague Spring. Finally, Parfenov underscored Andreeva’s criticism of glasnost. “Glasnost doesn’t have alternatives—either you have it or you don’t,” he wrote. “Limited glasnost doesn’t exist—this is already something else.”

The letters from Bolshakov and Parfenov differed from Nesterov’s in that they emphasized that Andreeva’s letter was out of sync with the Party line on Perestroika. In this regard Bolshakov’s letter was particularly forceful. “To the extent that all foundational statements of Nina Andreeva’s letter revise the party line of the Central Committee of our Party on Perestroika, I though it possible to give an open answer on the letter,” he wrote. He further warned Andreeva to not to “bury herself” by contradicting the Party line—words that ironically engaged Andreeva’s own call for greater ideological

---

67 Ibid., l. 2.
68 Ibid., l. 9.
69 Ibid., l. 9.
70 Ibid., l. 3.
71 Ibid., l. 7.
policing. The fact that both letters emphasized this point may have to do with the reason why they ended up in the archive of Komsomol'skaia pravda: the newspaper fervently supported reform politics, and yet rarely diverged from the line of reform. This point also and again suggests that Soviet people were deeply engaged in the scripts of Soviet political discourse. Citing statements could bolster one’s argument and also resonated with their personal beliefs. The letters from Bolshakov and Parfenov were not published in Komsomol'skaia pravda, though Bolshakov’s letter, sent to the newspaper on March 13, 1988, the day Andreeva’s letter appeared, was processed by the letter department and got a personal response. A. Tepliuk, assistant head of the department of propaganda, wrote on August 8, 1988: “Thank you for the interesting letter. It helps our work.”

In the weeks following the publication of Andreeva’s letter, responses like those of Nesterov, Bolshakov, and Parfenov flourished, yet few broke the surface of public silence. There are two notable exceptions. On March 23, 1988, filmmaker Aleksandr Gelman spoke before the Soviet Cinematographers Union and criticized Andreeva’s letter. On March 27, 1988, the newspaper Moskovskie novosti published a letter from Aleksandr Levikov criticizing her letter. This publication was unprecedented. No other national media outlet published a single critical response to Andreeva’s letter before April 5, 1988. Yet not all responses criticized Andreeva. While critical responses flourished below the surface of public discourse, loud support for her positions received great publicity. Nesterov mentioned the conferences convened by Local Party

72 Ibid., l. 10.
73 Ibid., l. 6.
Committees in Leningrad that were also broadcast on television. The local Sverdlovsk (now Ekaterinburg) newspaper Ural’skii rabochii, which republished Andreeva’s letter on March 25, 1988, reportedly received responses that disagreed and agreed with her ideas. By characterizing the critical ones as “uncompromisingly negating” and “polemicizing” her ideas, the editorial remarks bolstered her positions.76

When Nesterov sent his letter off to national newspapers, he dreamed his letter would cover a whole page in a major newspaper, just like hers did.77 At ten single spaced typed A4 pages, Nesterov’s letter was roughly half the length of the materials Andreeva originally sent to Sovetskaia Rossia. He was hardly the only one with the wish. From March to August 1988, Sovetskaia Rossia alone received 3,400 responses.78 Komsomol’skaia pravda reportedly received several thousand as well.79 Andreeva reported that her institute received thousands of letters of well, which, against the law, she was not permitted to read.80 Ural’skii rabochii received 757 letters between March 28 and April 3, 1988, “tens” of which concerned her publication.81 It’s possible that Andreeva’s letter generated more responses than any other letter printed during Perestroika.

Nesterov’s wish was not granted, though his letter was partially picked up in the press. On April 15, 1988, Sovetskaia Rossia filled an entire page with diverse responses to Andreeva’s letter, including an excerpt from Nesterov’s:

Young people argue with you. Young people thirstily search for the truth. Young people begin all the more clearly to distinguish believable principles from

---

76 Ural’skii rabochii, date unclear, page unclear, report on letters from 28 March to 3 April 1988.
77 Interview with Iu.M. Nesterov, 14 October 2014, St. Petersburg.
78 “Spravka o rabote s pis’mami chitatelei v redaktssii gazety ‘Sovetskaia Rossia’,” RGANI, f. 100, op. 1, d. 317, l. 65.
79 Interview with M.A. Kechkina, editor in the letter department at Komsomol’skaia Pravda, 12 June 2014.
80 “Pochta minuvshei nedeli,” Ural’skii rabochii (5 April 1988), 1.
81 Ibid.
dull dogmatism tangled up with hypocrisy. Young people want to create a truly socialist future for themselves and their children. Is it all that different from what members of other generations want? Are we really unable to achieve our goals together?

I believe we can.

From Nesterov’s perspective, the newspaper left out the most thoughtful parts of his letter, publishing only his statements that made him sound like a Party mockingbird. In this way his indictment of Andreeva’s letter met the same fate as the ideas she criticized: the bulk of his letter did not see the light of day in any major publication. Despite glasnost, his letter came out in full only in a “self-published journal with a microscopic print run” in Leningrad.

Redefining Glasnost

The forces that brought the excerpt of Nesterov’s letter to publication were entwined with the political reaction to Andreeva’s article, which developed much more slowly than the response to her letter among average readers of the Soviet press. What accounts for the delay is the fact that on March 13, 1988 Gorbachev was on his way to Yugoslavia, and Yakovlev was headed out to Mongolia. The masterminds of Perestroika out of town, Ligachev in his position as Secretary of the Central Committee convened a meeting on March 14, 1988 of editors of the most important periodicals in the USSR. In his memoirs, Ligachev recalled that he raised the question about how to relate to the distant Soviet past. Those in attendance had various responses. He advised the editors to peruse Andreeva’s article, which he thought articulated a useful attitude towards “muckrakers” and “reckless defiling of the past.” He recalled that many remarked on

---

82 Sovetskaia Rossia (15 aprelia 1988), 3.
83 Interview with Iu.M. Nesterov, 14 October 2014, St. Petersburg.
Andreeva’s reaction to the “muddy stream of anti-historical, anti-Soviet materials in the press.”

Ligachev’s response set a temporary political stance on the letter, but ultimately failed to last. The political reaction with greater longevity took root when Gorbachev returned to Moscow on March 18, 1988. He first discussed the article with Politburo members during a break at the Congress of Collective Farm Workers on March 23, 1988. He then pursued further discussion in the Politburo on March 24, 1988. Gorbachev personally was irate. “Pay attention to the relationship to this article, its value as a standard, recommendations to reprint and all to propagandize the article. For this reason the position of some of our comrades creates anxiety,” he stated. I.T. Frolov, assistant editor of Pravda, warned Gorbachev in a memo that the letter was reprinted “as if on command” in Ural’skii rabochii, Gor’kovskaia pravda, Vechernyi Donbass, Voronezhskaia pravda, Omskaia pravda, Novgorodskaia pravda. Suspecting that the letter was a sign of some of his closest Party associates collaborating against him, he questioned whether or not Andreeva was even a real person. “How could she have known what [the academic] Fedoseev spoke with Gorbachev about, or Ligachev with Yakovlev?,” he asked. Letters were invaluable sources—in fact, the main source of public opinion for leaders. Yet in this case, Gorbachev staunchly refused to see the person behind the letter.

86 Gorbachev referred to the break time discussion in the Politburo meeting on 24 March 1988. See V TsK KPSS, 299.
87 Brown, The Gorbachev Factor, 173.
88 V TsK KPSS, 299.
89 From “Dokladnaia zapiska (ideologia i gazeta)” (12 apreliia 1988), in the Gorbachev Foundation, f. 2, op. 1, d. 1135.
The Politburo convened to discuss the article from March 24-25, 1988. Gorbachev believed the letter challenged clear ideological positions articulated at the February (1988) Plenum. He argued that “unity, mutual trust, and clarity” were more important than ever.\(^{90}\) All this, ironically, even in a time of glasnost and democratization. On the horizon, he saw the upcoming Nineteenth All-Union Party Conference—a political meeting that involved not just Central Committee members but high-ranking Party members from across the Soviet Union. The last All-Union Party Conference had convened under Khrushchev, and Gorbachev was resurrecting the tradition to further socialist renewal. The upcoming conference would address key ideological issues, but why have a conference if Politburo members could not agree on these questions?

The prolific rumor mill had it that the Politburo member in cahoots with Andreeva was Ligachev. Taking the rumor to the extreme, one woman publicly accused Andreeva of sexual relations with him. According to a Moscow correspondent of the Italian Communist Party newspaper *L’Unita*, Andreeva sent a draft to Ligachev and his revised copy was heavily edited by the staff of *Sovetskaia Rossiia*.\(^ {91}\) According to Cherniaev’s records, after the Politburo meeting on March 24, 1988 Ligachev stated that the editor-in-chief of *Sovetskaia Rossiia* had visited him and that he (Ligachev) liked the article.\(^ {92}\) In the meeting of the Politburo on March 24, 1988, V. P. Nikonov stated that the article came before the Secretariat of the Central Committee for “literally five minutes.” On his account, “Ligachev said that these questions were worthy of discussion” and gave it his blessing.\(^ {93}\)

---

\(^{90}\) Gorbachev Foundation, f. 2, op. 2, d. 9112, l. 2.

\(^{91}\) Davies, *Soviet History in the Gorbachev Revolution*, 143.

\(^{92}\) V TsK KPSS, 306.

\(^{93}\) Gorbachev Foundation, f. 2, op. 2, d. 9112, l. 32.
Attempting to sort out the issue, Gorbachev asked each person at the Politburo meeting to state their response to Andreeva’s article. The meeting proceeded in a cordial manner. Each speaker iterated his (or in one case—her) commitment to unity in the Politburo. Each person also voiced support for perestroika and glasnost. Even the most conservative members stated that there was no other way to move the Soviet Union forward than reform. Yet they held different opinions on Andreeva’s article. Yakovlev delivered a twenty-minute speech in which he juxtaposed her arguments to Marx, Engels and Lenin as well as Gorbachev’s 70th-Anniversary speech. “The article pointedly opposed perestroika,” he concluded.94 V. A. Medvedev, who one time had actually worked at the same Institute where Nina Andreeva was employed, fully agreed with Yakovlev. “In this article it’s impossible to find a truthful attempt to clarify the truth, to explain a point of confusion, to bring them into the open to discuss and get down to the heart of the matter,” he stated. The article “is sharply directed against perestroika.”95

The opinions of Yakovlev and Medvedev marked an extreme among those attending the meeting. Shevardnadze, who called the article “disgusting” (vrednaia), more moderately argued that “such an article probably has the right to exist as well.”96 His position resonated with the line on glasnost and democratization that Gorbachev promoted when he did not suspect his associates of working behind his back. Most Politburo members expressed support for Andreeva’s letter. V.M. Chebrikov brought up Gorbachev’s 70th anniversary speech, thanks to which “we have an orientation” in the Politburo on the question of history. But his own personal experience would not allow him to stop acknowledging Soviet achievements under Stalin. He passionately stated:

94 Ibid., l. 2, 9.
95 Ibid., l. 18 c.
96 Ibid., l. 38.
I would like to say something about myself. I fought. There is a newspaper from
the front that discusses forcing the Dneipr. There is a big article about the battle I
took part in. It says: when the battle began, [zampolit] Zolotov took up the order
of Officer Chebrikov: “For the Motherland, for Stalin, onward!” Soldiers dashed
into battle, seized the first trenches, second trenches, and triumphed. There was
not just one such battle, and I myself said not just once: “For Stalin, for the
Motherland, into battle!” And we believed it.97

Just as personal experience touched off criticism of Andreeva’s letter, personal
experience gave way to support, too.

One of the central points in Andreeva’s article concerned the plurality of opinions
expressed in the press and the variety of cultural works given to publication, performance,
or showing. The Politburo revisited this point. “Even in moments of great success of the
people, some writers and cinematographers try to raise elements of muckraking,”
Ligachev lamented. M.S. Solomentsev criticized erotic scenes in Perestroika-era films.98
Only Shevardnadze countered: I don’t agree with my comrades who say that it is
necessary to forbid certain theater production and so on. Such visions are the right of the
author, the right of the artist. He [the author, the artist] differs from us, sees the world
differently."99 They reached no consensus.

One thing the Politburo agreed on was that an official rejoinder was in order.
Medvedev advised that “the response should be not an emotional outcry, but present
serious analysis with well-argued discussion through concepts and criticism.” His words
echoed the Politburo’s recommendation for the discussion of the New Edition of the
Party Program in October 1985. He recommended placing the response in Sovetskaia

97 Ibid., l. 16.
98 Ibid., l. 24. The film “Little Vera” (1988), which premiered in the Soviet Union the same month that
Andreeva’s article came out in Sovetskaia Rossiiia, was the first Soviet film to show sexual intercourse on
the screen.
99 Gorbachev Foundation, f. 2, op. 2, d. 9112, l. 41.
Rossiia, or “better yet,” Pravda. On April 5, 1988, the official rejoinder appeared in Pravda and Sovetskaia Rossia. Over the next few days, it was reprinted in every newspaper that had published Andreeva’s letter.

The content of “The Principles of Perestroika: The Quality of Revolution in Thought and Action” reflected the arguments Yakovlev advanced in his long attack on Andreeva’s letter on March 24, 1988. The article appeared without the name of its author, suggesting it was material from the Party. It also did not mention Andreeva’s name in order to bolster the statement’s intellectual tone. The article confirmed the Party line articulated in Gorbachev’s seventieth-anniversary Speech and reiterated the material of the February (1988) Plenum.

The official rejoinder opened the floodgates of public response, which underscores the potential gulf between broad social discourse and discourse represented in print even during glasnost. Komsomol’skaia pravda was among the first prominent daily newspapers to respond. In contrast to Yakovlev’s article in Pravda, KP editors responded by reproducing a letter from one of their readers. They picked a letter from a woman who, like Andreeva, had worked at a university, though this writer had already retired from her position. E. A. Okuntsova explained at the start of her letter that she spent thirty years teaching descriptive geometry and technical drawing at the Novosibirsk Institute of Railroad Engineering. She, too, had spent many years as chief organizer of extracurricular groups for students. Her family had a much more tragic background than

---

100 Ibid., l. 20.
101 Ibid., l. 22.
102 “Printsi perestroiki: revoliutsionnost’ myshleniia i deistviini,” Pravda No. 96 (5 April 1988), 2. Published responses (letters from readers) to this article appeared a week later. See Pravda No. 103 (12 April 1988), 1, and Pravda No. 105 (14 April 1988), 3.
103 E. A. Okuntsova, “Ne otstupim” Komsomol’skaia pravda No 89 (Sunday, 17 April 1988), 2.
Andreeva. In 1936, Okuntsova’s father, a former Chekist, was sentenced to prison. He remained there for 17 years. In 1957 he was rehabilitated and received a pension. Meanwhile, despite Stalin’s promise that “the son will not pay for the crimes of the father,” she and her mother were sent to Siberia in 1937 as family members of “an enemy of the people.” In an effort to shed their past, they burned their documents that had NKVD stamps and from 1943 forward lived in Novosibirsk.

Okuntsova stated that Andreeva’s letter “stunned and upset” her. It seemed to her “a sign of returning to the past.” She then leveled a number of arguments against the letter. Okuntsova quoted Andreeva’s point that students received news from western radio stations. “Is that bad?,” asked Okuntsova. “In my opinion, not really. Better to discuss problems gossiped about by others openly, let them shake someone, [then] sort it out, understand, have the final word on the subject.” She then went on to quote Andreeva’s description of students’ discussion with the soldier. Here she criticized the soldier and the Andreeva alike. “If we’re going to answer like that and commentate like that, then we will only intensify students’ ‘hypertrophied’ perception,” she wrote. She pointed out that the soldier should have mentioned that to her knowledge 1 in 5 officers were repressed in 1937-1938.

In her closing paragraphs, Okuntsova took a hard stand against Stalin. “We won the war, as it’s become well-known now, not because of but despite Stalin,” she wrote, and added parenthetically: “Just read the memoirs of G. K. Zhukov.” She concluded: “The entire letter is in essence the apotheosis of Stalinism, a defense of Stalin’s ‘honor,’ his followers [and] supporters.” Students needed more than that. They needed “the truth.”
Nearly every other prominent publication in the Soviet Union followed suit, similarly publishing letters from readers that stood in for the periodical’s response to Andreeva. *Pravda* published response letters on April 12 and 14, 1988. *Sovetskaia Rossiia* published response letters on April 12 and 15, 1988, including the excerpt from Nesterov’s. A pro-Gorbachev letter penned by well-known intellectuals appeared under the title “More glasnost, more democracy, more socialism!” in *Pravda* on April 19, 1988 and again in *Literaturnaia gazeta* on April 20, 1988. Political commentator Fedor Burlatskii wrote a long piece titled “What kind of socialism the people need” for *Literaturnaia gazeta*, also published on April 20, 1988. *Leningradskia pravda* printed five letters under the title “Supporting Leninism” on April 20, 1988. In the last week of April, *Ogonek* published editorial remarks by V. Korotich responding to Andreeva’s letter along with one reader’s letter. In all of these cases, the responses criticized and denounced Andreeva. Intellectuals sought to reclaim the promises they believed Perestroika had already made. Her letter had also motivated the “liberal” intelligentsia to articulate the position that the discussion of the “distant” Soviet past was integral to socialist renewal. That an open reappraisal would undermine the Soviet project was not on their minds, either.

Ironically, the consistency of responses made clear that there were still clear bounds on what the press could publish. Periodicals gave voice to difficult issues and encouraged discussion more than ever before, and yet ideological conformity was to some extent still essential. As long as it supported their own positions, even the liberal editors and intellectuals used it to their advantage. As for Andreeva’s reaction, she called the official rejoinder “unpardonable boorishness and disrespect towards the person who
appeared in the lines \textit{(skvozila v strochkakh)}.”\textsuperscript{104} She had a point. Once the discussion went public, it responded not to her personally but to a political position that overshadowed the person behind her letter.

In the highest echelons of state politics, Andreeva’s letter ultimately gave way to an effort to redefine the concept of glasnost in such a way that precluded her intervention in the debate on the Soviet past. In May 1988, the Central Committee convened to discuss the agenda of the upcoming All-Union Conference and produced a list of theses for the meeting. Thesis One summarized the ideological-political goals: “The Party will accordingly carry out policies of openness and glasnost, freedom of discussion of problems of the past and the present.”\textsuperscript{105} This statement was a direct response to Nina Andreeva and all those Gorbachev perceived as her collaborators.

As leaders confirmed the free and open discussion of the Soviet past, they raised glasnost to new moral heights. The Theses stated that “only such policies will further the ethical regeneration of Soviet society [and] liberation from everything foreign to its humane nature.”\textsuperscript{106} In a 1988 interview with American Sovietologist Stephen Cohen, Yakovlev characterized glasnost as “the development of the individual himself, of his moral fiber, so that personal choices can be made on the basis of high moral criteria, not on the basis of primitive egotism, opportunism, or even worse considerations.”\textsuperscript{107} Later, Yakovlev even referred to glasnost as a “mechanism,” as if it were a concrete object that transformed society and the individual.\textsuperscript{108}

\textsuperscript{105} TEZISY Tsentral’nogo Komiteta KPSS k XIX Vsesoiuznoi partiinoi konferentsii. Odobreny Plenumom TsK KPSS 23 maia 1988 goda (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo Politicheskoi literatury, 1988), 4-5.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{108} Undated letter from Yakovlev to family friend (late 1989/early 1990), GARF, f. 10063, op. 2, d. 529, l. 3.
The new definition of glasnost was codified at the Nineteenth All-Union Party Conference in June-July 1988. The “Resolution on Glasnost” stated:

To the present day there are cases of persecutions and even unlawful punishments for criticism. We have not extirpated cases when glasnost is used in the interest of individual or group ambitions, which destroy normal relations of mutual communication and comradely insistence on high standards among people. We do not always put into practice the essential principle of glasnost, which is that the freedom to express one’s opinions should serve the cause of elevating the personality (lichnost’ ) and protecting its dignity rather than humiliating it through slander and offensive labels.¹⁰⁹

The meaning of glasnost had come far from what it was when Gorbachev first used the word in 1985. Tamed by the fires of the Nina Andreeva scandal, it had come as close as it ever would in the Soviet period to “freedom of speech.”

**Conclusion**

Andreeva’s letter forever changed the lives of many individuals. The letter encouraged Nesterov’s participation in informal political groups in Leningrad. He became an organizing member of the local “Narodnyi front,” and he was elected a deputy to the Russian Congress of People’s Deputies. In the early 1990s, he was one of two founders of the highly influential political party “Iabloko.” Following the Soviet collapse, he was elected to the Russian national Congress. Traveling the reverse trajectory, Andreeva’s letter marked the end of Ligachev’s political career. In September 1988, he was dismissed from governmental posts. Yet Andreeva herself paid the biggest price for the letter. It wrapped her up an arduous trial with the woman who publically accused her of having sexual relations, whom she accused of slander. It also cost her and her husband their careers. They were both fired from their academic appointments by the end of 1988.

Denied pensions, they were banished to penury even before the collapse of the Russian economy in the 1990s.\textsuperscript{110} Andreeva dedicated her life to the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks, a political party that she founded in the years following the publication of her letter that exists to this day.

Andreeva’s letter also generated a turning point in the reform process. It pushed the discussion of the “distant” Soviet past far beyond what even Politburo members conceded in Gorbachev’s speech on the 70\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the October Revolution. It generated great rifts between top political reformers—divides that dated back at least to the discussion of Rybakov’s *Children of the Arbat* in October 1986, but became all the more prominent and divisive in spring 1988. Throughout the scandal with Yeltsin, a politician who Gorbachev long believed had a great deal of potential, Gorbachev proved to be a talented intermediary between various forces in the top political organs.

Andreeva’s letter unleashed forces that exceeded his ability to reconcile. Ultimately, her letter spurred the articulation of discussion of the past as a protected political value. Only after the publication of Andreeva’s letter in *Sovetskaia Rossiia* did discussion of the past also become written into the concept of glasnost. In line with Nesterov’s suggestion in his letter, Gorbachev announced at the Nineteenth All-Union Party Conference that in the near future, the Politburo would revive the system of popularly elected Congress of People’s Deputies even at the national level. Beyond 1988, throughout the 1990s, and even today, Andreeva’s name stood and stands in for a certain political perspective that is conservative and oriented towards the achievements of Stalin.

CHAPTER FIVE
Activating the Citizenry

In the Soviet Union during Perestroika, socialist democracy meant the active involvement of Soviet people in politics at every level. Democratization was the process of bringing broad participation about. Reformers traced these concepts not to the capitalist West but to Lenin, who believed that “every kitchen maid should rule the state” and that “only the uneducated person stood outside of politics.” By linking democracy to Lenin, reformers hinged democratization to the humanist vision that they believed was at the heart of the Soviet project and Perestroika. In order for the broadest swaths of the population to participate in politics, great care had to be given to education and personal development. Each person had to be activated, their full potential unleashed, and their eyes trained to see that their actions were not for him or herself alone, but for society at large. You could not force people to be political. Only a well-rounded education could bring each person to value participation in politics of their own accord.

The First USSR Congress of People’s Deputies, which convened in Moscow from May 25 to June 9, 1989, marked dynamic developments in the history of Soviet democratization. Gorbachev’s announcement of the new congress system in July 1988 marked a shift from the belief that democracy could be achieved through existing Party institutions, such as the Komsomol and Party organizations at every geographic level—a

---

1 For passages in which reformers link democratization to Lenin, see Mikhail Gorbachev, “O sozyve ocherednogo XXVII S”ezda KPSS i zadachakh, sviazannym s ego podgotovkoi i provedeniem,” Materialy plenuma TsK KPSS 23 aprelia 1985 goda (Moskva: Izdatel’stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1985), 20; and Mikhail Gorbachev, “Doklad General’nogo sekretaria TsK KPSS tovarishcha Gorbacheva M.S.,” XXVII S”ezd Kommunisticheskoi Partii Sovetskogo Soiuza, Stenograficheskii otchet (Moskva: Politizdat, 1986), 77.
view that characterized the years 1985 to 1986—to the conviction that successful democratization required new institutions. The USSR Congress of People’s Deputies was modeled on the Congress of People’s Deputies that existed in the USSR on the republic level, but diverged in several important ways: it would be formed of delegates selected through competitive elections; delegates would come from every republic, krai and territorial okrug; Party membership was not a prerequisite for running; and the Congress itself would be widely broadcast for the population at large. Upwards of 88% of the eligible population turned out to vote in the elections, which were held from January through May 1989 and were generally regarded as fair. The elections and the vivacious Congress that followed marked one of the less told revolutions of 1989, a revolutionary year across Eurasia.

One of the Congress’s best-known figures was Andrei Sakharov, a famous Soviet physicist, human rights activist, and in 1989 elected parliamentarian. The unusually rich archives that document his life provide a window into the history of democracy in the USSR, the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies, and popular engagement of Perestroika. Reading the archive with an eye to the history of the humanist aims of reform reveals an unusual portrait of Sakharov. Going all the way back to his early life as a physicist and activist, he appears not as someone for whom speaking out was an act of speaking against the state. Rather, his long honed moral vision developed in dialogue with the broader Soviet socialist language of morality. For the Perestroika period, the archives that document Sakharov’s life further suggest that the Gorbachev era and the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies was not transformative in only the ways that others have suggested. Historian Vladimir Mau emphasizes the shift in reformers’ attention from economic
questions to political questions.² Political scientist Archie Brown stresses the shift from authoritarianism to democracy.³ The case study of Sakharov suggests that the Congress was a moment of personal transformation. Through democratic exercises, Sakharov saw himself coming into his moral being.

Sakharov is also an important prism through which to examine the First USSR Congress of People’s Deputies because people wrote him letters, hundreds of thousands of letters from late 1986 through 1989. The Sakharov Archive in Moscow has preserved 1,937 letters from the period of the Congress alone, May 25-June 9, 1989. The letters have a dual significance. First, the sheer quantity suggests important continuities from the early Soviet period through 1989: namely, that the public letter continued to function as an act of political participation even in a time of new democratic institutions. This point emphasizes the way in which 1989 in the USSR was shaped by deep Soviet traditions, and not simply a turn away from them. Secondly, the content of the letters sheds light on popular engagement of reform during the Congress. The language letter writers employed underscores the extent to which on the popular level the language of morality had become the language of politics. The content of letters also reveals that the Congress was not a moment of transformation for Sakharov alone. People across the USSR also viewed it as such in their own lives and for the country as a whole.

A Soviet Political Activist in the Making

Sakharov is perhaps best known as a Soviet human rights activist. He was also one of the USSR’s prized scientists. In 1949 he authored the first Soviet atomic bomb,

and he co-authored the Soviet hydrogen bomb, which was successfully tested in 1955. To understand Sakharov’s work as a Congressman during Perestroika, it is meaningful to pause on his earlier life and how he became a Soviet political activist well before 1989. While the biographic and even autobiographic literature emphasizes the split in his two identities—one as a physicist, another as a dissident—it is important to see the connection between the two parts of his life. One connection is that his proximity to critical scientific concerns of the state in part made possible his work as a humanist and political activist. More importantly, throughout his youth, higher education, and work experience, he developed the conceptualization of man as an ethical being that inspired his political work. Sakharov is frequently cast as a critic of Soviet society, someone whose outside perspective on the system enabled him to speak out. Yet he shaped his understanding of the moral person with the language of Soviet ideology, in which humanist concerns were as important as they were imperfectly realized. This overlap played a critical role in his political activism in the 1960s and 1980s alike.

Andrei Dmitrievich Sakharov was born on May 21, 1921 in Moscow. On his account, the spark of moral concern was ignited in him by birth. Both his mother and father came from intellectual families. His grandfather on his father’s side was a

---

1 In his memoir, he suggests that his interest in physics and attention to politics were separated by time. The first book of his autobiography is devoted to his early life and career to the 1960s. The second book concentrates on the period following “the turning point” in his life around 1965-1967. See Vospominantia, 351. The bifurcated reading of his life was integrated in Cold War literature. See, for example, Jay Axelbank, “A Talk with a Dissident who built Russia’s Bomb,” Newsweek (1972). It is also the dominant reading of his life in more recent biographies. See George Bailey, The Making of Andrei Sakharov (New York: Viking Penguin, 1989); Jay Bergman, Meeting the Demands of Reason: the life and thought of Andrei Sakharov (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009); G.E. Gorelik, The World of Andrei Sakharov: a Russian physicist’s path to freedom (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Richard Lourie, Sakharov: a biography (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2002).

prominent legal scholar, and one of his most celebrated essays appeared in an anthology of arguments against the death penalty, which also included Lev Tolstoy’s “I cannot be Silent” (Ne mogu molchat’). Sakharov’s family was very proud of this fact. He read the book as a child, and it left a deep impression on him.⁶ Both of Sakharov’s parents were educators. His father was a particularly gifted physics teacher. Even without a doctorate, he worked his way up the educational hierarchy and at the peak of his career taught at a vocational institute in the Soviet capital. His parents were relatively far from politics, and Sakharov never joined the Komsomol or the Party himself.⁷ While relating distantly to the Party, his parents doted over his education. After fifth grade, teachers wanted young Andrei to repeat a grade, but his parents decided to home school him to avoid loosing any time. Sakharov’s father, who by that point had written one of the most accessible and widely used physics textbooks in the Soviet Union, became his personal tutor in science. The education served him well. Sakharov got into the physics department at the prestigious Moscow State University for college in 1938, and was accepted to the Theoretical Department at the elite Physical Institute of the Soviet Academy of Sciences (FIAN) as a doctoral student in 1945.

From childhood to the grave, Sakharov was committed to being an activated person who tried his best to excel at everything he did. For him, this is what it meant to lead a moral life, and his vision had much in common with broader Soviet trends, where activation of the human body and mind indicated moral distinction. After Sakharov

---

⁶ Sakharov, Vospominaniia, 15. Sakharov wrote two memoirs in the 1980s under very different circumstances. The first memoir, Vospominaniia, he wrote in exile in Gorky between 1981 and 1986 and submitted for publication in the US as early as 1987. The second memoir, Gor’kii, Moskva,dalee vezda, recorded only the events of Perestroika, beginning with the path to liberation in 1986 and ending in 1989. He was prepared to print the manuscript before his untimely death in December 1989.
⁷ Sakharov, Vospominaniia, 38, 48, 61.
finished his studies during the war, he decided not to go right to graduate school, though a prestigious MGU professor extended him a personal offer to do so. Instead, he went to apply his knowledge in a factory. He had to “do” something, he emphasized. During the war, he “was not a soldier in that war, but felt like a soldier of another, a scientific-technological one.”

Months before he defended his dissertation in 1948, he accepted a position at the “Object,” the name he gave to the top-secret laboratory where nuclear science was developed in the USSR. Nobody had to convince him to work in thermal-nuclear science. His “exertion, engagement and activation,” he insisted, came from him alone.

Humanistic concerns never failed to catch Sakharov’s attention. He saw poetry even in theoretical physics. “The thermonuclear reaction is the secret source of energy of the stars and the Sun, the source of life on Earth and possibly the reason for [the planet’s] doom,” he reminisced. The views of his colleagues at the “Object” shaped his perspective on political questions, bending them in the humanist direction for which he later became well known. The “Object” also brought him face to face with the underworld of the Soviet project: the extensive system of forced labor. Not only did prisoners build the laboratory, but the “Object” stood adjacent to the camp where inmates lived until the amnesty of 1953. The scientists looked down over hungry prisoners from their living quarters. When they were sick, the two populations were treated in the same infirmary.

---

8 Ibid., 133.  
9 Ibid., 132.  
10 Ibid., 133.  
11 Ibid., 152.  
12 Ibid., 154-155.
Over the course of his career, Sakharov’s proximity to the pinnacle of Soviet weaponry transformed his political observations. In the 1940s, he experienced the science of atomic and thermal-nuclear explosions as “a true ‘paradise for theory’.”¹³ In the USSR and the US alike, other scientists who did the same work described a similar experience. They weren’t necessarily thinking about the political or moral implications of their work. It was only after the Soviet Union tested its first successful nuclear bomb in 1955 that Sakharov came to the realization that while he designed the technology, the weapon was entirely in the control of politicians and the army.¹⁴ He had created Frankenstein, who once alive, was beyond the scientist’s control. This realization reaffirmed his investment in national and global politics. He was in an unusually privileged place to participate in these conversations, too. He had a direct line to top Soviet officials, even the General Secretary. He was personally briefed on state affairs, including, for instance, Khrushchev’s speech before the Central Committee in 1956, when the leader denounced Stalin’s “cult of personality”—a speech that remained “secret” to most of the Soviet population.¹⁵ The physicist was not one for whom the inner-workings of the Soviet state were veiled.

Sakharov’s view of the moral person as an activated one shaped his historical imaginary, including his diagnoses of the problems of Soviet society, past and present. When reflecting on the violence carried out under Stalin, he wrote: “In all many, many millions died—from dekulakization in special villages, from the famine following from collectivization, in the process of battle with ‘parasites’ and ‘enemies of the people’”—as

---

¹³ Ibid., 132.
¹⁴ Ibid., 258.
¹⁵ Ibid., 221.
a rule, those who were the most active members of society.”¹⁶ In studies of the process of destalinization in the USSR, it is usually the realization of drastic death tolls that is emphasized. Here Sakharov’s identification of the victims as “the most active members of society” is of overlooked significance. On his view, the tragedy of the Stalin years was partially that those who were lost were the morally exemplary. There was also Sakharov’s interpretation of World War Two. Despite the staggering fatalities of the Soviet army in battle, he celebrated the war effort for how it drew people together, creating a moment of unity and, most importantly, action. At the war’s end, “the illusion dissolved, and the people began to divide into atoms and disperse.”¹⁷

At the war’s end, Sakharov devoted himself to the study of atoms quite literally; simultaneously, he developed his moral character by writing letters to public figures—perhaps in an effort to counter what he perceived as the atomization of society. Soviet leaders had long encouraged the practice as a politically acceptable and morally commendable act, a culturally appropriate way of improving society and the state. His epistolary life began in the 1950s. Around 1957, he wrote his first letter to Khrushchev, asking the leader to intervene in the sentence of an endocrinologist convicted for telling anti-Soviet jokes to a patient. This doctor had treated Sakharov’s wife and was the father of a friend. Khrushchev received the letter and sent it to Suslov. In the end, the doctor only served one year of his sentence, though Sakharov never knew if his letter impacted the situation.¹⁸ In the late 1950s, Sakharov also spoke out against the harms of Lysenkoism on Soviet science in a letter to Khrushchev, and also about the problems of

---

¹⁶ Ibid., 37.
¹⁷ Ibid., 61.
¹⁸ Ibid., 271-272.
atmospheric nuclear testing and even low-level radiation. In 1959, he was chief author of a statement titled “Soviet Scientists against Nuclear Threat”. Khrushchev apparently trusted the physicist’s opinion on these topics. In 1963, Sakharov was made part of the team that negotiated an end to above-ground nuclear tests in the USSR and US.

Following Khrushchev’s ouster in 1964, Sakharov remained an active letter writer and deeply concerned with humanitarian causes. In January 1966, he added his signature to a collective letter to the 23rd Party Congress, which would decide on whether or not to rehabilitate Stalin. “I couldn’t avoid thinking about this,” Sakharov reflected. “It became ever clearer to me that the discussion was not only and not just about technical (war-technical, war-economic) questions, but in the first place about questions of a political and moral quality.” In late 1966, Sakharov independently sent a telegram to the Chair of the Supreme Soviet, Yasnov, to voice concern about changes to Articles 70 and 190-1 of the Criminal Code, which in their new editions would enable easier persecution of people for their beliefs. In 1967, Sakharov worked with the journalist Ernst Genri on an interview for publication in the newspaper Literaturnaia gazeta. Secretary of the Central Committee Suslov barred the interview from publication.

Sakharov’s most famous public statement grew out of the interview with Genri. In early 1968, in the midst of the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia, the physicist began to

---

19 Lysenko was a geneticist who led a campaign against some of his peers. He had them arrested and, in some cases, executed. It was clear to many, including Sakharov, that Lysenko’s “science” was based on false principles and that his turn against his colleagues halted empiricism in his field.

20 Also see Andrei Sakharov, “O radioaktivnoi opasnosti iadernykh ispytaniy,” (24 maia 1958), in Trevoga i nadezhda: stat’i, pis’ma, vystupleniia, interv’iu, Tom 1 (Moskva: Vremiia, 2006), 54-64.

21 Sakharov, Vospominaniia, 353.

22 Obid., 357-358.

23 Later in life, Sakharov came to think of this event as the start of his epistolary career—a view that reflects the interpretation of the public statement as a document that could not be published. This interpretation does not necessarily encompass the breadth of Sakharov’s devotion to letter writing, or his view of statements and public letters. See Andrei Sakharov, Statement for the Press, n.d. [January 1987], Ms Russ 79 (1562), Houghton Library, Harvard University.
draft a book that he gave the title “Thoughts on Progress, Peaceful Coexistence, and Intellectual Freedom.” The work discussed major problems facing the world, including nuclear weapons, environmental degradation, and overpopulation. His concerns grew out of his Khrushchev-era consternation with the forms of nuclear testing and the consequences of nuclear potential in different, and increasingly hostile, states. He argued for the principle of “convergence”—the idea that Western capitalism and Soviet socialism would eventually become more similar than different. The concept did not imply that the USSR would become the West. The physicist wrote, “Only universal cooperation under conditions of intellectual freedom and the high moral ideals of socialism and labor [...] serve the interest of saving civilization.”24 The concept reflected his deep faith in the humanitarian aims of the modern state—aims that he associated with the USSR and that he wanted to believe even the US embraced as well. Sakharov saw “convergence” as the only safeguard against global nuclear war.25

Sakharov shared an early draft of the essay with his acquaintance Roy Medvedev, a dissident historian. Medvedev in turn shared it with his friends, who called the work a “historical event”.26 The physicist continued to edit his ideas, and by summer 1968 he submitted a revised draft to top Soviet officials. By then, the essay was circulated in samizdat form, and it had ended up on the desks of Central Committee members before

25 For the June 1968 version of the text, see Sakharov, “Razmyshleniia o progresse, mirnom sosushchestvovanii i intellectual’noi svobode,” in Trehoga i nadezhda, tom 1, 67-131. See also “Text of Essay by Russian Nuclear Physicist Urging Soviet-American Cooperation,” New York Times (22 July 1968), 14. Vladimir Zubok offers a compelling Marxist interpretation of this essay to illuminate how Sakharov’s views were made of the fabric of the Soviet world. In this specific case, it seems to me that it was Sakharov’s humanist ideals and infinite desire for conditions that allowed for the full development of the human being that showed how he, as a thinker, was cut from cloth of Soviet culture. See Zubok, Zhivago’s Children: The Last Russian Intelligentsia (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 267-268.
26 Sakharov, Vospominaniia, 376.
he submitted it to them himself. The day Sakharov heard on the BBC that his text had been published in Amsterdam he knew he was in trouble. He was called to a meeting to discuss the text with his boss at the Object. He was also called to a meeting with E.P. Slavskii, who vehemently criticized the text. How could Sakharov think the convergence of socialism and capitalism possible? “There’s no humanizing capitalism,” Slavskii asserted, “there are no socialist characteristics in their social programs [or] market relations, and there is no state capitalism in the USSR.” The differences between the statesman and scientist might have been irreconcilable, but Sakharov appreciated the meeting as the only real conversation he had with officials on the ideas expressed in the essay.27

For signing the letter to the 23rd Party Conference, Sakharov’s paycheck was cut in half. For the circulation of “Thoughts on Progress, Peaceful Coexistence, and Intellectual Freedom,” he lost his job at the Object and returned to Moscow, where he worked full-time at the Institute of Theoretical Physics at the Academy of Sciences.28

Punishment notwithstanding, Sakharov defended the practice of public letters and statements:

A statement29 on general questions is, in my opinion, important because it serves the discussion of problems, forms alternatives in the official perspective, makes the problem clearer, and draws attention to it. This is, undoubtedly, important not

---

27 Ibid., 379-381.
28 In the Soviet Union, academic appointments were often deemed far less prestigious than work in the field. This was the case for the same reason that Sakharov, after completing his studies during the war, decided to apply his skills to work in a factory rather than going on immediately to a Ph.D. program. “Practical” work was seen as characteristically “active” and therefore morally exemplary by comparison to theoretical work.
29 There was often no difference between a public statement (obraschchenie) and public letter. In form, it was very similar. Authors often addressed public statements to a specific person or audience, investing the piece with the appearance of a letter and the expectation of a response. In content, the public statement was in a way a pure form of the public letter. The public statement always concerned socially salient questions. A public letter, on the other hand, to a newspaper or a public figure like Sakharov, might address social issues or individual concerns ranging from personal opinion to a request for personal assistance. A public statement never concerned narrow personal causes.
only for broad social participation (obshchestvennost’)—which is important; but, as it seems to me, also for circles of high-ranking leaders, among whom we cannot fully exclude the existence of some kind, even if very slow, yet real processes of change in perspective and practice. Concerning an address on concrete questions, in defense of this or that individual or group, they [high-ranking leaders] again pay socially-valuable (obshchestvennoe) attention to the fate of these individuals, and even to some extent defend them; furthermore, the atmosphere of glasnost prevents the further increase in violations of the rights of man (prava cheloveka); and, finally, from time to time, the fate of those defended sometimes changes for the better.

In both situations open statements are particularly important, glasnost is important. However, the simultaneous presence of unpublished statements can be useful. 30

Sakharov’s defense of statements, which fully included letters to public figures, demonstrates his commitment to the practice of letter writing. He believed public statements demonstrated one’s one engagement in society and had the power to activate others in the community. The passage also suggests that for Sakharov, this form of political engagement had the potential to shape the ideas and actions of Soviet statesmen, who were not beyond the pale of reform. Influenced by these statements, politicians could actively decide to work in the interest of individuals and groups that made up society. Finally, this passage underscores that Sakharov did not write letters simply for public attention. He believed that those that were not published could be as important as those that were.

Ultimately, Sakharov’s public statements landed him in exile. In 1979, he spoke out publically against the Soviet war in Afghanistan. Without trial or conviction, he was exiled to Gorky (now Nizhni Novgorod), a closed city where foreigners were forbidden to travel. He was forbidden from traveling. He was given a comfortable apartment, but was not allowed to have a telephone. Profound isolation was intended to separate him from “asocial” elements the government believed inspired his sharp remarks. His wife

30 Sakharov, Vospominaniia, 358-359.
Elena Bonner remained his link to the outside world; she carried letters and reading material back and forth between Gorky and Moscow and maintained limited contact with her children, who left the USSR for Massachusetts. Her courier service halted only when she was independently exiled to Gorky several years after Sakharov. Even with limited access to the broader world, Sakharov continued his scientific work and remained a global political figure.

**Sakharov and Perestroika**

Sakharov’s relationship to reform developed dramatically from 1985 to 1989. Changes unleashed by Perestroika were not lost on the physicist, yet his experiences in Gorky brewed like a storm over Gorbachev’s election and the first years of reform. In 1985 his wife Elena Bonner was in desperate need of medical attention after a heart attack. Soviet doctors said good health was within her reach; they prescribed a cessation of smoking, a healthier diet, and convalescence. Sakharov believed she needed treatment abroad. He petitioned Gorbachev for permission for her to take a medical trip outside the USSR. He submitted a stern letter to the Academy of Sciences, promising to withdraw his membership if they did not see to his wife’s exit visa to get medical attention elsewhere.31 He also went on a hunger strike, in response to which he was hospitalized against his will and force-fed. In late 1985, Bonner received permission to travel abroad, and then had sextuple bypass surgery in Massachusetts. While she was gone, doctors provoked responses from Sakharov on his views of reform. He was recorded on video in medical offices without his knowledge, and also prompted to speak on Chernobyl, despite not having access to good information about the extent of the nuclear meltdown. These

31 This document is included in the appendix of Sakharov, *Gor’kii, Moskva, dalee vezde*, 227-235.
statements were alternately broadcast to show the physicist had lost touch with the world, and to show that certain problems in the USSR weren’t as bad as one might think. In either case, they tarnished his public image.\textsuperscript{32}

Despite the storm, Sakharov noticed the changes that coincided with Gorbachev’s election. It was in the hospital in 1985 that the physicist saw one of the General Secretary’s earliest speeches on television. He turned to his roommate and remarked, “It looks like our country is lucky—a smart leader has appeared in it.”\textsuperscript{33} He also noted significant strides in glasnost in the press. Things that earlier would have been punishable by Articles 190-1 and 70 of the Criminal Code were now being published in newspapers like \textit{Literaturnaia gazeta}.\textsuperscript{34} The political climate seemed right for addressing one of the issues Sakharov long held close to his heart: the imprisonment of prisoners of conscience. In exile, the physicist caught wind of an interview Gorbachev gave to a French journalist for the journal \textit{Humanite}, in which the Soviet leader suggested that the USSR had no prisoners of conscience. Sakharov then penned what he later called “one of the most important documents of my life”: a letter to Gorbachev in which he pointed out that there were in fact such prisoners.\textsuperscript{35} He listed twelve by name and demanded their immediate release. He promised this would be the last thing he asked for from the General Secretary.\textsuperscript{36} Even in exile, his epistolary activities remained central to his life.

In fact liberation for prisoners of conscience was not his last request to Gorbachev. On October 23, 1986, he sent a second letter to Gorbachev in which he raised

\textsuperscript{32} Sakharov described these incidents in a letter to his family in Massachusetts. See Letter from Sakharov to his friends and family, n.d. [summer 1986], Ms Russ 79 (1561), Houghton Library, Harvard University.
\textsuperscript{33} Sakharov, \textit{Gor’kii, Moskva, dalee vezde}, 42.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 39.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 17.
\textsuperscript{36} He sent this letter on February 19, 1986. The letter was published abroad (with Sakharov’s consent) on September 3, 1986. For the text of his letter, see the appendix to Sakharov, \textit{Gor’kii, Moskva, dalee vezde}, 239-244.
the question of his own political exclusion. He argued that seven years earlier he was sent to Gorky illegally, without trial or conviction. He asked the General Secretary to permit his immediate release. By way of conclusion, he promised “to forgo all public appearances.” The one exception to his promise, he wrote, were “those situations in which I, to use the expression of Tolstoy, am unable to be silent.”

37 The reference here was to the title of Tolstoy’s article published in the volume in which his grandfather’s essay appeared. By refusing to remain silent in instances that demanded his voice, he was asserting he would never stop leading a moral life.

Sakharov wondered if Gorbachev received or read this second letter, not to mention his first. Meanwhile in Moscow, Gorbachev broached the subject of the physicist’s release as early as summer 1986. The Politburo met on December 9, 1986, and recommended the couple’s release. Late at night on December 15, 1986, an electrician arrived to Sakharov’s apartment in Gorky to install a telephone. On his way out, he told the physicist to expect a call around 10AM the next day. Hours after the expected time, Gorbachev personally phoned Sakharov to invite him to return to Moscow. Sakharov never knew if his October letter played a role in his return, but it was during this conversation that he learned through an indirect reference that Gorbachev had read his February letter. Like Nesterov, who received a call from the Central Committee Letter Department the same year regarding his letter to Gorbachev, Sakharov

37 Sakharov, *Gor’kii, Moskva,dalee vezde*, 24.
39 For the documentary record of discussions in the Politburo and other state agencies on the possibility of Sakharov’s release, the decision to release him, and the terms of his release, see Joshua Rubenstein and Alexander Gribanov, eds., *The KGB File of Andrei Sakharov* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 328-330.
40 Sakharov, *Gor’kii, Moskva,dalee vezde*, 28.
41 Ibid., 24.
felt a deep sense of accomplishment at the acknowledgement. He was so thrilled that he inadvertently ended the call himself—a formality that by rank belonged to Gorbachev.42

Sakharov and Bonner stepped out of a train at Yaroslavskii Station in Moscow on the morning of December 23, 1986.43 It was the physicist’s first time in the Soviet capital in seven years. In his notes for one of his earliest interviews following his return to Moscow, he assessed the start of Perestroika and the General Secretary who promoted it:

I relate to [the start to reform] with great attention and respect. This does not mean, that I like all of [Gorbachev’s] actions, that I agree with all the thoughts in his addresses, and moreover does not mean, that I welcome everything going on the country and in our its domestic politics. However every speech M.S. Gorbachev gives suggests that discussion is possible, even if you don’t agree with him. The only personal contact I’ve had with Gorbachev was his call to me. This was no trivial act.44

Sakharov’s emphasis on the possibility of discussion, even without disagreement, hinted at his moral ideals: discussion could signal activation, and disagreement could encourage only more active discussion. The lines he crossed out expressed his hesitation—namely a reluctance to include himself in the state (“our”) and perhaps a hesitancy to couple

42 Ibid., 29-30.
43 Andrei Sakharov, Gor’kii, Moskva, dalee vezde (N’iu Iork: Izdatel’stvo imeni Chekhova, 1990), 33.
44 Andrei Sakharov, Draft answers to questions from the press, n.d., Ms Russ 79 (1562), Houghton Library, Harvard University. These answers are likely a draft of answers to an interview that was planned with the journalist Oleg Moroz from Literaturnaia gazeta. In the arrangements for Sakharov’s return to Moscow, Gorbachev and other political leaders sanctioned this interview, which Moroz had solicited while Sakharov was still in Gorky. Sakharov initially turned down the journalist’s request, but after his release he became excited about the opportunity. In his memoirs, he states that he gave his most in depth early assessment of Perestroika in this interview. Unfortunately, the interview was never published. Sakharov said that he was not willing to eliminate statements that might have made it more agreeable to the censors. They interview is mythologized, but no copy of it seems to exist in any archive. The information for this document in the Sakharov Archive at the Houghton Library does not mention its connection to the LitGazeta interview, but the content coincides with what Sakharov describes in his memoir, and it does not appear to be written for any foreign press, interviews with which were much greater in number for Sakharov in January 1987. For references to the interview with Literaturnaia gazeta, see Sakharov, Gor’kii, Moskva, dalee vezde, 39-43; Joshua Rubenstein and Alexander Gribanov, eds., The KGB File of Andrei Sakharov (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 328-330; and Oleg Moroz, “Istoriia odnogo interv’iu,” in Sakharov, Trevoga i nadezhda: stat’i, pis’ma, vystupleniia, interv’iu, Tom 2 (Moskva: Vremiia, 2006), 645-800.
Gorbachev and something so morally admissible as “action” (“that I like all of Gorbachev’s actions”).

Sakharov had come home to Moscow with a moral agenda well-placed in the political landscape of Perestroika. At times, his interpretation aligned with leaders’ expression of reform as an attempt to reverse stagnation by activating the Soviet subject. In this way he drew on his understanding of the morally ideal subject as the activated subject developed since the earliest days of his career. In this vein, he wholeheartedly praised the anti-alcohol campaign unleashed by Gorbachev, for it targeted “a cruel impoverishment of our people,” a source of sluggishness and threat to realizing one’s full potential. His commitment to activation also led him to take issue with other aspects of reform, including the prominent campaign in 1985-1986 against “unearned incomes.” For reformers who articulated the campaign, “unearned income” included any money received from activities that were not stated on one’s workcard. It was equated with black market activities, though arguably “unearned income” made life possible for a broad portion of the population. The campaign proposed high taxes against this income—in some instances equal to the income itself. Sakharov argued that such labor should be treated like work in any official enterprise, and taxed as such, too. The difference in his view concerned not just his ideas about the market, but about what conditions allowed a person to become activated and what actions defined activation.

Part of Sakharov’s hope for Perestroika as a moral venture also included making the Soviet Union a more humane state in ways that expanded reformers’ visions. In this

---

45 He maintained this view even in exile. Though cut off from the broad world of science, he continued to publish research articles in Gorky, averaging one per year. His productivity indicated his brilliance, but brilliance alone does not generate productivity. It also signaled his hard work and concerted effort.

46 Sakharov, _Gor’kii, Moskva, dalee vezde_, 41.
way the humanitarian vision articulated in “Thoughts on Progress, Peaceful Coexistence, and Intellectual Freedom” in 1968 remained central to his worldview in 1986. In the years following his return to Moscow, and in the wake of the Chernobyl nuclear meltdown, he advocated for the safe use of nuclear energy, which had the potential to destroy man while also creating the possibility of modern life. When ethnic violence broke out in Nagorno-Karabakh, at the time a western province of Azerbaijan on the border of Armenia, Sakharov became a fierce advocate of peace and for the less attended to Armenian position. He traveled to the region and offered solutions that he believed would bring the violence to an end. In the midst of war, Armenia was then struck by one of the most destructive earthquakes in modern history. In addition to visiting the afflicted areas, Sakharov submitted a scientific proposal to Gorbachev for the prevention of earthquake damage.47 All of these interventions demonstrated his commitment to a more humanitarian Soviet future.

Of all the political causes Sakharov advocated for, one rose above the rest: the freedom of prisoners or conscience. He became known across the USSR and around the globe for his commitment to this issue. The letters that he received during Perestroika demonstrate this point: far more than usual came from people who had been politically excluded, imprisoned, or placed in a psychiatric ward for social or political views. For Sakharov, the issue of prisoners of conscience was deeply connected to the fate of reform. He had focused on the topic in his first letter to Gorbachev in February 1986, but following his release freedom for prisoners of conscience became hinged, in his mind, to the fate of Perestroika itself. In a statement from February 1987 following his

participation in the Forum for a Nuclear Free World and the Survival of Mankind, he tied the freedom of prisoners of conscience to all the central political aims of Perestroika:

Great openness and democratization of our country are necessary. So are freedom of dissemination and receipt of information; unconditional and complete release of prisoners of conscience; real freedom of choice on country of residence and travel; freedom of choice on area of residence within the country; real control by the citizens over the formation of domestic and foreign policy.48

Statements like this one underscore that Sakharov did not believe everything in the course of reform was perfect, but very quickly after his release he came to see Perestroika as “inevitable.” Only through reform could the country set itself on a more moral path to the future. In his capacity as a global figure, he committed himself to actively participating in helping bring about that future.

The “Moral Mandate” and the Activation of the People

1988-1989 marked important developments in Sakharov’s political activities as well as the transformation of Perestroika as a moral venture. On July 1, 1988, the last day of the Nineteenth All-Union Party Conference, Gorbachev won approval to create a new kind of Soviet parliament called the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies.49 In October 1988, detailed proposals for the design of the Congress appeared in print for public consultation. Then a Special Session of the USSR Supreme Soviet amended the 1977 Constitution to create the Congress of People’s Deputies with 2,250 members, a bicameral Supreme Soviet with a total of 542 members drawn from the Congress, and a new electoral law. There was a pre-existing model for this new body: the Congress of

People’s Deputies that existed at the republic level. But there were important differences.

One, the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies would bring together delegates from all fifteen Soviet republics, autonomous republics, and territorial okrugs. Two, the national body would be popularly elected. Three, only a portion of seats in the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies would be reserved exclusively for Party members. In these three ways, this parliament was definitively new.\footnote{The formation of a legislature through contested elections was bound up in broader reorganization of the Communist Party—an important development in a one party state in which the party and state apparatuses functioned together. This change also originated at the Nineteenth All-Party Conference in June-July 1988. Not just in the last day but in the last minutes of the Conference, Gorbachev stated that the reduction in the size of the Party apparatus should take place by the end of 1988. “I think that it is vitally necessary to adopt the resolution,” he stated. “Is that right, comrades?” The resolution quickly moved to a vote, passed without a hitch, and delegates then filed out of the room, wondering, according to some, what had just happened. In October 1988, the branch economic departments of the Central Committee, which had overseen the work of several ministries, were abolished: the number of Central Committee Departments was cut from twenty to nine. The Secretariat of the Central Committee was also replaced by six new Central Committee commissions. Gorbachev appointed a chairman to each. The power of these chairman did not rival what members of the Secretariat had formerly had, and, moreover, could be further diminished by appointment to a lesser commission, as happened, for instance, with Ligachev, who transitioned from the position of Secretariat to Chairman of the Agricultural Committee. See Brown, \textit{The Gorbachev Factor}, 184-185.}

And yet, the Congress grew out of the traditions of Soviet democracy. The new institution was seen as a return to the ideas of Lenin, and the chief goal was the activation of the population. The Congress of People’s Deputies, like all forms of Soviet socialist democratic institutions and practices that preceded it, aimed to involve as many people as possible in politics. Additionally, the practices that were long considered democratic would play an important role in the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies, including writing letters to its delegates. It is also important to note that the new Congress did not introduce political pluralism into Soviet politics.\footnote{On this point I think there is less clarity than Archie Brown argues. He sees the First Congress of People’s Deputies as the first instance of political pluralism in the Soviet Union: “The introduction of elections which, in the main, were genuinely contested was the decisive turning-point in terms of the transformation of the Soviet system, undermining such pillars of the Communist system as ‘democratic centralism’ and the \textit{nomenklatura} system of party appointments, and introducing substantial elements of pluralism and democracy into what had hitherto been an overwhelmingly authoritarian regime.” Brown, \textit{The Gorbachev Factor}, 181.} It was not until 1990 that the Article of
the Constitution that preserved the Communist Party’s existence as the single political party in the Soviet Union was abolished. Political pluralism was still generally frowned upon by reformers, and the existence of more than one party was frequently interpreted as political “factions”. Delegates and observers alike militated against this view. To the vast majority of the Soviet population in 1989, “pluralism” was still synonymous with “factions”; both were associated with Western-style democracy, which was seen as lacking the humanist roots of socialist democracy.

Following the announcement of the creation of the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies at the 19th All-Party Conference, Sakharov became a founding member of the political debate club known as the Moscow Tribune. The group included some of the capital’s best-known intellectuals, such as Yuri Afanasiev and Aleksandr Popov. The main goal of the group was to provide a forum in which members could discuss key questions of reform, and in which, through this process, they could develop their own active character. The Moscow Tribune enthusiastically greeted Gorbachev’s announcement on the formation of the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies, and vigorously discussed the various proposals for the Congress published in Soviet newspapers in October 1988, but they were disheartened by the unexpected Special Session of the Supreme Soviet in December 1988. They had proposed holding a national referendum on the four issues summarily tackled in the Supreme Soviet’s December legislation. For members of the Tribune, the new electoral law was a disgraceful form of action: they called it “rushed”. In response to Sakharov, chief ideologist of reform Aleksandr Yakovlev defended the amendments by emphasizing the need to act quickly,
for not doing so could potentially prevent any action at all. In other words, for him it was the moral thing to do.

Sakharov was travelling in the US when he decided that he would run in the elections for a position as a deputy at the Congress. Elections for the First Congress of People’s Deputies took place between March and May 1989. The December 1988 Electoral Law stipulated that deputies could be elected in one of three ways. Of the Congress’s 2,250 deputies, 750 (or one third) would be elected by territorial districts based on population; another 750 would be voted in by territorial districts on the formula of 32 from each Union Republic, 11 from each autonomous republic, 5 from each autonomous region, and 1 from each autonomous district; and the final 750 would be elected within social organizations, including the Communist Party, which received 100 seats, and the Academy of Sciences, which received 30. In the case of Poland in 1989, the elections are often front and center in the narrative: voting a Solidarity Party majority into the Polish Parliament, and the Polish Communist Party’s decision to uphold the elections, marked the peak of revolution. Held from January to May 1989, the Soviet elections also marked a high point. The experience of Sakharov and his supporters suggests this part of the parliamentary exercises fanned hopes that the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies would make the Soviet Union a moral state.

The trickiest part of the election concerned nominations and the path to getting one’s name on the ballot. The electoral law stated that a candidate had to be nominated

---

52 Sakharov, Gor’kii, Moskva, dalee vezde, 126-127.
53 Ibid., 146.
55 Archie Brown makes a similar point, though the argument here is slightly different. While he sees the elections as a critical juncture in the transformation of the USSR from authoritarianism to liberalism, I see the elections as a high point of the moral aims of Perestroika, that is, the quest to activate the people. See Brown, The Gorbachev Factor, 181.
by the working collective, but the person only became a nominee (i.e. their name was added to the ballot) when approved by a gathering of people in that voting district. For social organizations, the path was slightly different. Rather than a gathering of people in the organization at large, nominees had to be approved by the institution’s central organ. In the case of the Communist Party, this organ would be the Central Committee. In case of the Academy of Sciences, it would be the Presidium of the Academy of Sciences. In the Academy of Sciences, the way the Presidium handled nominations resulted in scandal. In the course of accepting nominations, they decided 5 of 30 places would be given to individual institutes within the Academy of Sciences. Then each person suggested for the ballot had to be approved by a clear majority of Presidium members. In the end, only 23 potential nominees passed the test. Then the Presidium decided to allocate another 5 seats to specific institutions. In theory, those 23 names would be on the ballot for the March 21 election. Voters, who included members of the Academy of Sciences and of the various institutes—about 900 total—would vote in 20. The problem was that the 23 who passed the guidelines set up by the presidium did not include anyone well known across society, such as Aleksandr Popov, Dmitrii Likhachev, or Andrei Sakharov. The Presidium’s regulations seemed to intentionally eliminate them.

What looked like a botched nomination process proved to be transformative for Sakharov and, in his view, the whole country. The physicist had been nominated by over 55 institutions within the Academy of Sciences. If the ballot had been determined by popular referendum within the Academy, his name undoubtedly would have been on it. He was irked by the outcome. On 2 February 1989, he participated in a mass meeting at Luzhnikii Stadium in Moscow. Hundreds of people showed up to demonstrate their
frustration about the Presidium’s nomination process. More than 600 people in the stadium and several thousand in other places whose signatures were gathered on lists supported his nomination. To his mind, there was no doubt about what he should do. “On this day,” he wrote, “I felt I had received the moral mandate (nравственный мандат) to become a deputy.”

The phrase speaks volumes about Sakharov’s worldview. It suggests he believed that political leaders should be moral paragons, and that a state in part became moral by being ruled by people of moral distinction. The question was how one knew they were morally fit to be a political leader. Here the people played an important role. Sakharov believed he had received the “moral mandate” because so many people expressed their support for him. In this way, Sakharov’s “moral mandate” resembled the ancient Chinese “Mandate of Heaven,” the belief that the heavens granted the emperor the right to rule. In the Chinese tradition, that right was expressed in the support of the people: popular approval suggested the emperor maintained the Mandate; popular disapproval suggested he had lost it. Sakharov’s moral distinction, and thus his potential for political power, was confirmed by the thousands of people who cheered him on at Luzhniki and signed their names on the lists of supporters. It was clear to him at that moment in the Stadium that he was obliged to enter the political arena.

Sakharov was in a different situation than many of the other potential nominees in the Academy of Sciences: many paths to the Congress were potentially open to him, for he received multiple nominations across the country—from Moscow’s District Number 1 to the Object where he worked from 1948 to 1968 to the Kolii Peninsula. But he decided that he would only run for candidacy through the Academy of Sciences. Success getting

56 Sakharov, Gor’kii, Moskva,dalee vezde, 149.
his name on the ballot there signified for him the democratization of the organization that he had belonged to for 35 years. On 13 February 1989, he sent a letter to the Academy’s Presidium criticizing the nomination process and stating that he would seek nomination only through the Academy of Sciences. Ultimately, Sakharov won the nomination from one of the Institutes of the Academy of Sciences that had been allocated one of the ten votes split off from the thirty: the Physics Institute (FIAN), where he had completed his doctorate and taught for many years. Ultimately, Sakharov prevailed in the elections on March 21, 1989, and was allowed to fill his “moral mandate” in the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies.

The election process, from Sakharov’s perspective, was not just a moment of transformation in his own political career. It marked a high point of Perestroika itself and the activation of the people. On the day he participated in the political meeting at Luzhniki Stadium, he read his program and answered questions. He could not have predicted the response. “The people (narod),” he wrote, “so many times swindled, having lived in general hypocrisy, corruption, lawlessness, under-the-table dealing, and a wretched existence—turned out to be alive (zhivyi).” “These people (liudi),” he wrote, “blue- and white-collar workers, the broadest mass of intellectuals—had been awoken from the dream of passivity by the hopes of perestroika.” The election process even in its earliest stages had activated the population. The creation of a new democratic institution was already accomplishing reformers’ goal. As Sakharov put it, the level of

57 Sakharov, Statement to the Academy of Sciences, 13 February 1989, Ms Russ 79 (3346), Houghton Library, Harvard University.
59 Sakharov, Gor’kii, Moskva, dalee vezde, 147-148.
60 Ibid., 149.
activity of the population during these months signaled “a new stage in history” in the Academy of Sciences and, perhaps, the Soviet Union as a whole.\textsuperscript{61} This did not mean that everywhere the elections went off without a hitch. M.P. Kireev for Dnepropetrovk, for instance, wrote Sakharov a letter in which he called for elections that were “free,” “straightforward,” and “equal,” which the elections in his region were not. At the same time, his letter was not just a criticism. It was also an expression of hope. If the machine worked well, it would, in his words, “further the democratic movement” in the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{62}

\textbf{Sakharov and the First USSR Congress of People’s Deputies}

On the morning of May 25, 1989, Sakharov along with more than 2,000 other delegates filed into the Kremlin State Palace for the first session of the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies. He arrived eager to get to work, as did his fellow delegates. Barely had the Congress opened when a deputy from Latvia demanded from the microphone that the Congress find out who ordered the violent suppression of a political demonstration in Tbilisi on April 9, 1989. Sakharov had actually been an observer to the events in Georgia: after catching wind of the tragedy, he traveled to Tbilisi and visited injured demonstrators in the hospital. The topic was of foremost concern for the Latvian delegate, for how could the USSR pretend to be democratic, even with a popularly elected congress, when political demonstrations were prohibited by force of violence. The situation in Tbilisi was exceptional in that political meetings across the USSR had increased over the course of

\textsuperscript{61} Sakharov, “Zaiavlenie dla pechati v sviazi s vyborami” (5 fevralia 1989 g.), in Tревога i надежда: Stat’i, pis’ma, vystupleia, interv’iu, tom 2, 399.
\textsuperscript{62} M.P. Kireev to A.D. Sakharov (03 June 1989), f. 1, op. 8, 3 iunia 1989, pismo [hereafter p.] 381. Sakharov Archive, Moscow.
Perestroika and especially in preparation for the Congress and had proceeded peacefully, but the violent response wasn’t unique. Demonstrations were forcefully suppressed in the Baltics, Minsk, Moscow, and elsewhere. This became one of the contested topics of the Congress.63

The session off to an animated start, officials then took back the floor for procedural business: to introduce members of the Congress Presidium, and to present the agenda for the Congress. By this time Sakharov stood at the microphone. Gorbachev gave him permission to speak. Presenting on behalf of a group of Moscow deputies, Sakharov addressed two hot topics. First, he argued that the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies should be the ultimate legislative authority in the USSR, even above the Supreme Soviet, which, according to the December 8 legislature that defined the electoral law, would be composed of delegates elected to the Congress and would be the highest legislative body. Sakharov argued that all delegates popularly elected should have this important function. His second thesis raised what would become one of the most fiercely contested aspects of the Congress: the election of the Chairman of the Supreme Soviet, who according to the December 8 laws would be the head of state. It was assumed that this function would be assumed by Gorbachev, who was already head of state by a different set of juridical conventions. Sakharov expressed his support for the leader—his “conditional” support. He believed the Congress had the right to know Gorbachev’s platform before voting him into this position, implying that candidates for Soviet head of

state should in fact have a platform prior to election, and he demanded that the election be contested.\textsuperscript{64}

In the course of presenting this thesis, Sakharov was interrupted by Gorbachev, who suggested that delegates keep their comments to five minutes. The interruption was indicative of parliamentary procedure in its most nascent form: in these early days of the Congress even the basic rules had yet to be established. Sakharov quickly finished his point and sat down. Ultimately, the topic of the election of chairman, which was one of the first items on the agenda for the Congress, stood out as one of the most fiercely contested issues. In the afternoon session on May 25, 1989, a delegate from Apatita (near Leningrad) named A.M. Obolenskii put forward his own candidacy for chairman. He would vote for Gorbachev, he asserted, but he firmly believed that the election, which would take place by secret ballot, should be contested in the spirit of the new election format for the Congress itself.\textsuperscript{65} Adding Obolenskii’s name would establish “a democratic procedure for the future,” as one delegate put it, “This is not a game; we are talking about principles.”\textsuperscript{66} In response, others voiced their wholehearted support for Gorbachev, implying that nominating additional candidates undermined his leadership. In debating Obolenskii’s nomination, the Congress was essentially grappling with what Soviet socialist democracy should look like.

Sakharov spoke a second time in the course of debate, which, in light of the fact that there were over 2,000 delegates in the room and not everyone got to speak in the course of the entire Congress, was perceived as an unusual privilege and met with mixed reception. Those who were drawn to Sakharov saw it as an olive branch from Gorbachev

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 3-4.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 31-33.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 33-34.
to the physicist that had undoubtedly suffered much more for his political participation over the course of his life than perhaps any other delegate. Those with a critical stance towards him saw it as a subversion of congressional order, an odd bias of Gorbachev’s, and the abuse on Sakharov’s part of a sizable public reputation. He underscored his support for Perestroika, reiterated his conditional support for Gorbachev, and promised that he could not participate in “elections in a formal matter.” The question of adding Obolenskii’s name to the ballot was put to a placard vote. There were 689 votes for including him on the ballot, 1,415 against, and 33 abstentions. To have his name added, the vote needed just over 50% in favor. Obolenskii’s name was not included on the ballot. Neither was any other name besides Gorbachev. Sakharov expressed his reaction in the purest language of Soviet morality: with his actions. He stood up from his seat and left the hall, “thousands of eyes” watching him. When Gorbachev later asked him why he protested, Sakharov stated that it was “a matter of principles.”

Nearly every time Sakharov rose to speak, it was at his own volition and his statement was carefully planned out ahead of time. On one occasion, he was baited, and it was this exchange that provoked a massive shift in the relationship to Sakharov as a delegate and to the Congress as the path to a more democratic and moral Soviet state. It was in a discussion during the ninth session of June 2, 1989. S.V. Chervonopiskii, a prominent Ukrainian Komsomol leader and Afghan war veteran, addressed hardships facing veterans of the Afghan war and emphasized the need for greater social services for those who had served. He also called for greater respect from the media, and implicated Sakharov in the disrespectful attitude the press had taken towards the war and those

67 Ibid., 24.
68 Ibid., 34.
69 Sakharov, Gor’kii, Moskva, dalee vezde, 179.
ordered to participate in it. During a trip to Canada in February 1989, Sakharov gave an interview with the newspaper *Ottawa Citizen*, in which he stated, among other things, that he had heard there were instances of Soviet airborne detachments killing their fellow soldiers on the ground who were at risk of being taken hostage. Quoted in *Red Star*, the newspaper of the Soviet army, and elsewhere in the USSR, this line of the interview raised great commotion. Chervonopiskii had belonged to an airborne division that served in Afghanistan. He took the comment to mean that troops like him lacked compassion even for their own people. He read an appeal that demanded the Congress explain “on what grounds or upon whose authorization” Sakharov had made this statement to the Canadian newspaper. “To the depths of our souls,” he continued,

we are indignant over this irresponsible, provocative trick by a well-known scientist, and view his impersonal accusation as an ill-intentioned attack on the Soviet Armed Forces. We view their discrediting as a regular attempt to breach the sacred unity of the Army, the party, and the people. We view this as a belittling of the honor, dignity, and memory of those sons of our motherland who to the end carried out its orders.

Chervonopiskii promised that the airborne troops, “contrary to the attempts of Sakharov and others like him,” would protect the country to their best ability. In his response, Sakharov held that he had not insulted the Soviet Army or the soldiers who carried out their orders there. The issue, he said, was the war itself, which he called a “criminal venture” for which nearly a million Afghans and thousands of Soviet soldiers paid with their lives. “This is what rests on us as a terrible sin, a terrible rebuke,” he stated, raising the discussion to the key of morality. “We must wash from ourselves precisely this infamy which lies on our leadership.” He said that he had spoken out about this war long before and was exiled to Gorky for it. He clarified that in the interview he

---

70 Ibid., 155.
had mentioned things he heard from foreign radio broadcasts—things that were now under investigation and had not been proven true or false. “Before this question is clear,” he said, “no one has the right to accuse me that I have said a mistruth.” He closed by saying he would not apologize to the Soviet Army or to soldiers, for he had only insulted—and intentionally so—those who gave this criminal order to send Soviet troops into Afghanistan.”

This time the crowd answered him with their action. The published transcripts of the Congress state that following Sakharov’s speech, there was “Applause, stir in the auditorium.” “In reality,” wrote Sakharov in his memoirs, “a storm raged.” For five minutes, the majority of deputies jumped up from the seats, yelling, “Shame! Away!,” while a smaller number of delegates applauded. When the storm passed, other delegates spoke, mainly critically of Sakharov, in what he believed was a planned attack on him. That evening when he left the Congress, his wife Elena Bonner met him outside the Kremlin walls. “You presented poorly,” she said, “but you did great.” Sakharov reflected: “Even though I was in the uncomfortable position of lacking documentary evidence, I felt that morally I was in the right (ia chuvstvoval svoiu moral’nuiu pravotu).”

Sakharov’s commitment to being morally upstanding continued through to the last minute of the Congress: he worked day in and day out. In the final days of the Congress, he focused on shaping his speech on a critical proposal that he called the “Decree on Power.” In the last several days, he tried to get the floor to speak but without luck. On June 9, 1989, the final day of the Congress, Gorbachev granted him the microphone,

---

72 Ibid., 355-356.
73 Ibid., 356. The transcript for this session in this volume is based on the publication in the newspaper Izvestiiia on June 5, 1989.
74 Sakharov, Gor’kii, Maskva, dalee vezde, 193.
stating “Andrei Dmitrievich Sakharov urgently requests the floor.” There was commotion in the hall. Gorbachev explained that Sakharov had asked for 15 minutes, but the hall would not permit it. Gorbachev acknowledged that the physicist had received the floor seven times in the course of the Congress. Without putting the decision to give him the floor or not to a vote, which probably would have kept Sakharov from speaking, Gorbachev said he would speak and asked him to reduce his comments to 5 minutes.

Sakharov’s “Decree on Power” was a reflection on the work of the Congress as a whole, and the place of the Congress system in the Soviet government. “The Congress did not accomplish its main task,” he said, “the establishment of power, the establishment of the sort of system of power that would provide for the accomplishment of other tasks.” He believed that the Congress in the form it had taken on through the decisions of the Congress itself would fail to transform Soviet politics in the way it originally aimed. He pointed out that the process of electing Gorbachev Chairman of the Supreme Soviet was flawed. The elections needed to be competitive, not because Sakharov didn’t support Gorbachev, but because “sometime it will be someone else.” He was committed to creating a parliamentary system that would last long into the future. Sakharov also criticized the relationship of the Congress to the Supreme Soviet. According to the December 1988 laws, the Supreme Soviet as the ultimate legislative body in the USSR. Starting with the First USSR Congress of People’s Deputies, the Supreme Soviet was composed of deputies elected to the Congress who were then elected by members of the Congress. They would have the ultimate ability to pass new laws and change old ones. The Congress would just play an advisory role. Sakharov also criticized the rules for working in the Supreme Soviet. It was not stipulated that everyone had to quit their day
job to become a full time legislator, nor were the people elected by the Congress experienced legislators. All of these points did not bode well to Sakharov’s mind. He argued that the fundamental goal of restructuring—namely, “All power to the Soviets!,” to give people at the most local level the opportunity to rule the country—was impossible if the Congress itself could not achieve ultimate legislative authority.

Sakharov attempted to correct these wrongs with a single proposal, the “Decree on Power,” which outlined a fundamentally different state. He read four of seven or eight points (omitting the others in the interest of time):

1. Article 6 of the USSR Constitution is rescinded.
2. The adoption of USSR laws is the exclusive right of the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies. On the territory of a union republic, USSR laws acquire legal force following their ratification by the republic’s supreme legislative body.
3. The USSR Supreme Soviet is the congress’s working body. [. . .]
4. The election and recall of the supreme officials of the USSR, to wit, the chairman of the USSR Supreme Soviet, the deputy chairman of the USSR Supreme Soviet, the chairman and members of the Constitutional Oversight Committee, the chairman of the USSR Supreme Court, the USSR procurator general, the USSR supreme arbitrator, the chairman of the Central Bank, as well as the chairman of the USSR KGB, the chairman of the State Committee for Television and Radio Broadcasting, and the editor in chief of the newspaper IZVESTIA, are the exclusive right of the congress. The aforementioned officials are accountable to the congress and independent of the decisions of the CPSU and its agencies.\(^{75}\)

For Sakharov, instituting these points would fundamentally transform the Soviet government. Article 6 of the Constitution guaranteed the Communist Party’s role as the single legitimate and leading political party in the USSR. Rescinding this article would subject the Party to the forces of competition, by no means eradicating the Party, but certainly leaving a mark on its hitherto undisputed role in Soviet society. Points 2, 3, and 5 addressed the legal role of the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies. Going back to the

\(^{75}\) *The U.S.S.R. First Congress of People’s Deputies*, vol. 2, 633-634.
positions Sakharov upheld in the first days of the Congress, these points asserted that this body should be the ultimate legislative authority in the USSR. This meant that the Congress should be more powerful than the Supreme Soviet, performing not just an auxiliary role to the smaller body but actually having the ultimate authority to pass laws. It also meant that the Congress itself decided key positions in the Supreme Soviet and Congress, including who would be Chairman, i.e. the role played by Gorbachev.

Though Gorbachev gave Sakharov five minutes to present these points, the deputy spoke for just over ten minutes, then the Chairman asked him to end his speech. He did not stop speaking. The photographs of him delivering his speech on the “Decree
on Power” show him at the platform with his hands in the air, invigorated and active (Image 5.1). This was the image of a moral person—on his own account and in the long tradition of Soviet moral discourse. Gorbachev asked for Sakharov’s microphone to be shut off, rendering the rest of his speech inaudible to the Congress. But that evening, Elena Bonner met Sakharov as he exited the Congress. She couldn’t wait to tell him what happened. When Gorbachev cut Sakharov off from speaking, microphones connected to the speakers in the hall were turned off, but the microphone recording the speeches for the media were not. For the people in the hall, the end of his speech became inaudible. For the millions of people watching from home or listening on the radio, however, the continuation of his speech was heard loud and clear.76

The People Respond

One thing that distinguished the First Congress of People’s Deputies from other Soviet parliaments is that all of these events—the call to investigate violence in Tbilisi; the way that Gorbachev became the only official voted in through uncompetitive elections and Sakharov’s stormy exit from the hall; the discussion of the war in Afghanistan; Sakharov’s “Decree on Power”—were shown in real time on television. Sessions were also broadcast live on the radio, and full transcripts were printed in national daily newspapers within days of the session. Every passionate speech on every heated topic was witnessed not just by 2,250 delegates in the hall but by millions of viewers at home. The liveliness of debate and wide range of topics captivated the country’s attention. So many people watched the Congress sessions that production rates

76 Sakharov, Gor’kii, Moskva, dalee vezde, 209-210. Sakharov included the full text of his speech in his memoir. See Gor’kii, Moskva, dalee vezde, 210-217.
across the country dropped markedly between May 25 and June 9, 1989. Wide publicity aimed to give the population the opportunity to be actively involved in the political process.

Watching, listening, and reading about the Congress constituted forms of political participation (even if activation in the economic sphere declined briefly). Acts of participation also included calling hotlines set up to field public opinion during the Congress or calling delegates directly, taking part in meetings with deputies (particularly in the Moscow region, where parliamentarians were geographically close enough to meet with their constituents), and discussing congressional proceedings with family and friends in the kitchen or public political meetings. For perhaps the first time in Soviet history, participation also included going out on the streets to demonstrate during the Congress and after its sessions. Public demonstrations responding to politics had of course happened in the USSR before; but never had they taken place in such great numbers. People protested in cities from Lviv to Omsk.

To respond to the work of the Congress, Soviet people also turned to the mode of engagement that Sakharov had so long practiced throughout his life: letter writing. Sakharov received letters from people of all ages, professional backgrounds, and education levels who lived in every corner of the Soviet Union. Letters poured into his home, the Physics Institute, the Kremlin, and through friends and acquaintances. People also sent letters addressed to Sakharov to newspapers, the Central Committee, and political leaders. While the Sakharov Archive in Moscow has preserved 1,937 of these letters from the First Congress alone, it is difficult to say how many he might have received in total. Those in the Archive primarily include the communications he received
at home and in the Kremlin where the Congress met. Sakharov was undoubtedly not the only deputy to receive so many letters during the Congress, but his letters are unique for the fact that they have been carefully archived and meticulously cataloged.

The staggering quantity of letters he received was part of the larger explosion in public letter writing during Perestroika. The letter department of the popular daily Komsomol’skaia pravda was indicative of this broader trend. In the first nine months of 1986 they received over a million letters from readers.77 A television news team from Japan visited their office to record footage of the “mountains” of letters.78 They received so much mail that they had to change how they worked with it.79 In the Cold-War West, many interpreted published letters as a sign that Soviet people were finally free to say what they wanted.80 This interpretation disregards the long history of public letter writing in the USSR. Since Lenin, leaders encouraged letter writing as an appropriate means of engaging in politics and a sign of the active participation of the masses. Gorbachev did the same. At each stage of the reform program, he called on the population to write letters to help shape the reform process, and called on newspapers and other institutions to give special attention to letters.81

77 “Vchera. 1.000.000 pisem s nachala nyneshnego goda poluchila redaktsiia,” Komsomol’skaia pravda No 211 (Tuesday, September 16, 1986), 1.
78 Interview with Margarita Kechkina (head of the letter department at Komsomol’skaia pravda from 1993-1997), June 12, 2014.
79 TsAOPIM, f. P-1968, op. 1, d. 73, l. 69.
As a public figure, Sakharov was unusual, and not necessarily the kind of person leaders had envisioned as the recipient of huge quantities of mail. He was not a Party member. Until the Congress, he had no formal links to political institutions. In fact he was long portrayed in the Soviet press, which often included letters from Soviet people to make the point, as an anti-Soviet person with a problematic moral orientation.

Institutionally, he had no formal letter department to process his mail. He had no affiliation with an organization to which he would, as a matter of course, forward letters. He had no ties to a periodical that would print letters. There were also no formal laws governing how he had to work with mail from citizens. (Newspapers, for instance, were required to answer every letter they received.) Institutional ties were meant to bridge the gap between independent organizations and the state. While Sakharov was not tied in, those who sent him letters often bridged the gap themselves. It was not unusual for letter writers to address their note to Sakharov and Gorbachev, or to ask Sakharov to pass their missive on to state figures, or to ask that he read their words out in the Congress, or to send letters for him directly to the Kremlin.

Those who wrote to Sakharov were demographically diverse. They hailed from all corners of the Soviet Union, from all ages, professions, social and economic backgrounds. Letters came from voters in Mogilev and students in Volgograd, a pensioner in Izhevsk, a worker in Tashkent, and an unidentified writer in Riga. Unsigned letters (anonimki) to Sakharov existed but were rare. Some authors refused to write their names next to bold criticisms of Sakharov or when they feared the authorities tracing the letter. Most letters were written by individuals, though collective letters were not uncommon. One way the body of letters Sakharov received was distinct is that it included
an unusually large number of letters from prisoners or former prisoners, social outcasts or pariahs in the workplace, and the relatives of these misfits.

The reasons why people wrote Sakharov resembled trends in letter writing that had existed since Lenin: namely, they wrote to participate in political events, this time the Congress. Some letters superficially took part by thanking Sakharov for his positions or expressing support for his speeches, as did Susanna Aloian from Erevan, who wrote on the second day of the Congress: “I saw and listened to your speech on television, I nearly had a heart attack from joy, in your face I saw my personal god.” 82 Not every letter was so effusive. There were in fact critical letters, many of them from Azerbaijani who were offended by Sakharov’s vocal support for the Armenian side in the bloody conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Most letter writers participated more vigorously in the Congress by attempting to leave an impression on the course of the Congress itself. Some, like Saushkin from Atbasar commented on specific moments in the Congress. He criticized the fact that other delegates were not answering Sakharov’s questions about the election of the first chairman. He suggested Yeltsin fill the position. 83 Others raised specific questions that they wanted the Congress to address. Zhuravlev from Moscow asked Sakharov to raise the question of “the responsibility of the leadership for the condition of the country.” 84 The idea was that it was not the hard work of the masses that could turn the country around, but realization of what the leadership was doing wrong that would make the difference. Maia Vasil’evna Batchenko from Rostov-na-Donu asked Sakharov to raise

83 Saushin to A.D. Sakharov, 28 May 1989. SA, f. 1, op. 8, d. 27-28 May 1989, p. 175.
the question of calling up students for military service. “It’s impossible to drop your studies for two years,” she emphasized. She may have addressed this question to Sakharov in particular because of his well-known critical relationship to the Afghan war.

Sakharov’s archive of letters provides an opportunity to assess the popular relationship to the Congress and its ultimate goal of furthering socialist democracy. Letters of thanks, praise, questions and requests implicitly or explicitly expressed a sense that the Congress was fulfilling its democratic mission. But not every letter writer felt this way. Responding to the fact that the Congress elected Gorbachev to the post of Chairman of the Supreme Soviet without any other candidates on the ballot, the chemist B.G. Golovkin from Sverdlovsk wrote a statement boldly titled in capital letters, “THE CRIMES OF THE CONGRESS AGAINST DEMOCRACY,” which he asked Sakharov to read out loud at the Congress. The main crime was of the “1600” deputies who voted against adding Obolenskii as an alternate in the election for Chairman of the Supreme Soviet (in fact it was 1,415). In an “authentic democracy” (podlinnaia demokratiia), anyone could add his or her name to the ballot. The winner simply needed the majority of votes. The “system of 1600” further committed the crime of making it possible only for Gorbachev, or in the future, likely only those with connections to Gorbachev, to become Chairman. Obolenskii stood for the “speeding up of Perestroika,” while the “1600” stood represented “the regrettable otherthinking (inakomysliashchee) majority.”

One of the striking aspects of the letters to Sakharov is the extent to which they suggest the broader population interpreted politics through the lens of human transformation. Many judged deputies and members of the Congress Presidium in terms

---

86 B.G. Golovkin to A.D. Sakharov, 26 May 1989. SA, f. 1, op. 8, d. 21-26 May 1989, p. 156.
of the quality of their personality. The full development of every personality had long been the priority of Soviet socialist politics. A collective letter from residents of Moscow responded to Sakharov’s defense of his statement on the Afghan war in the interview with Ottawa Citizen. They described the attack on Sakharov and the prolonged booing that following his speech as “terrible”. The letter writers were clearly not sympathetic to the Soviet project, as they called socialism “cursed” and “bloodthirsty.” But they criticized Sakharov’s opponents through the lens of human transformation, suggesting they had internalized the categories of Soviet political discourse. Referring to Sakharov’s critics, they wrote: “They are still not human beings (liudi), in no way are they human and they never will become [human], they simply won’t.” They judged the deputies by the extent to which they had become and could become fully-developed people. In place of their signatures, the group signed the document with one word: “Liudi,” or human beings. 87

Letter writers also judged Sakharov’s personality. Like Susanna Aloian who “in [Sakharov’s] face saw [her] personal god,” most letter writers praised him as a paragon of morality. 88 I.M. Kuznetsova and N.M. Terept’ev from Moscow wrote that his “conscience and purity” were “beyond suspicion.” 89 Letter writers praised his “wisdom,” “sincerity,” “courage,” “principle,” “patience,” “honesty,” “humanism,” and even “sanctity”. These descriptions made it from the envelope to the streets on banners carried at demonstrations that read “Sakharov – conscience of the people,” and “Sakharov – mind, honor, and conscience of our epoch.” Not all letter writers praised. A collective

87 Collective letter to A.D. Sakharov (3 June 1989), SA, f. 1, op. 8, d. 3 iunia 1989, p. 359.
88 Susanna Aloian to A.D. Sakharov (26 May 1989). SA f. 1, op. 8, d. 21-26 May 1989, p. 163.
89 I.M. Kuznetsova and N.M. Terept’ev to A.D. Sakharov (3 June 1989). SA, f. 1, op. 8, d. 3 iunia 1989, p. 343.
letter called him an “incorrigible naive humanist!” His fellow dissidents also criticized him for participating in the Congress at all, viewing him as a sell out to the system. The high praises on a popular level were new. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Soviet press ran smear campaigns with letters from Soviet people who criticized his personality. The new public assessment was not the product of human rights work, but of Perestroika. The population was on the hunt for moral examples and found one in Sakharov.

To what extent did observers believe the Congress accomplished its goal of creating democratic power structures that countered the legacy of Stalin? One of the themes in letters was explicit or implicit comparison of the Soviet government under Gorbachev to the Stalin era. M. Kuzina from a village near Stavropol begged the Congress “to avoid a new cult.” She was responding specifically to the decision not to include Obolenskii on the ballot for Chairman of the Supreme Soviet. “I think the concentration of power in one [pair of] hands is dangerous,” she wrote. She proposed having Gorbachev and Obolenskii share the responsibilities of Chairman. She also recommended separating the positions of Chairman of the Supreme Soviet and General Secretary of the Communist Party, both of which Gorbachev occupied. She recommended making Yelstín General Secretary, despite his expulsion from the Politburo the year before. These comparisons reflected the close link between Perestroika-era democracy and the reinvigorated public discussion of the problems of the Stalin era. There was a widespread belief that the legacy of Stalin in the Soviet economy and political system necessitated Perestroika and, as Gorbachev and his greatest advisor Aleksandr Yakovlev argued, could only be cured by greater democracy.

---

90 L.G. Rotgenger, Iu.I. Iagodzinskii and T.V. Iagodzinskaia to A.D. Sakharov. SA, f. 1, op. 8, d. 3 iunia 1989, p. 402.
To what extent did writing letters to Sakharov or any Congress deputy further democracy? This question is particularly relevant to the many letters of praise Sakharov received, including Susanna Aloian’s message in which she called Sakharov her “personal god”. This letter appears more like an act of hagiography than democratic participation. It is also striking that so many letter writers praised Sakharov when he took more time at the microphone than any other deputy, when far from everyone in the Congress received the chance to speak. Yet the democratic potential of letter writing during the Congress was enormous. For the first time in Soviet history, every session of a state meeting was televised. Citizens could watch it at home in real time. They could respond immediately to what they observed. When deputies read letters out loud in their speeches, which happened on a daily basis, it gave a sense that individual citizens themselves had been brought into the meeting hall, and in fact in those instances citizens’ requests guided the content of the Congress.

One way in which letter writing during the Congress was different from earlier periods in Soviet history is that it was not the only practice that brought one’s ideas into the public sphere. People talked out their impressions with friends, made phone calls, joined political discussion groups, or printed bulletins in their living room. During Perestroika they even protested or held mass meetings, which were often allowed to proceed peacefully.92 Letter writing differed form other forms of engagement in that it was indiscriminately available to all who could find a scrap of paper and 7 kopecks for postage. Despite the economic crisis that peaked in the Soviet Union in 1989, this sum was no hardship, for money, unlike goods to purchase with it, was rarely in short supply.

92 There were also instances when mass demonstrations were violently suppressed even under Gorbachev. April 1989 in Tbilisi was one of the most famous examples that also was discussed at length at the First Congress.
Moreover, unlike participating in a demonstration or debate club or publishing a bulletin, writing a letter created the possibility that one’s words would actually make it into the Congress hall itself. Something mentioned in a phone call might do the same, but a letter or telegram preserved the exact vocabulary and tone of the letter writer. It was a form of representation and direct participation in ways that not even voting could be. This point is underscored by the fact that Sakharov’s archive of mail included an enormous number of telegrams. Sending a message this way ensured its timely arrival. In this way, the Congress added new meaning to public letter writing.

It is difficult to know how Sakharov responded to the letters, how many letter writers he wrote back, or even how many letters he read. Presumably, between sitting in the congress hall for upwards of eight hours a day and preparing his speeches and visiting with Muscovites by night, he could not have had time to read them all during the Congress. But the letters mattered a great deal to him nonetheless. In one of his speeches—his speech on the “Decree on Power” on the last day of the Congress—he mentioned that he had received many letters in response to his June 2 speech on the Afghan war, and he called on Soviet people to support his “Decree” in the same way they did the earlier speech. Sakharov interpreted the sheer quantity of letters as a sign that his work was politically significant, morally respectable, and essential to the future of the country.

Conclusion

In 1989, Sakharov wrote: “It was this activation of the people that made possible the election of the new, brave, and independent people (liudi) that we observed at the
For him, the Congress itself and events in preparation for it marked a new height in reform and in the realization of a more human Soviet state: it marked the activation of the Soviet people. The level of popular participation in the Congress suggests that it was not Sakharov alone who experienced the Congress this way. The event unleashed an eagerness to participate in politics across the population that was perhaps unique in the USSR in the post-war era. In this way, the events in the USSR in 1989, starting with the elections to the Congress in January, marked a revolutionary turn in Soviet politics—a revolution that was largely an achievement of the goals of Perestroika.

Meanwhile, revolutionary events swept across Eurasia. On June 4, the eleventh day of the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies, the parliamentary elections brought the Solidarity Party to power in Poland. The same day, burgeoning demonstrations for democratic changes in the style of Gorbachev’s Perestroika on Tiananmen Square in Beijing and elsewhere in China were violently put down by the government. On June 16, 1989, the Hungarian reformist leader Imre Nagy, who had been executed in 1956, was given a public burial in Budapest, and within months, the Hungarian equivalent of Article 6 was removed from the Constitution. On November 9, 1989, protestors in East and West German began to dismantle the Berlin Wall. By December 1989, it was clear that revolution was afoot in Czechoslovakia as well.

At the time, there was less clarity about what these events meant for the future than we might think today. In a statement of support for a general strike in Moscow in early December 1989, Sakharov commented on these events: “[…] a real revolution is happening in Eastern Europe. A revolution with progressive slogans that, I think, every

---

93 Sakharov, Gor’kii, Moskva,dalee vezde, 147-148.
honest person in our country could support.” This statement suggests that he saw the events in Eastern Europe as an example for Perestroika—to what reformers and the population at large could aspire. He did not, however, pretend that all “honest people” thought the same or that there was not deep division about the path to revolution in the USSR. He clarified parenthetically that he meant not just “honest,” but “progressive”: “in this situation I do not want to accuse Nina Andreeva of dishonesty, but in no way can I call her ‘progressive’.” The example provided by countries in Eastern Europe, in his view, would “intensify” reform in the USSR.  

Throughout 1989 Sakharov remained actively devoted to political reform in the USSR. In addition to supporting the general strike in Moscow, he served on the committee to revise the Soviet Constitution. He also served in the Second USSR Congress of People’s Deputies, which met in Moscow from December 12 through December 24, 1989. Even by the time of the second Congress, the parliamentary system witnessed a number of significant changes. Most importantly, the proceedings were not longer broadcast in real time. The revolution ceased to be televised. The Congress system fell apart the wake of the attempted putsch led by Party hardliners in August 1991. It dissolved itself in September 1991 at the sixth and final USSR Congress of People’s Deputies. But Sakharov did not live to witness the ultimate fate of the Congress system that he saw as the last hope for reform. At 9PM on December 12, 1989, after a long day at the Congress, he went to his study to take a nap before preparing his speech for the following day. Per his request, his wife Elena Bonner went to wake him up at 11PM. She found him on the floor, dead. Up until the very last moment, he exhibited the activation

---

94 Sakharov’s speech during the political strike at FIAN, Moscow, 11 December 1989. Ms Rus 79 (3377), Houghton Library, Harvard University.
that he believed characterized the moral person and that would, he hoped, help transform the country for the better.
CHAPTER SIX

Empty Shelves, (Im)moral Selves

When V. Pristavkin came home from work on July 30, 1990, he scoured the kitchen for dinner. He found a bread-roll in the cupboard and a small piece of meat in the freezer. He had run out of sugar weeks ago after making a single jar of jam. He went to the store to buy something, anything, for his meal. He noted the grocery’s scant offerings: ketchup, Turkish tea, flour for 31 kopecks, margarine, bay leaves, matches, salt, and coffee beans. The lone goods stood on the shelf next to a list of items that should have been there per established economic norms. He noted these details in a letter to Komsomol’skaia pravda. Despite glasnost and the congresses, he argued, only the disappearance of goods from shelves made reform “loudly audible on a daily basis.” He could only hope that shortages would be temporary. Perhaps at some point, he wrote, reformers “will feed us not only a line, but some noodles as well” (lapshu budut veshat’, ne tol’ko na ushi narodu, no i poiavitsia ona na prilavkakh magazinov).¹

Food shortages occurred sporadically throughout the Soviet period, but 1990 marked a particularly difficult year in distribution. By some standards, the store Pristavkin visited offered an abundance of goods. In other parts of the country, there were no matches at all, or salt, or potatoes, or bread. There are no reports of starvation under Gorbachev, but the shortages posed a significant challenge to reformers, who had initially promised improved living conditions over time. Instead it appeared that just the opposite was happening. Acute shortages coincided with landmark developments of Perestroika in other respects. With the eradication of Article Six of the Constitution at the Twenty-

¹ V. Pristavkin to KP, 31 July 1990. RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2, d. 30, ll. 253-253B.
Eighth Party Conference, 1990 marked the end of the Soviet Union as a one-party state. It was also the year when, through long-awaited press reform, the media became unhinged from the Party. 1990 also included the “parade of sovereignties,” when republics from the Baltics to Central Asia demanded control over affairs traditionally attended to by the center. Food shortages stood out among these momentous events, provoking anxieties in every corner of the USSR and a surge of letters to public figures about economic shortcomings.

Shortages of basic necessities and the letters complaining about them mark an important moment in the development of Perestroika as a moral venture. Scholars and journalists have used these sources to support a myriad of arguments on morality, politics, and the Soviet Union. One argument is that the inability of the state to sufficiently feed the population proved that the Soviet project was essentially immoral and that Perestroika failed to address its moral shortcomings. Scholars who make this argument draw on the primary sources that make similar claims to bolster their position. Examining Perestroika as an attempt to produce the new Soviet person makes it possible to read complaints about food in the Gorbachev era in a new way. Comparing complaints written during Perestroika to earlier complaints reveals an important difference between the two: those from the latter period framed the difficulty of procuring food as an ethical problem. This observation suggests that food shortages were not objectively immoral, as some scholars suggest, but that reform produced the critique of shortage as such.

Another argument concerning complaints on food is that Soviet people’s antagonistic words helped chip away at the Soviet state. Anthropologist Nancy Ries

---

writes: complaints had “the reflexive, unintended consequences of reproducing powerlessness. The fatalistic stance of powerlessness left a power vacuum, readily filled by those who spoke the language of power and could deploy their own power stances.” While associating complaints with “powerlessness,” Ries did not see those who complained as victims of power. Just the opposite. She tied complaining to the Soviet collapse and the creation of what she perceived to be a democratic state out of the rubble. Ordinary citizens helped make this political transformation possible through complaints that hollowed out the power of the Soviet government. Taking a critical stance on these arguments, I read complaints about food shortage not in terms of events that followed (the Soviet collapse), but in the context of the events unfolding at the time (Perestroika). If complaints helped bring down the Soviet Union, one would expect the government to loathe them. On the contrary, the state in conjunction with the media made complaining useful to Perestroika. Letter writers contributed to reform by taking on the role of chronicler who noted its negative aspects. Hence the documentary tone of the letter from Pristavkin cited above. Reformers hoped that over time these documents would prove things were getting better.

It is important to avoid projecting liberal assumptions about letter writers’ motivations for criticizing the state in a time of shortage. One of the weaknesses in Ries’s interpretation of complaints is that it positions the complainer in opposition to the state. Indeed, letter writers vehemently criticized Perestroika and every policy by which it had become known. Yet we need not interpret such remarks as originating in a private sphere and then emerging into the public only in the form of resistance. In this chapter, I argue

---

that complaining provided yet another way in which Soviet citizens participated in the life of the state and became co-producers of Perestroika. These letters thus provide evidence of a persistent socialist subjectivity even in 1990—one characterized not by a clear division of private and public, as in the case of liberal states, but by the attempt to integrate the personal and the political.  

**Economic Crisis and the Social Contract**

The origins of the economic crisis during Perestroika are largely beyond the scope and methodologies of the present study, but they are worth exploring here to the extent that they developed out of reformers’ attempt to produce the new Soviet person. Economists and historians suggest that when Gorbachev came to power in 1985, there was no economic crisis in the Soviet Union. People did not live in abundance, yet life was remarkably stable. Initially, economic reform was geared not towards saving a failing economy, but making an obstinate one function better. From 1985 through 1991, new economic policies were inextricably linked to human activation. If workers unleashed their full potential, reformers suggested, then the Soviet economy would function even better. Gorbachev and his allies summarized this argument in one phrase: “the human factor.” Stronger workplace ethics would result in a stronger economy and a higher standard of living, which in turn would further encourage the liveliness of workers.

---

4 This argument diverges from scholarship that reads the year 1990 as the starting year of a new liberal order in the Soviet Union and what would be post-Soviet Russia. This argument is implicit in the NLO project on 1990 under the intellectual guidance of Irina Prokhorova. See Prokhorova’s introduction and the included articles in 1990: Opyt izuchenii nedavnii istorii, toma 1-2 (Moskva: NLO, 2011).  
From 1985 to 1990 Gorbachev’s major economic initiatives focused on worker productivity. The aggressive anti-alcohol campaign, which resulted in tighter regulation of alcohol sales and the revocation of most liquor licenses, aimed to improve worker performance and lower levels of absenteeism. Reformers followed this campaign with three signature reforms that similarly aimed to activate workers. The Law on Individual Labor Activity, passed in November 1986, allowed Soviet citizens to seek paid labor outside of designated workplaces. The Law on State Enterprises, passed in June 1987, aimed to transfer control of enterprises from the state to workers, replaced “commands” with “state purchases” of essential products, and allowed enterprises to move towards self-financing as opposed to centralized control. Passed on May 26, 1988, the Law on Cooperatives legalized the creation of small businesses.

Gorbachev argued that the ideas motivating these laws originated in the works and actions of Lenin. In response to criticism in the Politburo that the Law on Individual Labor Activity departed from socialism, Gorbachev stated: “It isn’t perfect socialism, but dirty socialism that will build things. How did Lenin reason about this? [...] The full initiative of citizens, give freedom to entrepreneurship. That’s socialism.” Economic historian Chris Miller interprets this passage as evidence that for Gorbachev, ideology constituted a question of pragmatism rather than conviction. While it is difficult for any historian to ascertain belief, what Gorbachev meant by this comment appears differently when put in the context of his broader worldview. By “dirty socialism,” Gorbachev was likely referring to the New Economic Policy (NEP) instituted by Lenin in 1921.

Introduced at the end of seven years of war, which followed four years of world war,

---

6 Miller, *The Struggle to Save the Soviet Economy*, 87-91, 98-100, 104-105.
7 *Politbiuro TsK KPSS*, 169, quoted in Miller, *The Struggle to Save the Soviet Economy*, 91.
8 Miller, *The Struggle to Save the Soviet Economy*, 91.
NEP permitted limited market activity in an effort to prevent starvation. Gorbachev referred to this policy as “dirty socialism” because it was a concession for convinced Communists at the time. Limited market activity seemed a retreat from smashing capitalism. Reformers, like historians, debated whether or not NEP constituted Lenin’s “real” vision, or if for him, too, it remained a concession. The contours of this debate during Perestroika have yet to be fully researched, but Gorbachev’s speeches suggest that he, at least, came to associate NEP with the “authentic” Lenin.  

Gorbachev pointed to NEP as one more way in which Lenin remained invaluable to the Soviet Union in the 1980s. This conclusion, well entrenched by 1990, reflects a development in Gorbachev’s thinking from 1985 and the evolution of his reading of Lenin. At the start of his tenure as General Party Secretary, Gorbachev linked campaigns to improve labor discipline and greater productivity in the workplace with Lenin. In conjunction with social changes (increasing glasnost, promoting democratization) and broad material incentives, reformers thought they’d more perfectly realize the kind of socialism Lenin had in mind. In the course of the 1980s, Gorbachev increasingly came to see NEP as Lenin’s blueprint for a socialist economy. A detailed study of research institutes, where Perestroika era economic policy incubated, would illuminate the details of reformers’ evolving understanding of NEP and its relationship to socialist economies.

---

in other places, including Hungary and Poland as well as Scandinavia. For his Soviet audience, however, Gorbachev rarely if ever discussed foreign models, but increasingly framed Soviet economic policy in terms of the NEP model offered by Lenin.

Laws that intended to activate workers were effective in some ways, but undermined the economy in others. On the one hand, industries reported lower rates of absenteeism, fewer workplace injuries, and higher rates of production. On the other hand, the reforms created an enormous budget deficit. The main culprit was the anti-alcohol campaign. Taxes on alcohol constituted one of the government’s primary forms of income, and restricting alcohol sales cost the state 15 billion rubles. Some argue that the global transition to the post-industrial period irreparably and the falling price of oil damaged the Soviet economy in the 1970s-1980s. Others, however, point out that revenue lost from oil profits created only a portion of the deficit, which alone would not have produced a significant challenge to the Soviet economy. In addition to lost oil revenues there were profits lost from alcohol sales. The anti-alcohol campaign doubled the amount of money lost from oil, creating the two created a 30 billion-ruble deficit. In this way the moral aims of Perestroika directly affected the Soviet economy.

The budget deficit created a genuine economic crisis that became increasingly visible in 1989 and 1990. For reformers, the important question was how to address the deficit. In theory, there were multiple options for how the state could have responded. It could have cut the military budget, or the foreign aid budget. In time, reformers would take both of these actions, but politically they were not easy, nor could they be enacted

11 Miller, *The Struggle to Save the Soviet Economy*, 64.
immediately in step with the anti-alcohol campaign. Another option included the budget allocated for domestic welfare programs. One of the biggest lines in the Soviet budget included food subsidies. Through subsidies, the state paid one-third of the cost of each loaf of bread, over half the cost of every gallon of milk, two-thirds of the cost of butter, and 72 percent of every kilogram of beef. Subsidies reflected the state’s promise to maintain a minimum standard of living for the population. Raising the price of basic foodstuffs might have made sense mathematically, but historically it had often carried grave political consequences.

Eighteenth century French history and nineteenth century British history offered countless examples of the volatility of food prices in flux, but reformers needed to look no further than their own past for examples. The Soviet Union itself had formed out of widespread protests for bread in wartime Petrograd. In its nascent days, the Soviet state had to grapple with a population ready to oppose it in order to procure food. A second instance of significant protest over food took place in 1961 in Novocherkassk, where in response to a 25-30% price hike on milk and meat, workers at the Electric Locomotive Works in Novocherkassk went on strike. The government responded with military force, killing 24, injuring about 100, bringing 114 to trial, and sentencing 7 to death.

Convictions about a just price of food went to the heart of the social contract between the Soviet state and its citizens that had become a cornerstone of the Soviet state.

13 Miller, The Struggle to Save the Soviet Economy, 66.
Even in time of revolution, war and economic upheaval in the first decades of Soviet history, Soviet people expected the state to satisfy the population’s basic needs in exchange for loyalty and hard work. Following Stalin’s death in 1953, the social contract came to revolve around a living standard above mere subsistence with the renewed foregrounding of light industry and housing. The state gave special attention to education, housing, and healthcare. Every Soviet citizen could expect his basic necessities to be met. Shoes would no longer be second place to steal. In this period it became possible to dream of owning a car, even if waiting lists remained prohibitively extensive. From the Khrushchev to Brezhnev eras, incomes went up, and the citizen as consumer became a core feature of Brezhnev’s notion of developed socialism. Life in the USSR did not need to be luxurious, he reasoned, but it should be comfortable. More than that, people should be able to buy consumer products, including electronics and furniture, and unnecessary but delightful foods, like candy. Life under socialism was supposed to be sufficient—and sweet.16

Brezhnev in particular came to see the cozy life as a legitimate aspect of Soviet socialism. This vision extended into the Food Program of 1982. By 1990, it promised, each Soviet person would be guaranteed 70 kilograms of meat, 260 eggs, 110 kilograms of potatoes, 19 kilograms of fish, 16 kilograms of sugar, 13 kilograms of vegetable oil, 135 kilograms of bread, and 340 kilograms of milk per year. On a weekly basis, that meant more than a kilogram of meat, 5 eggs, just over 2 kilograms of potatoes, roughly a third of a kilo of fish, a third of a kilo of sugar, a quarter of a kilo of vegetable oil, 2.5

---

kilos of bread, and nearly 7 kilos of milk per person.\textsuperscript{17} Soviet agriculture was in no place to provide this much food on a per capita basis, but the hope was that in time, improvements in farming and the rest of the Soviet economy would make it possible. That Soviet leaders publically discussed the number of eggs a person would eat a year provides an indication of how food came to stand at the center of the social contract, and how the items in one’s cupboards, as Pristavkin described in his letter to \textit{Komsomol’skaia pravda}, came to be a topic of public discourse.

The comfortable life remained at the heart of Gorbachev’s vision of Perestroika, of what reformers promised people would get out of changes initiated from above. The longest and most discussed section of the New Edition of the Party Program published in draft form in 1985 concerned material conditions under socialism. Reformers promised every Soviet family an apartment by the year 2000 and significant improvements in education and health care. Reformers also anticipated higher levels of production of consumer goods in order to put an end to shortages. Reform was not merely about a higher standard of living, nor did the population read it that way. On the broadest level, social discourse focused not on how people could have more things, but on how socialism could work better. Yet the production of things remained linked to human transformation. While not the only concern, the promise of a higher standard of living meant a great deal to people. At the very least, it gave them reason to think that in the course of reform, living standards would not get worse.

Reformers adamantly resisted doing away with or cutting back food subsidies. For the time, they decided to fill the budget gap by printing rubles. But this response created

\textsuperscript{17} S. Orliuk and D. Babich, “S prazdnikom sas, dorogie tovorishi,” \textit{Komsomol’skaia pravda} (24 November 1990), 1.
the problem they had hoped to avoid. By 1989, consumers felt the burden of the budget deficit anyway. As more money entered the consumer economy, goods were snatched up more quickly and shortages proliferated. Despite the government’s attempts to avoid it, prices inched upwards as well. Cooperatives that were allowed to set their own prices on most goods became infamous for selling items at previously unheard of prices, and yet still competitive prices, for they actually had goods on hand to sell.

The population did not sit idly by as goods became more expensive or disappeared altogether. They did the same thing as in 1917 and 1962: they protested. As the country prepared for the First USSR Congress of People’s Deputies, worker strikes began to crop up throughout the Union. Sulfur miners in Lviv (Ukraine) struck first in January 1989, then workers in Tallinn (Estonia) in February, and then workers in Frunze (Kirgisia) in mid-May. These events were small rumbles compared to the earthquake of protests that followed the Congress. Strikes exploded in coalmines across the USSR, most notably in the Donetsk Basin in eastern Ukraine, the Pechora Basin of Western Siberia, the Kuznetsk Basin, the Kemerovo Oblast of Western Siberia, and in central Kazakhstan near Karaganda. Roughly half a million miners went on strike in July 1989.¹⁸

A survey of miners on strike in the Donbass suggested that the majority of those on strike protested shortages of basic necessities such as meat and soap.¹⁹ Unlike in 1962, the government did not use force to quell the strikes. Reformers had after all offered an invitation to strikers by encouraging citizens to become actively engaged.

No aspect of economic reform or response to economic hardship remained separate from the broader moral discourse of Perestroika, including strikes. This form of

responding to shortages on basic goods incurred a variety of moral judgments. Some viewed them as a legitimate means of encouraging the state to make good on economic promises. Strikes also offered a way to exhibit one’s activation and commitment to engaging the state. By not using force, reformers tacitly approved of this form of activation. Yet other citizens criticized strikes on moral grounds. Letter writers ordered strikers to “get back to work.” They blamed them, rather than inflation, for shortages. The press covered the strikes—a phenomenon new to Perestroika. In 1962, public media did not utter a word about Novocherkassk. Yet coverage did not universally support the strikes. On March 7, 1991, Rossiiskaia gazeta reported that during 1989 the economy as a whole lost 2.5 million workdays due to economic strikes alone.²⁰ Figures that framed strikes in terms of the loss of work easily lent themselves to moral criticisms of strikes, including accusations of laziness.²¹ Those who objected to strikes, however, still had the opportunity to write public letters.

Perestroika in Flux

It is difficult to gauge the material conditions in which Soviet people lived in 1989-1990 at the onset of the economic crisis.²² Yet precise details of how much food people

²² It would be possible to map the geography and extent of the economic crisis by following in the footsteps of historians who set up cottage industries of researchers to investigate the extent of shortage and hunger in other parts of Europe, especially France, through economic reports published for specialists at the time. This work has not yet been done for Perestroika. The one thing that is abundantly clear from the information published in the non-specialist press is that the crisis varied greatly across the Soviet Union. Shortages were highly localized, as were responses to deficits. This point is reflected in the variety of systems constructed for managing shortages. Rations systems took on different forms ranging from coupons to the passport system, which restricted sales to residents of a specific area. In each case, regional authorities and institutions designed the rationing system to control distribution. Even coupons looked different depending on where they were issued.
ate on a daily basis is perhaps less important than the fact that information about the crisis was widely broadcast through the press. On July 12, 1990, the journal *Merkurii* reported on food prices in urban markets in 1990 versus 1989. While potatoes cost only 89% of what they had the previous year, onions cost 148% and pork 129% of their previous prices. On November 1, 1990, *Izvestiia* reported on the range of prices in different urban markets across the Soviet Union. Beef cost 7 rubles per kilogram in Frunze, but went for 20-30 rubles per kilogram in Leningrad. A kilogram of apples cost 80 kopecks in Alma-Ata, but 3-5 rubles in Moscow. On November 24, 1990 *Komsomol’skaia pravda* published the findings of a poll on satisfaction with the economy. They reported that out of 1,606 residents of Russia, 7% were satisfied with the economy, 37.7% were more dissatisfied than satisfied, and 28% were completely dissatisfied. Readers absorbed the material published in the press like sponges. They paid attention to these comprehensive reports because their stomachs and their wallets depended on them. Authors frequently discussed what they read in their letters. O.I. Ivanova wrote that she listened to a radio program about a meat-packing factory where meat was spoiling because the refrigeration units stopped working. In this case media fanned frustration by letting readers know that items they lacked were going to waste.

There is no comprehensive study of rationing during Perestroika, a topic that is difficult to study because it was so localized. The historian Elena Osokina provided for the Stalin period. This study is instructive for how the kind of questions to answer about the late Soviet period. At least in the 1930s, rationing depended on one’s age and gender, one’s workplace and position, one’s Party membership and criminal record. Social and economic organizations had as much to do with rationing as central and local governments. Trade unions, schools, and workplaces distributed coupons for deficit goods. Certain workplaces also came with welfare benefits for its employees in the form of subsidized cafeterias and access to goods produced within the institution. The sporadic details provided in public letters during Perestroika suggest all of these factors remained relevant to distribution of deficit goods even in the 1980s and 1990s. See Elena Osokina, *Our Daily Bread: Socialist Distribution and the Art of Survival in Stalin’s Russia, 1927-1941*, trans. Kate Transchel (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2001).

---

26 O.I. Ivanova to KP, 26 June 1990, RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2, d. 30, ll. 58-58B.
Newspapers could also inspire hope. The 30-year-old G.A. Ratnikova from Gavrilov Posad reported that the newspaper *Argumenty i fakty* comforted the residents of Ivanovskaya oblast by announcing that more meat would arrive. The comfort, however, was short lived, for the promised goods never appeared. Ratnikova was furious, and wrote that residents of Ivanovskaya oblast believed that *pel’meni* (dumplings) would be soon be stuffed with rat tails.27

Information about shortages in the newspapers was largely new. In earlier times, newspapers avoided questions of material poverty by focusing on spiritual wealth. Published letters focused on how the opportunity to frequent the theater made life immeasurably rich. That articles informing citizens about economic woes appeared under Gorbachev might have something to do with the newfound independence of the press from the Party in 1990, but we should not overemphasize the significance of the separation of media and state. Reports on food deficits did not largely diverge from the standards of Perestroika set before the press law went into effect. Such reports appeared even before the press reform went into effect on August 1, 1990, and largely because reformers promoted transparency of political affairs in the press. Making this information available for the public enabled citizens to actively respond to it.

Existing studies of the food crisis during Perestroika rely primarily on information published in newspapers to show how material conditions worsened in absolute terms.28 Yet the question of how much food people had is less important than the fact that information about shortages and price hikes circulated widely. Access to this news meant that even if you had Polish potatoes in Moscow, you knew that they did not in Izhevsk,

---

27 G.A. Ratnikova to KP, 14 June 1990, RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2, d. 30, ll. 32-32B.
which could make you worry about what would come next. Knowing that in Leningrad you paid 3-4 times more for beef than residents of Frunze also stoked frustration. Up until the late 1980s, food prices were largely controlled by the state and often stable across the USSR. The knowledge of how widely prices varied ran up against citizens’ notion of the moral economy—of a just, which in this case often meant standard, price on goods. By publishing information on the economy, the media played an important role in shaping the experience of shortage during Perestroika. That the newspaper published this information also helps explain why so many citizens sent letters complaining about immediate problems with provisioning to editors, even though doing so was unlikely to bring them more milk for their children.

Many letter writers also hoped that by writing a letter to the newspaper, they would get the ear of their political leaders. Such was the case with Anna Stepanovna Burkova from Ulan Ude, which she identified as the “poorest and dirtiest city in Siberia.”29 She wanted the Russian government to know that she could not buy shoes at the store and there were no fall and winter jackets for children. She said her children and husband had no socks, tights, or underwear. Worst of all, they had no soap. Her husband smelled of typhus and cholera, she wrote, and had lost his dignity and pride for his Fatherland. On top of all of these deficits, there was no salo (salted pig fat). “Who can eat salo?,” she asked.30 She scolded the government, questioning why the leaders’ souls did not ache for their people.31

Of all the foods that letter writers mourned the shortage of, one in particular stood out above the pig fat and milk products, potatoes and bread. That item was sugar. In her

29 A.S. Burkova to KP, 4 September 1990 (date on envelope), RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2, d. 30, l. 258.
30 Ibid., l. 256B-257.
31 Ibid., l. 256B.
letter to *Komsomol’skaia pravda*, the pensioner A.M. Chernovskaia lamented that she could not buy candy for her grandson. At two and a half, he did not know the taste of sweet treats until he was given one at a friend’s house one day. Since then, he had asked his grandmother for candy, and she cried because she could not fulfill his simple request. She asked if it was not possible to ration 100 grams of candy a month for children under five. She bolstered her request by asking what had happened to the Soviet state and why a country that had prided itself on its children now treated them so poorly. She put a moral spin on the absence of candy by noting that only the “elected” and those with “connections” had access to sweets. Complaints about sugar demonstrate the symbolic power of food. Chernovskaia’s complaint was not just about candy, not just about providing for her grandson, and not even simply about the Soviet notion of childhood. Sugar went to the heart of Brezhnev’s notion of developed socialism, according to which life would not be luxurious, but it would be comfortable, and it would sweet, filled with simple pleasures like candy. Complaints about sugar pointed out that the state was breaching the social contract with the people.32

As citizens wrote letters to the newspaper and via the press to their leaders, they framed complaints on food shortages in terms of Perestroika—its success, its value, and the necessity of it. As Ia.P. Dobagov, a worker from Zhako, wrote, there was so much hope at the start of reform. “How much good we associated with it, [we] hoped and really expected that finally everything would change for the better,” he wrote. He had expected that “lines would disappear” and “drunkenness would be eradicated.” In 1990 his hopes were dashed. “Instead of improvement that people have waited for so long, our welfare is

32 A.M. Chernovskaia to KP, 1 December 1990. RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2, d. 32, l. 73.
obviously getting worse,” he wrote.\textsuperscript{33} Shortages made him pause and take stock of what Perestroika had given him. He was not the only one to do so. Many letter writers revisited the pillars of reform and questioned the extent to which they maintained their strength.

One of the pillars of Perestroika to come under reappraisal in a time of increased shortages was stagnation, the concept on which Gorbachev’s extensive reform program was based. As articulated in the draft of the New Edition of the Party Program in 1985, stagnation as a concept marked a new interpretation of the Brezhnev period as a time when workers became alienated from their work, ceased working to their fullest potential, and as a result the economy lagged. Initially, Soviet citizens took the concept to heart, convinced they could have been doing more all along. Shortages cast those thoughts in sharp relief. B. Nikitin and V. Talapikhina from Kineshma asked why Gorbachev “threw dirt” on Brezhnev. Under Brezhnev “there was everything. Prices were normal.” “This is the real stagnation,” they wrote. Their comment, which was repeated across many letters, cast the entire reform program into question. If reform made conditions worse than they were before, then what was it all worth?\textsuperscript{34}

Letter writers did not stop at Brezhnev. Niktin and Talapikhina also questioned Stalin, claiming that even under this leader “everything existed” and “prices were normal.” In both situations, with respect to Brezhnev and especially Stalin, it is interesting how letter writers mobilized historical memory. Nikitin and Talapikhina did not mention that under Stalin millions of people starved to death in the process of collectivization, that shortages of food were widespread in the cities, and that the rationing system persisted into the postwar period. These details escaped their memory. Yet the memory of Stalin

\textsuperscript{34} B.V. Nikitin and V. Talapikhina to KP, 15 August 1990 (date on envelope). RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2, d. 30, l. 35.
could be mobilized effectively against Perestroika. By 1987, Gorbachev claimed that not just Brezhnev but Stalin was responsible for the failures of the Soviet economy. The forceful process by which he collectivized and industrialized the country resulted in widespread alienation in the workplace. Nikitin and Talapikhina and others who compared the current times to the Stalin years suggested that even that period that Gorbachev claimed was terrible was far better than what they had before them.35

As letter writers reconsidered the past, many also cast doubt on the efficacy of changes to the present. Anna Stepanovna Burkova, who said her husband smelled of typhus and cholera because there was no soap to wash with, called it “embarrassing” to watch the Congresses, “where deputies act like neighbors in a communal apartment.”36 A woman from Krasnodar agreed: “How many conferences can you have?,” she asked. She complained that all you could watch on television were conferences.37 A man from Erevan questioned glasnost. “What has changed with the arrival of glasnost?,” he asked. Have we “started to live better? Received meat? Improved the conditions of labor, everyday life, or lowered prices? NO!!! In my opinion we’ve only started to more bravely speak about departed leaders. Carrying out analyses and criticizing their ‘doings’, we have not taken a step forward towards socialist development.”38 It was difficult for letter writers to see the silver lining in these political developments when they could not purchase basic necessities in the stores.

The most concise expression of how Perestroika produced the language for criticizing shortages comes from a letter submitted to Komsomol’skaia pravda by Iu. P.

35 Ibid., l. 35.
37 Anonymous to KP, 27 September 1990. RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2, d. 30, l. 83B
Sibil’, a third-year university student. The envelope sent to the newspaper included a rations coupon from June 1990 stamped “Coupon for the right to receive food” (Image 6.1). At this time, many university students received rations coupons to ensure that they received food regardless of fluctuating prices. The coupon included Sibil’’s name, year of student and department, and the date. Sibil’’s letter consisted of a single line: “Attribute of a rights-based government” (Image 6.2). The letter writer suggested a “rights-based government” in the Soviet Union meant nothing more than a food-rationing program. The statement implied that Perestroika was taking the Soviet Union not to a loftier more idyllic place, but to one that was primitive and marked by material scarcity.39

Publications in the periodical press helped citizens frame their critical remarks on shortages in these ways. The discourse on stagnation offers a strong example. On November 24, 1990, Komsomol’skaia pravda published a short article written by a newspaper staffer on Brezhnev’s food program, unveiled in 1982. The article cited the specific amounts of each product Soviet people were to have under this plan: 70 kilograms of meat, 260 eggs, 110 kilograms of potatoes, 19 kilograms of fish, 16

kilograms of sugar, 13 kilograms of vegetable oil, 135 kilograms of bread, and 340 kilograms of milk per year. With respect to sugar, the journalist noted that Brezhnev’s plan made no mention of a coupon system for obtaining the prescribed amount. The article ironically “congratulated” Soviet citizens on “completion” of the food program, as Soviet leaders had announced in 1982 that the plan would be fully implemented by 1990. Clearly, the goals had not been achieved. This article appeared on the front page next to an article on the moral consequences of food shortage. In its content and layout, the newspaper provided readers with the discursive tools for framing complaints on shortages in terms of the historical and programmatic underpinnings of Perestroika as well as its claims to produce a more moral society.40

Does the vocal criticism of every pillar of Perestroika suggest that in the face of shortages, people stopped believing in the ideas that inspired reform? Historians have made this observation about food shortages at other historical settings.41 During Perestroika, however, it does not seem to be the case. When letter writers criticized democratization and glasnost in light of the food shortages, they were not necessarily denouncing the main objectives of reform. As Gorbachev made clear, democratization and glasnost offered a new path to the creation of a socialist state. The socialist state, as he promised, was one in which each person could live in dignity, which included a guaranteed basic standard of living. Letter writers were pointing out that democratization and glasnost had not achieved that goal. Reformers had not made good on the social contract at the heart of socialism and reform: they failed to deliver goods to the people.

Far from losing sight of the ideas on which reform was founded, those who criticized Perestroika believed them more than ever. They believed reformers should actually achieve them, too.

**Speculation and the Moral Economy**

In addition to questioning individual policies that made up Perestroika, economic initiatives and widespread shortages cast the moral vision of Perestroika in flux. Shortages made people wonder what kind of person represented the long sought after new Soviet person. Letters that cast the evolving moral vision in sharpest relief came from those who long functioned as the unethical other in Soviet society: speculators. In September 1990 Komsomol’skaia pravda received a letter from a 21-year-old resident of Krasnodar who identified herself as a “woman, mother, speculator.” She lived in a modest apartment with her husband and toddler daughter. Her husband made 200 rubles a month, and she received a mere 35 rubles a month to care for their daughter—“a mockery of maternity,” she wrote. The family income was slightly higher than many households; letter writers in the countryside often complained about a monthly salary of 85 rubles; but this letter writer nonetheless found it difficult to make ends meet. She and her husband did not receive their apartment from the state but purchased it on their own. They had to pay for it somehow. Thus, she argued, material circumstances forced her into “speculation.”

In general in the Soviet Union, speculation meant making a profit off of selling goods. Except for the black market, the state owned all stores, and workers took home only a salary, not any share of the profits. The letter from the woman in Krasnodar

---

42 Anonymous to KP, 27 September 1990. RGAPSI, f. M-98, op. 2, d. 30, ll. 81-81B.
provides a window into what speculation looked like in practice. In her case, someone had set up a gated market where anyone could come to sell their goods. Sellers paid 3 rubles for a ticket to enter, and customers paid a 1 ruble entrance fee. Initially, the letter writer had heard that sellers could set their own prices on goods, which is what lured her to work there; but in reality, she said, only foreigners were allowed to do so. She had to sell her items at the price the market manager dictated.43

The highly emotional and confessional letter demonstrated the author’s moral struggle with her occupation and her own moral standing. On the one hand, she was faced with popular constructions of the evil speculator. On the other hand, she was only trying to get by and support her young family. She was also nowhere nearly as bad as others at the market. Foreigners, she pointed out, charged “600 rubles for shoes, and 1000 rubles for a raincoat.” Xenophobic stereotypes helped her see her own work in a moral light. The letter writer also noted that selling goods required her to stand at the market for 5-6 hours a day. In other words, even speculators worked hard. This point made her out to be moral in the way that Soviet people had long sought to demonstrate their morally upstanding nature: through their work. At the end of the day, she saw herself doing a service to others who had no time to track down much needed goods—many of those people parents of young children like her. She was creating access for them. Thus she was helping compensate for the state’s failure to do what she perceived as its job. In short, even as a speculator, she was an ethical subject.

At the same time the letter writer wrestled with what was and was not moral, she argued that the very idea of morality was changing. By way of ending her letter, she compared herself to a prostitute, another definitively immoral character in the Soviet

43 Ibid., ll. 82-83.
imagination. This young woman, however, pointed out: “they are already talking about creating the [legal] foundations of this ancient profession.” Popular films of the period like Interdevochka (1989) pushed the question of sex work into public discourse by featuring a prostitute as the main character. Some had come to question whether or not sex work really was as immoral as Soviet authorities had portrayed it. The letter writer argued that the same would happen to speculation. “It’s not worth struggling against that which is inevitable, against history,” she wrote. “Since antiquity people have been speculators, only before they called them something else—‘salesmen’.” Though she feared times had not changed enough to identify herself by name, she made a strong argument for the evolution of moral concepts, and contributed to that process of change with her own letter.44

In contrast to the “woman, mother, speculator” from Krasnodar who identified herself as a saleswoman who turned a profit, Aleksandr Mikhailovich Golovko received the title of speculator by criminal conviction. Born in 1955, he was 35 years old in July 1990 when he wrote his letter to Komsomol’skaia pravda.45 He was born in the southwestern corner of Ukraine that had the highest concentration of heroes of socialist labor and World War Two in the republic, he noted. His parents came from peasant families and became industrial workers. His father served in the war, but only 44 years after victory did he receive the title of second-class invalid, which allowed him to collect greater social security.46 Golovko spent most of his life working as a driver, but returned to the countryside in 1985. In 1986 he purchased apples and in 1987 watermelons from a farm and resold them in areas where they were quickly snatched up. He was so good at

---

44 Ibid., ll. 83B-84.
46 Ibid., ll. 152B-153.
selling the crops that farmers he worked with even asked him to sell milk products. His operations were cut short when the Ukrainian courts tried him for speculation according to Article 154, Part 3 of the Ukrainian criminal code. On May 17, 1988 he was stripped of his political rights for five years and required to pay 31,933 rubles in fines. The government seized his property, including the house he built for his young family before 1986.

Like the woman from Krasnodar, Golovko negotiated his own moral standing in the course of his letter. Every detail was used to invoke moral sympathy, from his father’s long wait for social security benefits to the noble characteristics of his native village to the fact that he built his home for his family with his own two hands. With respect to his apple and watermelon trade, he wrote that he only returned to the countryside when he heard about potential crop failure—announcements that newspapers including Komsomol’skaia pravda widely advertised in the summer months to encourage city-dwellers to go to agricultural regions to help with the harvest. Since he grew up in the countryside, he already had the knowledge of how to help. If he had not taken the initiative to distribute the apples and watermelons, they would have rotted, which to his mind was far less moral in a time of shortage than his distribution operations. Golovko emphasized that he did not sell goods at exorbitant prices, nor did he decide prices himself. Prices were always dictated to him within a certain range. If he bought apples for 10 kopecks per kilogram, for instance, he was told not to sell them for more than 40-45 kopecks. In all these ways he sought to prove his own moral integrity.

48 Ibid., ll. 154-154B.
49 Ibid., l. 153.
50 Ibid., l. 153B.
Similar to the woman from Krasnodar, Golovko argued that what it meant to be moral was changing, but for him, those changes were commensurate with the course of Perestroika. Before even introducing himself, he began his letter with a brief history of Perestroika since the Twenty-Seventh Party Conference in 1986. At that important event, he wrote, he recognized the “historical truth” about past leaders and came to feel “resentful and estranged” from them. Like those around him, he took up the slogans of the Conference and became convinced that “it’s impossible to keep living this way.”

There was so much hope in the hearts of people, he wrote, but the bureaucracy started to get in the way. Production started to fall, and there were shortages. Then the press asked cooperatives and others to help ensure that the harvest got distributed before it rotted. That’s when he started to sell apples. The problem was that even while he heeded the call of reform, the legal authorities did not. They “ignore the process of reform taking place in the country,” he stated, “choosing not to accept my individual labor activity by the criteria of common sense and new thinking.” In other words, it was the justices’ idea of morality that lagged behind the time, not his own. By situating his actions in the history of Perestroika, Golovko acknowledged the evolving conceptions of morality while suggesting that he was simply living by the moral standards that corresponded to the new society. In short, he was not a criminal, but the new Soviet person reformers sought to create.51

When Gorbachev came to power in 1985 and reformers outlined the basic principles of socialist morality in the New Edition of the Party Program as a “collective morality,” a “humanitarian morality,” and an “active, energetic morality,” they certainly did not have in mind the speculator as the moral paragon of Soviet society. Golovko and

51 Ibid., L. 154.
the unnamed woman from Krasnodar sought to prove that the course of reform created possibilities for the moral subject. Neither rejected the qualities identified in the New Edition of the Party Program. In fact both demonstrated the ways they exemplified those principles. The persistent sense that one could speak with full authority only if speaking on a moral platform underscores how core Soviet values carried over into the early 1990s.

The shifting nature of the conception of the ethical subject that made it possible for a speculator to portray himself as the new person might have helped others arrive at the conclusion that morality had simply evaporated. Everywhere around them many saw signs that the Soviet Union had become profoundly immoral. O.Iu. Averin from Sasovo stated that he had no more “patience to look at the brothel that has come to rule over our country.”52 O.I. Ivanova, who reported talk of rat tail dumplings, decried: “There is speculation at every step, prices are scary, thievery is all around. They steal at the meat-packing company, everywhere it’s possible to take something.”53 A.T. Nekrasov, a 39-year old worker from Strunino, characterized his surroundings as “a society where those on top steal from those on the bottom, and those on the bottom steal from each other. A society where you can’t leave a bike without a lock.”54 An anonymous letter writer from Komsomol’sk na Amure lamented: “We have ceased to feel ourselves human beings, citizens in our own country, we are like hungry dogs sniffing at empty shelves in stores and bare our teeth at strangers on our own territory.”55

The portrait of Soviet society in 1990 as a place where prostitution flourished and everyone stole as much as possible leads some to the argument that morality had nothing
to do with Perestroika, for clearly nobody lived by moral principles or law. This claim takes up the argument inherent in the words of the Averins, Ivanovas, and Nekrasovs, but does not properly contextualize it. It is important to note that many of these practices had existed for a long time. There was nothing new about stealing from the workplace during Perestroika. Yet letter writers claimed it was new, and the moral language used by those who believed Soviet society had become demoralized in the course of Perestroika had its roots in reform discourse. Reformers long claimed that political, economic, and social initiatives aimed to remoralize Soviet society—an idea that evolved over time from activating the worker to addressing the darker pages of Soviet history. By describing society as definitively immoral, letter writers used reformers’ language to tell them their plan failed. They had not created a more ethical society, but a far less ethical one.

That the description of Soviet society as immoral came out of the discourse of Perestroika becomes more evident by comparing the language of letters written in this period of shortage to letters from earlier periods of shortage. In a November 1935 letter to V.M. Molotov, the pensioner, invalid, and former prisoner who had served ten years under the Imperial government N.S. Kratiuk described his trying life circumstances. He had tuberculosis, as did his wife, and they still had four young children to raise. Because of his disability, he could not work; nobody wanted to hire him; but he could not feed and dress his family on his social security. He documented his exact pension, how much he paid for bread each month, the rent he paid for his apartment, and other staple expenses. He could not make ends meet, he wrote. He asked Molotov to help him by providing a cow for his family. He acknowledged that there were likely thousands of people asking for cows, and how could he expect Molotov to fulfill all of those requests, let alone his.
Nonetheless, he appealed to Molotov on the basis of his inability to work, his large family, his especially his suffering at the hands of the Russian imperial state. He engaged the subjectivizing narrative of the time by saying his life, too, was bound up with the revolution, which ultimately made him worthy of Molotov’s attention.\footnote{N.S. Kratiuk to V.M. Molotov, 22 November 1935, in Pism’ya vo vlast’: 1928-1939 (Moskva: Rosspen, 2002), 276-280.} In this way, Kratiuk resembled other letter writers and diarists of the time.\footnote{Jochen Hellbeck and Igal Halfin provide a range of examples of Soviet subjects inscribing their life on the revolution during the Stalin era in diaries, autobiographies, and trial statements. See Jochen Hellbeck, Revolution on my Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin; idem., “With Hegel to Salvation: Bukharin’s Other Trial,” Representations 107, no. 1 (2009), 56-59; and Igal Halfin, Terror in my Soul: Communist Autobiographies on Trial (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).}

In a letter to Komsomol’skaia pravda in September 1970, a man by the last name Shkakonok wrote about the difficulties he had finding basic necessities for his family. He and his wife together made only 175 rubles a month, and had two small children. The children needed pants and tennis shoes for school, but he could not find them anywhere. The parents of his children’s classmates were able to travel as far as Moscow for items their kids needed for school. He could barely make it to Novosibirsk. The underlying assumption in his town was that if you did not dress appropriately or have basic necessities, you were not working hard enough. He begged to differ, and he complained that the newspaper silenced his position. The newspaper, he wrote, continually emphasized that man could get by on the spiritual wealth acquired at the theater and library. It did not publicize the widespread problem of procuring basic goods for one’s family. Shkakonok worked installing stoves and furnaces, which brought him into people’s homes on a daily basis. He thus knew that he was not the only one to find it difficult to dress his children. Unlike Kratiuk, Shkakonok did not ask his addressee to solve the problem of shortages directly. His just wanted the newspaper to acknowledge
this widespread difficulty in print.58 Yet like Kratiuk, Shkakonok’s letter showed the author’s deep awareness of social and political discourses of the day.

The letters from Kratiuk and Shkakonok bear numerous similarities to complaint letters on shortages during Perestroika. The authors make a strong case for themselves as moral subjects, and they attend to details of salary and cost of deficit items. The list of how much things cost constituted a prominent feature of letters across the Soviet period. Yet in letters from earlier periods, I have yet to come across any that challenge the state on the grounds that society has become thoroughly immoral. Instead, they framed the problem in terms of the prominent discourses of the time. This is evident in Kratiuk’s letter, as he framed himself as someone valuable to the Revolution, and well as Shkakonok’s letter, which addressed the newspaper’s constant emphasis on spiritual wealth over material poverty. Letter writers during Perestroika framed the problem in terms of morality because this was the dominant political and social objective of the day. It is unlikely that letters written during Perestroika were simply more open and direct about their assessment of the state as immoral because of glasnost. KGB files suggest that unhappy citizens brazenly expressed themselves throughout the Soviet period. In a report on letters about the price hike on milk and meat in 1962, the KGB reported that numerous anonymous letters “express hatred towards the Communist Party and Communists [and] threatened local party and Soviet activists.”59 Some letters written Perestroika made such comments, too. Yet the accusation that society had become thoroughly immoral grew out of the political language of Perestroika.

59 KGB document, 25 July 1962. RGANI, f. 89, op. 6, d. 22, l. 1.
Mobilizing Complaints for Reform

Persistent shortages pushed reformers to institute further economic reforms. At the Twenty-Eighth Party Conference in July 1990, Gorbachev announced his support for marketizing the Soviet economy. Reformers’ shift to the market leaves many questions open for further research, yet important here is the fact that Gorbachev saw not the capitalist West as his model for market reform, but socialist precedents such as NEP.60 For Gorbachev, the introduction of the market was never separate from the effort to create the new Soviet person. In response to citizens left wondering what a market was, Gorbachev explained that the “market” he had in mind constituted a mixed economy made up of a mix of enterprises, ranging from state-owned to cooperative to joint-stock companies.61 Though clearly an evolution in his thinking about reform, the Soviet leader tied market-socialism to the goals with which Perestroika began. He stated in his address to the Supreme Soviet: “We want to give powerful stimuli to the initiative of people, their labor activities, [and] their enterprise, to open wide possibilities for the use of the achievements of science and technology, and to enter a new dynamic of economic development of the country.”62

How Gorbachev explained the shift to the market for his audience is important. What justified the move, he said, was that Soviet people themselves had changed since the start of reform. “Society is on the verge of a storm,” he stated. “Before us is a different people, a different society. It’s a different spiritual and emotional condition of

60 Economic historians give surprisingly little attention to the question of the shift in reformers’ thinking—when it took place, why, and how reformers themselves understood and framed the shift. This oversight is perhaps a result of the analytical frames brought to the subject, including the expectation that the shift to market capitalism was inevitable.
61 His speech was published in Izvestiia and then other newspapers, including KP. See Komsomol’skaia pravda (18 September 1990), 1-2.
62 Komsomol’skaia pravda (18 September 1990), 2.
society.”\textsuperscript{63} In addition to serving as justification for introducing market reforms, his words also offered an interpretation of the widespread complaints generated in part by the economic crisis and food shortages. Describing complaining masses as “on the verge of a storm” cast them not as unhappy subjects, but activated ones. He thus turned the act of complaining into the condition that reform sought to create, and transformed a population that in many ways came to question Perestroika as freshly prepared for further changes.

The “500 Day” plan drawn up by the academic Shatalin and a small committee appointed by Gorbachev provided the blueprint for creating a market in the Soviet Union. The plan included the rapid erasure of price controls, privatization of state-owned industry, large budget cuts, and decreases to defense spending and foreign aid. There were four stages to creating the market. Starting on November 1, 1990 and for the first 100 days, emergency measures would be taken to denationalize the economy and institute the legalization of all entrepreneurial activity and to create a central bank. In the next 150 days, privatization and price liberalization would continue and privatization of housing would begin. In the third stage, a portion of state industry, transportation stock, and commercial business would be sold to the public, and the ruble would become convertible. In the fourth stage, the last 100 days, three quarters of state enterprises would be denationalized and an even higher percentage of transportation, construction, and trade would go to private hands. Gorbachev ultimately adopted Shatalin’s proposal in a highly modified form, but the name remained the same, and Shatalin played a prominent role in its implementation.\textsuperscript{64}

\textsuperscript{63} V Politbiuro TsK KPSS, 630.
\textsuperscript{64} Moskoff, \textit{Hard Times}, 20-21.
Gorbachev had become convinced that introducing market reforms would allow Perestroika to succeed, and he equated the success of reform with the creation of the new person. In his September address to the Supreme Soviet, Gorbachev compared reform to a pregnant woman. “It’s the ninth month of pregnancy,” he stated, “and it’s possible a healthy child will be born, or a disabled one. It’s even possible that the mother dies.”

The choice of metaphor allowed him to underscore the fragility of reform at that moment. Reform could live, it could have defects, or it could die. The metaphor also equated the success of reform with the birth of the new person. The birth scene had often lent itself to this purpose throughout Soviet history. For example, it appeared in the opening montage of Dziga Vertov’s film *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). The picture flashes between a birth scene, a film shoot, and a trolleybus to suggest the connection between the creation of a new society and new person and, in this case, the role of film in the creation process.

Gorbachev did not necessarily have Vertov in mind, but the metaphor was widespread enough to make the point anyway. A new society was inextricably linked to the creation of a new people.

Newspapers reinforced the connections between creating the market and the new Soviet person. They did so by rather conventional means: they asked citizens to write letters and keep diaries. On September 29, 1990, just over a week after Gorbachev’s address to the Supreme Soviet, an editorial statement appeared on the front page of *Komsomol’skaia pravda*:

> In sociology there is the following method: evaluate social events by how individuals relate to them. That is, study diaries and letters. It provides a strikingly objective picture, even though the impression is subjective. [. . .] From parliament, the President, the government, [and] Shatalin’s group we await change. From

---

65 *V Politiuro TsK KPSS*, 630.
citizens male and female – letters. Keep diaries in the kitchen and send them to us. This will be the thermometer under the armpit of reform.\textsuperscript{66} The newspaper’s invitation to readers to keep diaries and write letters offered them something to do in a time of shortage. It implored them to become documentarists and chroniclers of reform. It went so far as to say that the proper role of the state included bringing about change, while defining the proper role of the citizen as composing letters. Keeping a diary or writing a letter was not a mere palliative—a way to keep citizens peacefully occupied while reformers manipulated power. The practice of documenting reform gave citizens an opportunity to participate in the process. Komsomol’skaia pravda made this clear by comparing the letter to “the thermometer under the armpit of reform.” A thermometer allowed one to track changes in a sick person’s health. The letter and diary, which recorded daily events over time, would show the progress of reform.

The language of the call for letters and diaries in September 1990 echoed the call for letters in Komsomol’skaia pravda in step with the publication of the draft of the New Edition of the Party Program in October 1985. At that time, Gorbachev stated that the new Party documents would “call forth a wave of responses, suggestions [and] letters.”\textsuperscript{67} He expected the press “to become the all-People tribune of discussion, to accumulate ideas, opinions [and] the experiences of the masses.”\textsuperscript{68} Komsomol’skaia pravda invited readers to submit their letters on the recently published Party documents, stating: “Each [person] has the right to express his or her observations and suggestions on the pre-Conference documents. In this is the great strength of our Soviet democracy.”\textsuperscript{69}

\textsuperscript{66} Komsomol’skaia pravda (29 September 1990), 1.
\textsuperscript{67} Materialy Plenuma Tsentral’nogo Komiteta KPSS. 15 oktiabria 1985 goda (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1985), 13.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 14.
\textsuperscript{69} Komsomol’skaia pravda No 249 (30 October 30, 1985), 1.
editorial call for citizens to participate in this way harkened back to the rural correspondents movement of the 1920s. Yet one should not assume a straight line from the 1920s to 1990. When shortages and price hikes spurred vocal complaints across the country about food in the early 1960s, for instance, there were no open calls for complaints by newspapers and the state. Of course, critics needed no invitation to write scathing letters. The point, however, is that Komsomol’skaia pravda’s call for letters and diaries documenting shortages in 1990 brought the act of complaining into the scope of reform. It also showed a continued commitment to using letters as well as diaries to allow citizens to become citizens actively engaged in state processes, and reiterated the place of citizens as the co-producers of Perestroika as a politics of activation.

Photographs of cars lined up waiting for gas, a crowd waiting to purchase wine, and a woman carrying an armful of bread loaves shrouded the editorial statement, and above it appeared an example diary by Citizen K. There were 8 entries from September 1 through September 20 that recorded her experiences obtaining provisions for her family.

The first entry stated:

**September 1** Yesterday at the general store they had boiled sausage, and it was possible to go through and pick it up just like that. If I had only known that it would be the last time, I would have taken three links. Today I waited in line for sausage for 30 minutes.

On September 2 she noted that eggs, flour, pickled goods (excluding seaweed and Bulgarian lentils) had disappeared long ago, and that there were no potatoes or onions.

Bread disappeared on September 3, but reappeared on September 11. One day she stood

---

in line for 45 minutes for tomatoes. Another day she stood in line for an hour for meat, but in the end could only buy carp. Yet another day waited in line for what she thought was meat, but turned out to be cookies.

Citizen K.’s diary provided a manual for participating in reform via diary keeping and letter writing. Her entries taught readers to document what they bought, goods they could or could not get, when and how they got them, prices, the amount of time spent in lines, and any surprises. They also offered instruction on style and length. Each entry included one to three sentences, no more. In other words, the point was to be concise. In a time when people spent much of the days standing in line, this advice reassured readers that they did not need a lot of time to keep a diary. Citizen K. also interspersed her diary with comments that had subtle political edge. In a line towards the last entry, she mentioned that grandmother did not like to hear that goods had disappeared from shelves. The meaning of this line is unclear. Perhaps grandmother felt that the disappearance of goods suggested the regression of Soviet society. Maybe she feared the return of times of starvation during World War Two. The lack of clarity was perhaps the point. The diary need not be a political rampage. It need only attend to the dailyness of life, with subtle gestures towards the political significance of it all. The real political act—the celebrated one—was the act of recording.⁷¹

It is unclear if Citizen K. was a real person or if editors invented her, but in any case her published diary sent readers into diary production. Several days after the publication, S.O. Piskunov, a senior at Kiev Polytechnic Institute, decided to keep a

⁷¹ *Komsomol’skaia pravda* (29 September 1990), 1. KP published a second diary as well. See *Komsomol’skaia pravda* (6 October 1990), 1.
journal of his own “shopping adventures.”

His diary included 14 entries from October 4 through October 31. On October 4, he went to the store and bought goods for 1 ruble 20 kopecks, paid with a 3-ruble note, but could not get any change. The saleswoman instead wrote his name on a list of IOUs. The interaction led him to conclude that new deficit had appeared in Kiev: a deficit of money, specifically coins for giving change. On October 7, he wrote that he traveled to the market to buy potatoes, since the store only sold potatoes “the size of walnuts” that “would fall out of a mesh bag on your way home”. At the market, the cost of potatoes varied from 70 to 90 kopecks per kilogram, depending on if you wanted to wait in line or not. If you bought them at 70 kopecks, there were 6 or 7 people in line. For 90 kopecks, there was no line.

On October 12, he noted the specific kinds of matches available at the store. The “normal” matches for a kopeck had disappeared, but you could still buy “stones”, which he described as “long 15 cm” matches for 1 ruble 50 kopecks per box, and you could buy “sovereigns,” which were “four boxes held together by two pieces of plastic with a picture on one of them.”

Though Piskunov did not mention citizen K. ’s diary or the newspaper’s call to document his experiences, evidence suggests the newspaper inspired him to keep his diary. He started keeping a diary a few days after hers appeared in print. His entries resemble hers in form as well as content. He similarly documented what he bought, the goods he could or could not get, when and how, the amount of time spent in line, the amount spent on food, and any surprises. He also included some reflections that verged on political statements, but without overdoing it. His entries were under ten sentences each, making them longer than citizen K. ’s, but still crisp. If his diary were to be

73 Ibid., l. 334B.
74 Ibid.
published, the editors would likely redact the entries, anyway. Piskunov mailed his diary to *Komsomol’skaia pravda* in early November, which also suggests he took his cue for creating the document from the newspaper. In his cover letter, he framed himself as a sociologist, as editors had mentioned in their call for readers to keep diaries. He had heard that those living in the Ukrainian capital lived better than others, but told the editors that based on his objective recordings, they could “judge for themselves.”

Piskunov’s diary offers a subtle example of how documenting shortages created an opportunity to work on the self. By keeping track of the mundane details of everyday life, including what he could purchase, prices, and the length of lines, he was adapting a number of roles for himself. One was as chronicler who attended to the tiny details of life. His description of the matchboxes offered a case in point, as did his close attention to date and even time when he could buy certain goods. Through his diary, he also became a journalist in the style of the rural correspondents in the 1920s. This role became apparent in his notes on new shortages, like money, or the condition of public transportation. Most importantly, Piskunov fashioned himself a sort of Sherlock Holmes, an investigator, by asking questions about shortages. One store did not sell any needles, he noted, which he speculated was a conscious decision, for they did not want to draw attention to the fact that they had already run out of thread.

As in earlier times, the diary offered not pacification for the population, but the opportunity to participate in the life of the state. Editors hoped that diaries would be “the thermometer under the armpit of reform,” showing that conditions improved over time. Piskunov’s diary did so only obliquely. If there is any one narrative uniting the disparate

---

75 Ibid., l. 333.
76 Ibid., l. 336.
entries, it is that conditions steadily worsened. His first entry documented the peculiar absence of change at stores. Several days later he discussed the shortage of public transportation and the long wait times to catch the commuter rail to the suburbs. Over the next few weeks staple goods like matches became more expensive. On October 29, he reported that he read in the newspaper that “there is enough of everything and more,” which he read a signal of worse times to come, rather than better.\(^{77}\) In the last two days of October, stores closed and bread disappeared altogether. The patient was getting worse, not better. Yet perhaps the effect was intentional. The 500 Day Plan was scheduled to begin the day after Piskunov ended his diary. By shaping his diary as tragedy rather than comedy, he perhaps intended to suggest that conditions could only get better.

Keeping a diary was not the only way to participate in the life of the state at in a time of shortage. Citizens could also do so by writing letters. The letter from V. Pristavkin, with which this chapter began, provides an example of the documentary tone that many letter writers employed when they wrote to the newspaper to complain about deficits or prices. His letter resembled the diary entries of Citizen K. and Piskunov. The newspaper’s call for readers to participate in reform by recording deficits helps explain why a letter writer would report each item in the cupboard and in the store. Letter writers also helped document the economic crisis by submitting other mementos of shortage. O.A. Epp, a boiler operator and mother of three children in Makinsk, sent the newspaper price tags of stockings in December 1990 (Image 6.3). She wrote that after standing in line for half an hour for women’s pantyhose, she could only buy children’s tights.\(^{78}\) V.A. Illarionov, a Moscow intellectual, sent the newspaper coupons for food, including two

\(^{77}\) Ibid., l. 336B.

coupons for sausage and two for oil for the month of June 1990, and one for sausage and one for oil for the month of August 1990 (Image 6.4). His letter did not explain why he was sending the coupons. One can speculate that he sent them in part because they had already expired (he wrote his letter in September 1990). By sending them, he also helped document shortage.79

The effort to turn complaining into an act of participation in reform worked in many ways, yet some citizens also pushed back against it. In addition to documenting shortages by sending his coupons to Komsomol'skaia pravda, Illarionov addressed the topic at the heart of reform: “spirituality, that way of thinking and feeling that guides us, the person.” He reflected:

Today we speak and write about acquisitions, and about acquiring spiritual freedom—the pinnacle of the most difficult path of the human towards perfection. But now, today, in an epoch of total [illegible word], in an epoch of diverse and multifaceted deficits (including economic),[.] spirituality constitutes a deficit that is hardly palpable. In our society, in a society of total deficit, in the coming years, is such a desired goal achievable—the acquisition of spiritual freedom, the pinnacle of the most difficult path of the human towards perfection? Is this not another rank and file myth, an illusion in our society, in our lives, for our lives, for our society?80

79 V.A. Illarionov to KP, 6 September 1990. RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2, d. 31, ll. 2-5.
80 V.A. Illarionov to KP, 6 September 1990. RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2., d. 31, l. 1B.
His letter suggested that he fully understood the objectives of Perestroika as liberating the individual, and yet he began to wonder if it remained a worthwhile goal. Especially in a time of economic deficits, he suggested, developing the self would be impossible. His point starkly contrasted Gorbachev’s reading of the “stormy” population as increasingly activated and of complaining as a way of participating in reform.

The intellectual Illarionov was not the only letter writer to doubt the moral objectives of Perestroika. N. Chuprova, a nurse from Leningrad, stated in her letter:

From this kind of life you get tired and mean. About what kind of education (vospitanie) can you talk if everything is on the brink of failure and “explosion”? If around [you] is hooliganism, fighting and swear words, the absence of spiritual values, if there is only one thought: “Where to get money and buy essential goods and where is it possible to find good quality [goods]?” HOW in such conditions [can you] become good and mannered (vospitannym)? How??

She, too, made the point that shortages made it difficult to work on the self.

---

81 N. Chuprova to KP, 19 August 1990 (date on envelope). RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2, d. 30, ll. 29-29B.
The 39-year old A.T. Nekrasov, a “simple worker” with an eighth-grade education from Strunino, reiterated the point made by Illarionov and Chuprova. He wrote:

People, lines, people begging from the government, studding the threshold of tall buildings [. . .] Is this really the new person, yes he is dressed a little better, but his soul is equally as enserfed [as before the revolution], “What can I do,” this [illegible word] of revolution and 70 years of power.82

Nekrasov went on to explain that the government kept Soviet people from full transformation. As Komsomol’skaia pravda put it in the call for diaries and letters, reformers had the job of creating change, while citizens had the task of writing letters. He viewed this approach as infantilizing. He argued that people had to be more involved in the process of change. The people needed to take part in the process that ultimately aimed to effect their lives. For Nekrasov, this meant more rigorous elections for deputies. If competition were even greater, he argued, the process would show “who is who” and weed the bad characters out from the good. People would identify more with these representatives. He also supported a multiparty system. He called for these political changes on Leninist grounds, but seemed to support melding various political traditions. “You don’t have to teach a person much [to be free], you just have to let them learn from free people,” he wrote.83

Reformers and the press responded to citizens’ assertion that the attempt to forge new people was falling by the wayside as the material conditions of life became more difficult. They did so above all by acknowledging the complaint about this difficulty. On November 24, 1990, Komsomol’skaia pravda published an article titled “Prices on Conscience also go Up.” The journalist T. Iakovleva began by acknowledging that it had

82 A.T. Nekrasov, no date. RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2., d. 30, l. 16B.
83 Ibid., l. 19.
become difficult to maintain a high standard of personal morality in the face of shortages. “A deficit of goods gives birth to a deficit of human quality,” she stated. The article went on to acknowledge the complaints that the absence of goods made it difficult to be a good person, asserted on various television programs and letters to the newspaper. The act of acknowledgement suggested that the newspaper was listening to people, which is often times the best those in power can do in the absence of an immediate solution to economic crisis.

Another strategy for responding to the population included trying to convince readers that the kind of person one became did not depend on goods alone. Iakovleva’s article went on to offer a cautionary tale from the Stalin period. It was then that one worker turned to another and said, “Morality? I don’t have time to think about this word. I’m busy. I’m building socialism. But if it came to choosing between pants and your understanding of morality, I would choose pants. Our morality is the morality of creating the world.” After the broad public discussion of the Stalin period launched in 1987, readers would have been well prepared to contextualize this worker’s comment with the unprecedented level of violence carried out in the 1930s. The moral of the story was never to lose sight of morality, for doing so could lend itself to disastrous outcomes. The article closed by warning readers that the deficit of goods and the deficit of morality had different sources and similar as well as different solutions. Even if the deficit of goods were solved, however, the deficit in morality might remain.84

Reformers were also well aware of citizens’ growing impatience, and that it challenged the effort to work on the self. A summary of letters to Gorbachev drawn up by

---

the staff of his letter department addressed the connection between deficits and the mood of the people. They noted changes in the tone of letters to Gorbachev:

Formerly the absolute majority of letters began with a phrase like “Pardon me for distracting you from your work…” “I have no one else to consult…”. Now you frequently meet the expressions: “I request the President…”, “I know that there’s no point in writing you…”, “I have been following you for a long time…”, “I suspect that you are not giving a speech…”.

The mailroom staff also noted changes in criticism. In the past, the most critical letters were anonymous, but “now authors express unpleasant words and unfriendliness directly.” Above all, the mailroom staff noted the connection between economic crisis and morality. They wrote: “Dark forces and obvious defectors, write authors, are a destructive force in the economy as well as in ideology. Regular ideals become one with empty shelves in stores, stripping the goals of veterans and youth.”

The publications in the newspapers and communications from his own letter department indicate that Gorbachev was not out of touch with the people. He had a strong idea of the mood of the country in the midst of economic crisis. There was a remarkable amount of subjectivizing potential in shortages and economic reform, but the Soviet leader did not expect the population to tolerate everything. He often warned his colleagues that shortages would be the undoing of Perestroika. Yet there was little he could do immediately to ameliorate the situation. He hoped that transition to the market would improve living conditions within two years. Yet two years was a long time, and economic reform faced limitations. As Gorbachev rolled out the market, every republic demanded exclusive control over economic resources within their territory. Reformers

---

86 Ibid., 9.
87 Ibid., 10.
could not separate economic reform from negotiating the relationship between center and republic, and demands at the republican level made it difficult for the center to act effectively. In the meantime, reformers invited citizens to remain co-producers of reform, despite its shortcomings.

At least in 1990, it seemed like hope would go a long way. Even while some letter writers professed hate for the Communist Party, few spoke in revolutionary terms. Among those whose letters could be seen to hint at revolution was O.Iu. Averin, who threatened: “Today I wrote this letter, but tomorrow like my brother proletariats in the USSR, I will pick up not the pen, but stones, and the day after tomorrow it will be impossible to stop me.”

Though he promised revolutionary violence against the state if conditions did not improve quickly, his model for doing so came from the Soviet revolutionary heroes of 1917. The revolution, he implied, would be a return to “real” socialism. Similarly, Vladimir Kireev wrote: “I would like to ask if the government of the USSR and RSFSR does not think that it’s time to transition from words to deeds, otherwise it will be too late[,] The people will give power to armed forces or will repeat 1917. Then nobody will discuss democracy and glasnost.”

Like Averin, he raised the specter of revolution, and yet his point of reference was also 1917. From their perspectives, the revolution would be not a departure from the Soviet Union, but a return to it. Though Kireev and Averin meant they hoped to bring Perestroika to an end, their threat to return to the real revolution had a great deal in common with reform.

---

88 O.Iu. Averin to KP, 29 August 1990. RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2, d. 30, l. 1B.
Conclusion

The question of deficits is often linked to the Soviet collapse, and yet for letter writers who bitterly complained about shortages, the question seemed more closely related to Perestroika’s success. The collapse of the USSR and the failure of reform were separate things. Deficits cast tall shadows on Perestroika. Soviet citizens questioned every aspect of reform, from stagnation to glasnost, reformers’ attitude towards Stalin to the new Congress system. Yet criticism erupted not because people wanted bread more than morality, blue jeans more than political participation. It developed as a way of responding to what people widely viewed as a breach in the social contract. Reformers promised that Perestroika would give way to a higher standard of living, and yet many people ended up with less. Thus many came to criticize the path reformers followed: it did not lead where they promised, or even where their predecessors had promised.

Criticism did not necessarily undermine the Soviet state or Perestroika. Reformers attempted to mobilize the population’s energy to further reform. They framed complaining as a way of participating in the reform process. In many respects their approach worked. Soviet people framed their complaints as records of a time that would soon be gone. In the process, citizens became chroniclers and investigators who sought to reveal problems facing society in order to move past them. While some took to shaping themselves for the times, others came to doubt how long they could work on themselves before the effort to become fully developed people started to feel empty.

Scholars suggest that the effort to forge a distinctly Soviet subjectivity belonged to the project of building socialism. The understanding of the person and the relationship between the state and individual in liberal societies remained distinct. Gorbachev’s
introduction of market reforms in the Soviet Union raises the question of whether the subjectivity project changed or disappeared altogether during Perestroika, particularly with the introduction of the market. It appears that at least initially, it did not. The goal of transforming man remained at the heart of Gorbachev’s understanding of what it meant to create market-socialism, and the goal of involving the population in the life of the state through how they functioned in everyday life remained critical even in a time of market reform. It also shaped the experience of shortage, the complaints about the failure of reform, and the ways in which letter writers mobilized their words to hold their leaders to the promises they had made.
In late January 1992 the pensioner P. Ivanovskaia took up her pen. Over the previous months, she observed a period of astonishing political upheaval. Most notably, on December 8, 1991 Russian President Boris Yeltsin, Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk, and Chairman of the Belorussian Supreme Soviet Stanislav Shushkevich signed the Belavezha Accords dissolving the federal structures of the Soviet Union. A resident of Kamensk, Russia, Ivanovskaia experienced these events as deeply distressing, and felt increasingly cut off from authorities who supposedly represented her. Convinced that Yeltsin would not read her letter if she sent it to him directly, she wrote to the popular daily Komsomol’skaia pravda with the request that they publish it. If it appeared on the printed page, she believed, Yeltsin would have no choice but to confront her words. In this way she sought to remind him that he was her representative, that she was his elector, and that he was fulfilling none of his promises. She explained why she had originally voted for him: to her mind, he represented the opposite of Gorbachev, an “American lackey” who “threw our great country at the feet of America.” Contrary to her expectations, Yeltsin turned out to embrace what she considered the most despicable feature of the United States: capitalism. “I don’t want to live in capitalism,” Ivanovskaia protested. “I was born, raised, and grew old in socialism and I want no other system, even if it’s coated in gold.”

1 P. Ivanovskaia to Komsomol’skaia pravda [hereafter KP], 29 January 1992 (date on envelope). RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2., d. 197, l. 73-78.
Four hundred kilometers to the south of Kamensk, the 65-year-old pensioner Valentina Vasil’evna Koiadina observed the same political upheaval from Krasnodar, where she lived with her daughter, grandson, and father-in-law. She channeled contemporary events through her television and recounted what she watched in a letter to *Komsomol’skaia pravda*. One program broadcast footage of demonstrations in Moscow against the high price of food. She identified with the protesters, for she had experienced hunger as a teenager during World War Two. Another special discussed the state of the army, a particularly sensitive point following the Belazheva Accords, for the armed forces of a once united state fractured into fifteen armies capable of war against each other. Koiadina interpreted this fracturing as the outcome of problems that existed before the Soviet collapse. She remembered a fellow from her village, who needed an operation after violent hazing in the army. She implied that the army was broken long before the USSR. With a sense of certainty, she traced the problems she witnessed on television to one thing: socialism. “Even I understood,” she wrote, “that this one word in particular was the cause of the ruin (razval) of the Union. Not a single republic wanted to continue along the true path to communism.”

Letters from Ivanovskaia and Koiadina capture the breadth of responses to the Soviet collapse articulated in communications to *Komsomol’skaia pravda*. The archive folder including their statements contains 87 letters received by the newspaper from December 13, 1991 to November 10, 1992. All of the letters focus on the Soviet collapse.

---

3 The collection of letters to *Komsomol’skaia pravda* at the Russian State Archive for Socio-Political History is in Fond M-98, Op. 2. There are three folders of letters responding to the dissolution of the USSR: D. 197-199. There are a total of 203 letters. In this chapter I focus on the 87 letters in D. 197. A sizeable collection by the standards of archival researchers, these documents are a mere drop in the bucket compared to the wave of letters that likely followed in the wake of the Belazheva Accords. It is difficult to say why these particular letters ended up in the archive and who picked the organizational scheme.
In some ways, the letters from Ivanovskaia and Koiadina are representative of the collection. The bulk of letters (at least 55) were written in January or February 1992, were penned by individuals (only 7 were from collectives), and came from pensioners, typically meaning women over 55 and men above 60, though at least one author was in his teens, several more in their 20s, and a large handful in their 30s and 40s. Most letters also came from Russia (at least 52), though the statistic obscures the diversity of letter writers. They heralded from the Beringian province of Kamchatka in northeast Russia, to Tajikistan’s mountain-studded capital Tashkent, to the Polish-speaking villages of western Ukraine. Most letters from Russia came from smaller Russian cities, like Kamensk and Krasnodar, well beyond Leningrad/St. Petersburg and Moscow. One way Ivanovskaia and Koiadina are not demographically representative of this group of letter writers is that they are women: upwards of 52 letters came from men, including most of the collective letters. As few as 25 came from women.

In terms of content, Ivanovskaia is far more typical in the letter collection than Koiadina. In fact Koiadina solitarily responded to the collapse with approval. The rest criticized the Soviet dissolution, offering a description of this critical juncture that goes against the grain of accounts of the period in wide circulation. By and large these letter writers experienced the Soviet dissolution as the end not of empire but of Soviet values, especially internationalism and national equality; not as the peak of democracy, but the nadir; and not as the liberation of man, but as enslavement. This assessment had little to

---

4 Republican distribution of letter: 17 letters from Ukraine, 1 from Moldova, 5 from Kazakhstan, 3 from Turkmenistan, 2 from Tajikistan, and 2 from Uzbekistan. It is an anomaly that none came from Belarus or Kirgizstan, but perhaps to be expected that no letters came from Lithuania, Latvia or Estonia or Georgia, Armenia or Azerbaijan. The Baltic and Caucasian states had already bowed out of the Union half a year before the meeting in Belavez. In terms of letters from Russia, only one came from St. Petersburg, and none came from Moscow. At least two autonomous republics were represented among the letters: 1 letter came from Boshkortostan and 1 from Khakassia. Letters from Ukraine came primarily from Donetskaia oblast’ and Crimea.
do with letter writers’ opinion of Gorbachev or their political leanings. In terms of politics, these critics were far more diverse than one might expect. There were Andreevas as well as Sakharovs among them, Gorbachevs as well as Yeltsins, Ligachevs as well as Iakovlevs. The singularly negative relationship they had to the Soviet collapse resulted more from the disjuncture between where they thought their lives as Soviet citizens had been leading, versus where they ended up.

The strong negative response articulated in the collection is usually dismissed. Describing pro-Union demonstrations in the Baltics, where similar views would have been expressed, Anatol Lieven writes:

Most demonstrations were not merely small, but also attended largely by the elderly. The sight of badly dressed, misshapen Russian women shrieking hysterically at these meetings was one with which every observer became familiar. It is not the stuff of which successful counter-revolutions are made.5

Photographs of the protesters that accompany Lieven’s text show them to be rather well-kempt. He mobilizes sexist and ageist tropes common to the period to discredit the demonstrators and undermine the viability, significance, and prevalence of their position. The inverse strategy also provided a tool for legitimizing pro-independence demonstrators and their political position in the early 1990s. On December 18, 1991, Komsomol’skaia pravda published a photograph of exuberant demonstrators in the Kazakh capital Alma-Aty who welcomed national self-determination. Front and center in the photograph stood well-dressed young men. The legitimization of politics in favor of independence and discursive delegitimization of its opposite had significant consequences. Conservative demonstrators often faced violent suppression by the police,

---
as happened to one of the largest march or several thousand communists in Moscow on February 23, 1992.

The opinions expressed in letters to *Komsomol’skaia pravda* preserved in this folder do not reflect popular opinion at large, nor do they indicate that the pessimistic assessment of the Soviet collapse statistically prevailed over the optimistic. Yet these letters offer an opportunity to look closely at the critical voice that is usually overlooked and consider how it complicates the reading of the Soviet collapse as a moment of liberation. These letters are significant because they allow us to take stock of Perestroika as a moral venture in the wake of collapse.

Following December 1991, citizens continued to regard the letter as a confessional and autobiographical document, and a means of evaluating one’s moral worth to society. The individual life stories of letter writers reflect the fragmentation of values in the wake of the collapse, and suggest that the collapse not only burst asunder fifteen formerly united republics, but fractured the imaginary horizons that at least for a time had unified the population in a quest to produce a certain kind of person and a corresponding lifestyle. In time, too, the letter lost its place as a practice by which citizens became co-producers of state policy.

**From the Congress to Military Crackdown in Lithuania**

Making sense of the division in moral outlooks that marked 1991/1992 requires going beyond the scope of the letters to *Komsomol’skaia pravda* to consider the events to

---

6 The fact that 86 out of 87 letters express a negative assessment of the Soviet collapse raises the question of why these particular letters were saved and how they ended up in the same archive folder. It is possible that they were intentionally organized in the fashion, and Koiadina’s letter was merely a fluke. Yet it is impossible to ascertain. It is unclear if the newspaper staff organized these letters into folders, or if the archive staff did so years later when they requisitioned the letters for the Youth Archive.
which the authors responded. What we now call the Soviet collapse most immediately
resulted from the Belavezha Accords signed by Yeltsin, Kravchuk, and Shushkevich on
December 8, 1991, which dissolved the federal structures of the Soviet government,
leaving the governments of the 15 republics to act for themselves. It also entailed the
meeting of all republican leaders at the Kazakh capital Alma-Aty on December 21, 1991,
where each of them added their signature to the Belavezha Accords, and Mikhail
Gorbachev’s subsequent resignation from the post of Soviet President on December 25,
1991, the day he relinquished control of the armed forces to Yeltsin. In the letters sent to
Komsomol’skaia pravda, and in Russia today, there are primarily two words used to
describe the end of the Soviet period. Razval, a noun meaning ruin or destruction, begs
the question of who or what caused the “ruin” of the USSR and implies a swift change
that could have been prevented. Raspad, which means disintegration or decomposition,
implies that the USSR gradually unraveled over time, hinting at an inevitable outcome of
a long-term process. In at least one case, a letter writer also used the word raskol,
meaning schism or division, which is the word used to describe the Great Schism
between Western Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy in 1054.

Though highly unanticipated, the events of December 1991 rose out of the
relationship of the Soviet republics to the federal structures of the Union that had been at
the center of the Soviet state project since 1917. Through revolution and civil war the
Bolsheviks inherited a profoundly multiethnic state. In 1922 under Lenin, the four
existing republics signed the union treaty that created the Union of Soviet Socialist
The treaty provided for full-fledged republican governments as well as a federal government charged with foreign policy, oversight of the military, and economic exchange at the inter-republic and international level. Each republic comprised a variety of administrative units, including three kinds of ethnically defined autonomies. These arrangements constituted a self-conscious departure from bourgeois imperialism, offering what Soviet leaders perceived as a radical post-colonial alternative. This point is important to understanding how many people experienced the Soviet collapse in 1991/1992 and the deep divisions in moral outlook that accompanied it.

The Soviet solution to the so-called nationalities question was entwined with the humanist aims of the state to fully develop each person. While rejecting imperialism, Soviet leaders in a sense believed in nationalism, even though they were committed Marxists who expected the nation to whither away with time. In fact they believed in nations because they were Marxists. In order for nations to whither away, they first had to exist. Thus the Soviet Union became a “state of nations”. The federal government saw the political structures and cultural life of each republic and autonomy as developing the national level and advancing “backwards” peoples, in order to raise all citizens up to the same level. They encouraged the development of little nations through the policy of korenizatsiia, or developing the roots, which included creating writing systems for local languages, encouraging schools in local languages, and in some cases even

---

7 The original four republics were the Russian SFSR, the Ukrainian SSR, the Belorussian SSR, and the Transcaucasian SFSR. The last became the republics of Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and a host of autonomies in the 1930s.
8 The three kinds of autonomies included Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics (ASSRs), autonomous oblasts (AOs), and autonomous districts (okrugs).
accommodating local religious practices. When the bright and stateless communist future finally arrived, all people would be equally developed, well educated, and prepared for political inclusion.\textsuperscript{11}

When Gorbachev came to power in 1985, the Soviet Union counted 15 republics and 38 autonomies with no less than 126 officially recognized ethnic groups, as counted in the last Soviet census of 1989.\textsuperscript{12} Nations had not withered away. The age of stateless internationalism had not dawned. The conviction that nations created from above would contribute to the full development of each person subsided to the belief that the unique multi-national arrangement of the USSR kindled the distinctive values of internationalism and the equality of all people. Gorbachev rested assured of this point. Early in his rule he stated: “Into the consciousness and heart of every [Soviet citizen] there has deeply entered the feeling of belonging to a single family—the soviet people, a new and historically unprecedented social and international community.”\textsuperscript{13}

Several events disturbed his rest. During Perestroika, ethnically charged violence erupted in Kazakhstan in 1986 when Gorbachev replaced an ethnic Kazakh with an ethnic Russian as First Secretary of the Kazakh Communist Party. The riots in Alma-Aty and their violent suppression led to at least 2 deaths and some 200 injuries. In January and March 1987, violent clashes between ethnic Latvians and Russians were reported in Riga. Disagreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia heated up in 1987 over the legal status of the Nagorno-Karabakh region, which fell under Azeri jurisdiction but more than


\textsuperscript{12} There were 20 ASSRs, 8 AOs, and 10 autonomous districts. Edward W. Walker, \textit{Dissolution: Sovereignty and the Breakup of the Soviet Union} (New York: Roman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 2.

\textsuperscript{13} Quoted in Walker, \textit{Dissolution}, 58.
three quarters of whose inhabitants were Armenian. The conflict turned into full-fledged war in February 1988 that continued through the 1990s. Through the Soviet collapse, Gorbachev attributed such violent outbursts to meddling elites rather than the sentiments or reasons of ordinary citizens. Like instances of interethnic violence before Perestroika, these events and others raised the question of how well the 1922 Union Treaty had resolved the nationality question.

In select instances public demonstrations raised far more than questions: they challenged the legitimacy of longstanding arrangements between republics and the federal center by focusing on the issue of sovereignty. This was the case in the Baltics in particular. In 1987 Popular Front groups developed in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, which gave momentum to regional nationalist movements. In June 1987, a small group of demonstrators in Riga marked the anniversary of the deportation of thousands of Latvians to Soviet labor camps in 1940. In August 1987, demonstrations in all three Baltic republics critically marked the anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between Nazi Germany and the USSR, which gave the Soviets the green flag to annex the Baltics in case of war. Events escalated from fall 1987 when an Estonian economics professor called for complete economic independence of the Estonian republic to fall 1988 when the Estonian government declared its sovereignty. Sovereignty included the right of the republic to define their relationship to the federal government, ownership of local assets and control over natural resources, and most importantly the priority of republic laws.

---

over federal laws. It did not include recognition by the United Nations. Lithuania followed Estonia’s footsteps in May 1989.16

The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact posed a particularly thorny issue for Perestroika as a moral venture. Officially, Communist governments established in the Baltic States following World War Two had voted those states into the USSR in the 1940s. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact gained little attention by the Soviet state in its narrative of how the Baltics became part of the Union. Through the First USSR Congress of People’s Deputies in 1989, the government even refused to produce an official copy of the Pact, claiming it did not exist. People in the Baltic States knew of the document’s existence and even had a sense of its wording because the West German government had already released a copy of it. The Pact had the potential to challenge the assertion that the USSR was at its roots moral in nature, for it would not only signify collaboration with fascist Germany, but show that the USSR used imperial rather than post-colonial means to establish the state. This issue proved thornier than the legacy of Stalin or the history of State violence, which could be categorized as departures from Leninism. Acknowledging the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact would mean the Union itself was immoral.

The event that thrust the nationality question into every corner and crevice of the Soviet Union was the First USSR Congress of People’s Deputies in 1989. At the center of discussion at the Congress were situations in Georgia, Armenia/Azerbaijan, and the Baltics. The question about Georgia was who gave the command to the northern Caucasus military unit to violently suppress nationalist demonstrations in Tbilisi on April 9, 1989. The demonstrators had opposed greater autonomy for Abkhazia in the northwestern corner of the country. Regarding Armenia and Azerbaijan, the general

16 Ibid., 57-64.
question was how to bring peace to the region. Nationalist tensions surfaced in every session of the Congress through jokes and counterpoints and heckling. Representatives from Azerbaijan and Armenia could not even agree on who were the rightful representatives of Nagorno-Karabakh to the Congress. For the Baltic States, the main concern was securing a copy of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and proving the legality (or lack thereof) of the inclusion of the Baltic republics in the Union. Delegates from the Baltics were particularly vocal participants in the Congress, publicizing their nationalist concerns by frequently refusing to vote on the grounds that they had no right to decide for any republic other than their own. Responding these concerns, Gorbachev, who vocally supported federalism, suggested that it was time to revise the Union Treaty, which had not been touched since 1922.

The Congress transformed the Soviet-wide discussion of the nationalities questions in three ways. One, for the first time it brought representatives from every Soviet republic together in a meeting in which delegates could put these topics on the agenda. Two, for the first time since coming to power, Gorbachev acknowledged the shortcomings of Perestroika with respect to the nationality question. He stated: “At the beginning of Perestroika we far from fully appreciated the necessity of renewing the nationalities policy.” “There was also probably a delay in resolving a number of urgent matters,” he added.\(^\text{17}\) Third and most importantly, the Congress, including Gorbachev’s bald admission, was broadcast on national television. If violence in Central Asia and the Caucasus and charges of imperial takeover in the Baltics had been isolated discussions before 1989, they were now topics of national concern.

In September 1989 the Central Committee of the Communist Party devoted a plenum to the nationalities question with the aim of moving towards a new union treaty. Yet the effort became increasingly challenging. In response to demands made at the Congress, Gorbachev’s chief of ideology Alexander Yakovlev produced the original copy of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in early August 1989, which proved the Soviets and Nazis arranged for annexation of the Baltics before Baltic Communists voted themselves into the Union in 1944. On August 23, 1989, the fiftieth anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, protestors across the Baltics staged the single-most impressive demonstration in Soviet history: the Human Chain formed by hundreds of thousands of Baltic citizens who joined hands from Vilnius to Tallinn, more than 420 miles. Declarations of sovereignty in Estonia and Lithuania touched off what contemporaries called a “parade of sovereignties” across the entire Union. Latvia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia followed in 1989. Russia declared its sovereignty on June 12, 1990. All other republics did the same before the end of the year. Gorbachev watched the parade with frustration. Such declarations made centralized reform next to impossible and also riled conservative members of the Communist Party. Yet just as he refused to use the armed forces in foreign affairs on the grounds of principle, he refused to use them domestically.18

At least for a time. When the Lithuanian Supreme Soviet declared independence from the USSR in January 1991, aspiring to formal UN recognition, the Soviet government responded with force. The Soviet military first attacked the offices of the Vilnius television station, an obvious echo of the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. The invasion of Lithuanian exploded the moral claims of

18 Walker, Dissolution, 64-65.
Perestroika. It was not the only time that reformers used force to suppress political movements since 1985. The military suppression of demonstrations in Tbilisi in April 1989 is a case in point. Though the economy of violence under Gorbachev deserves greater study elsewhere, it seems that Lithuania’s geographic location in Europe made it matter more to foreign observers and perhaps to Soviet citizens who had long disapproved of the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. Moreover, the press continually portrayed the Caucasus as the boxing ring of the Union, always ready for a fight, while depicting the Baltics as the dignity of the Union. Images published in Komsomol’skaia pravda after the tanks rolled into Vilnius echoed photographs of the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989, which reformers had often pointed to as the example of what Perestroika was not. More than any other instance of violence during the reform period, military suppression of Lithuanian independence suggested that the Soviet Union was an empire, despite its radical approach to nationalities articulated in 1922, despite the departure from Stalinism after 1953, and despite Perestroika.

“I want to be a Prisoner”

Writing in early April 1992, Yurii Ivanovich Mushchkov from Tver’, Russia observed that it had swiftly become acceptable to refer to the Soviet Union as the “communist empire” and “other negative terms.” The press, he pointed out, actively participated in this renaming. He wrote: “The media, which used to chant the friendship of the people and internationalism, now exasperatingly tries to show that the rags of a once great country, in the form of now sovereign states, are better than what was for its
multi-national people.” Reading newspapers from the months before April 1992 today, it is stunning how quickly the press embraced the language of collapse, especially in referring to the “former” Soviet Union and the “former” republics. Republics’ accumulated grievances against the Soviet federal government stoked the thesis that the USSR was an empire. The Baltic republics had a particularly strong case for making this argument. Yet in other parts of the Soviet sphere, Mushchkov and many others criticized this quick redressing of the Soviet state.

Like Mushchkov, most letter writers represented in this collection heralded from Russia, but many denunciations of the empire narrative came from other republics, especially in Central Asia. For Annanur Annasakhatov, a 30-year-old Turkmen villager who was too young to have joined the Party, the empire narrative flew in the face of everything he learned from his elders. He wrote:

Our grandfathers say that the red-haired Russians in times past were very industrious and good, even more so than the wise, peaceful (spokoinye), hardworking Turkmens. They also say the Russians [of those times] are no longer around. Russians live everywhere in our country. All peoples respect them, [and] study Russian language and literature. [. . .] Why do we love and respect Russians? Because Lenin chose an exceedingly correct political line in terms of the relationship to all peoples of the country. You can say that the Bolsheviks took power by force. But everyone knows the condition of the simple people before the Revolution—it could make you cry. His words reflect the intermingling of Russian and Turkmen culture in his identity: on the one hand, a respect for his people and its traditions, including passing information from elders to youth; and on the other hand, a deep respect for Russians. He saw them not as oppressors but as exemplary human beings. The terms he used to describe Russians, which focused on work ethic, reflected Soviet notions of the ethical being at the heart of

---

Perestroika in its earliest days. As far as he understood the history books, Russians did not oppress his people but helped liberate them. No wonder he found meaning in the Soviet internationalism and national equality.

One argument favoring the empire narrative was that Russian language and literature subordinated local culture. Annasakhatov addressed this point:

My heart aches when Turkmen radio correspondents say that we studied Saltykov-Shchedrin instead of Garaja Oglan and Gorkii instead of Yunus Emre. Even Gorkii, and the Russian classics of the nineteenth century are authors of works of art of world literature, and moreover, who forbid us from studying the works of our own people who lived in Turkey?21

His opinion was not very popular, as his mention of what he heard on the radio suggests. In the Baltic corner of the USSR his opinion on Russian culture might have been unpronounceable. Yet his experience makes sense. Like Annasakhatov, millions of people across the Soviet Union were trained in the Russian classics, spoke and wrote perfect Russian, and had even mastered the form of a letter to a Soviet newspaper. What was one supposed to do with these skills when Russian culture became synonymous with imperial oppression? Making oneself fit for nationalism after internationalism proved difficult.

Writing on December 29, 1991, V.N. Mazchenko, resident of Stepnogorsk, Kazakhstan, demanded clarification from a journalist who had claimed that “an objective process of the dissolution of a colonial empire” was playing out in the former Soviet republics. Mazchenko listed his points:

First, which republics, in your opinion, constituted colonies, and which the metropole; second, might you be able to compare the living standards of the metropole and the exploited colonies; third, who are the citizens of non-local nationality—the exploiters or the exploited?22

His questions illuminate difficulties imperial terminology faced on the ground. The last question raised a point particularly pertinent to the author. Though a resident of Kazakhstan, the last name Mazchenko suggests he was Ukrainian by origin. Was he an exploiter or exploited? The history of migration and forced migration in the Soviet Union adds another layer to the question. Some Slavs were lured to Kazakhstan by the promise of new lands, and others were sentenced to labor camps or exiled there. How should Mazchenko’s family history influence his answer? The internationalist narrative, with its potential for historical elisions, offered comforts the empire narrative did not.

While the Baltic States were the first to leave the Union, Central Asian states had to be “kicked out” after Yeltsin, Kravchuk and Shushkevich met in Belavezh. Yet Central Asians (and Ukrainians living in Central Asia) were not the only ones to question the empire narrative. V.K. Pal’tsev, for instance, was a Party member, veteran, and pensioner living in Siberia. In his letter, he mapped his life:

I was born in Poltava, studied in Ukraine, then in Nizhnii Novgorod and Moscow, stepped across all of Europe in the war, served and fell in love with our Baltic republics, finished the service and settled in Siberia. The graves of my ancestors are in Ukraine [and] Russia. I am solitarily fluent in Russian and Ukrainian.

Pal’tsev’s life story led him to one question: “To what population do I belong?”

23 His life spoke to the way that crossing borders shaped the lives of many Soviet people. The experience of war pushed him further than those of Gorbachev’s generation and younger, but the federal structure of the Soviet state enabled an international life for everyone. For many, a life that defied borders defined the Soviet person. This was especially true for thousands of partners in interethnic marriages and their children. As long as the Soviet Union existed, there was little need beyond filling out box five on the passport to

emphasize one’s national identity. The possibility of being a citizen of an international state disappeared with the Soviet Union.

A sibling to the empire narrative, the narrative that the Soviet state was a totalitarian regime also provoked responses from letter writers. This narrative appeared in the letter from Koiadina introduced at the start of this chapter. She appealed to the narrative when she recounted what happened to her husband, who had been captured by the Nazis when fighting in World War Two and served three years in a concentration camp. After the war, he was arrested again, this time by the Soviets. He was sentenced to hard labor in Siberia. For Koiadina, the two camps were not the same thing. “From the concentration camp he returned a human being,” she wrote, “but from the communist camp he returned an animal in the image of a human being who had lost his health.”

In her view, the Nazis treated prisoners of war far better than the Soviets treated their own people behind bars.

Yet many letter writers rejected the totalitarian paradigm. Writing in March 1992, Aleksandr Semenov responded to Yeltsin’s claim that he had been “the prisoner of a totalitarian regime.” Semenev identified himself as an “Odessan” by nationality, a mechanic by profession, an accomplished Soviet athlete, and the father of two children who was not a Party member. He wrote: “I would really like to be such a ‘prisoner’. And if not a prisoner, than at least a ‘victim’ of the ‘period of stagnation’, and [I would] live in it just a few more years.” His letter succinctly demonstrated the power of irony to turn a narrative on its head—even in support of the Soviet order. Annanur Annasakhatov, quoted above, noted that it had become fashionable to compare “our brother-communists

---

24 V.V. Koiadina to KP, 04 February 1992 (date on envelope). RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2., d. 197, l. 110.
with fascists.” He wrote that television shows offended millions by calling “a real revolution” an “insurrection of power” or the “Bolshevik terror”. As he understood history, the peoples of the Soviet Union united to fight against fascists. Many letter writers, especially those who had lived through or fought in the war, argued the same.

The fall of empire, and the end of totalitarianism, fit with another narrative about the end of communism: the opening up of borders. From the foreign perspective, the Soviet collapse coincided with the crumbling of walls and the removal of curtains. Yet for many Soviet people, the dissolution marked not tearing down but putting up borders. Borders constituted the single most prominent theme across the 87 letters, in which authors complained about a host of everyday problems. As Viktor Andreevich Zadorozhnikov pointed out, national borders divided families. He lived with his wife and four of five children in Volgograd, Russia, while his oldest son Volodia served in the army in Zaporozh’e, Ukraine. Zadorozhnikov wrote Komsomol’skaia pravda because his son’s twentieth birthday was approaching. He asked the newspaper to wish their son happy birthday from his family so that he knew they were thinking of him. He wanted to send a package, but borders made that impossible. The Volgograd post office refused to accept a package destined for the now foreign country Ukraine. He looked to the press to address his concerns and function in the way state organs ceased doing: as connective tissue between the former Soviet republics.

Another problem was that borders abandoned people on the wrong side. A Russian woman in Gorniak, Ukraine wrote Komsomol’skaia pravda to request help escaping “a hostile government” and achieving “repatriation” to Russia. She had tried to

---

26 A. Annasakhatov to KP, 13 February 1992. RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2, d. 197, l. 64-64b.
27 V.A. Zadorozhnikov to KP, 28 February 1992. RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2, d. 197, l. 9-10b.
contact the Russian government directly, but they were deaf to her pleas, and she could not round up the resources to move on her own. The only way she would be able to return, she believed, was for the Ukrainian government to “declare her a persona non grata,” “carry” her to the border, and “dump” her on Russian soil. Similarly, Valentina Makarovna, a 55-year-old Russian engineer living in Dzhambul, Kazakhstan, referred to herself as an “immigrant” and appealed to Komsomol’skaia pravda to help her return to her “historical’ homeland.” That she put “historical” in quotation marks suggests a hesitancy to embrace nationalist ideology, yet awareness of its effectiveness. She was also concerned with resources, and wondered if she’d receive a pension after returning to Russia. “How is Russia going to pay pensions to people who worked for her outside of Russia?,” she asked. For both women, borders created by the Soviet collapse posed a problem not for ideological reasons, but for the pragmatic reason that they wanted to live on the other side.

In his letter, Iu.I. Mushchkov, with whom this section began, wrote: “Our country was hardly organized in the best possible way, a great deal was irrational and even absurd. But at least anyone of its residents could fearlessly move to any end of it, not particularly concerned with what was written in box five [of the passport].” Putting up borders around the fifteen Soviet republics turned out to be far less liberating that one would expect of the end of empire. One need not perform special analytic tricks to find evidence of imperial consciousness in the letters. Some letter writers lamented the loss of greatness associated with a country the size of the USSR. Others feared the loss of military power with the division of the Soviet army into fifteen different armies. V.K. Pal’tsev, quoted

28 Unknown to KP, no date. RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2, d. 197, l. 6-6b.
above, asked how far the dissolution would go: would Tatarstan become independent? Would Chechnya? Would every city and every village elect its own president? Dissolution to the point of absurdity.\textsuperscript{31} And yet alongside these imperialist tendencies was the belief in Soviet internationalism as a compelling alternative to empire and as the path to personal liberation.

**Referendum: March 17, 1991**

Negotiations to rewrite the Union treaty followed the First USSR Congress of People’s Deputies. In September 1989 the Central Committee of the Communist Party devoted a Plenum to the nationality question. In December 1990, the Fourth Congress of People’s Deputies decided to put the question of rewriting the treaty to the people in a popular referendum. Referendums are a rare process of representational democracy. In most cases, the people do not directly decide how the state will act. Rather, they elect officials who are supposed to carry out their will. Usually, the power of decision resides with those officials, and voters can influence how those officials act through direct democracy—taking to the streets or writing letters—or voting them out of power in the next election cycle. The referendum on the question of maintaining the union was the first referendum in Soviet history—a development as notable in the history of Soviet representative democracy as the Congress of People’s Deputies.

On March 17, 1991, the ballot asked citizens directly: “Do you believe it essential to preserve the USSR as a renewed federation of equal sovereign republics in which the rights and freedoms of a person of any nationality will be fully guaranteed?”\textsuperscript{32}

people to the poles faced problems in certain corners of the USSR. Armenia forbid the referendum—illegally, from the Union perspective. The republican governments of five other republics—Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Moldavia, and Georgia—did not organize the process, though it took place in some regions by citizen initiative. Yet in all, 80 percent of the population turned out at the polls, and 77.8 percent of voters voted YES. Newspapers celebrated the event with photos of voters dropping ballots into boxes and by publishing the full results of the referendum, which bolstered its legitimacy. The moment when the country decided to preserve the union marked a high point of democracy.

In April 1991 republican leaders met at Novo-Ogarevo to settle the terms of a new treaty. On April 23, 1991, they agreed on a union of sovereign states—the proposed new name was the Union of Soviet Sovereign Republics, which would keep with the existing acronym of Union of Soviet Socialist Republics—with a common union president, foreign policy, and military. The agreement was supposed to be signed into effect on August 20, 1991, but on August 18, 1991, eight Communist Party hardliners put Gorbachev under house arrest in his dacha on the Black Sea and launched a coup d’état in Moscow. It was timed to prevent the Novo-Ogoreva Treaty from going into effect. Making it to Moscow in the nick of time, Yeltsin ordered a tank to guard the Moscow White House, seat of the Russian republican government, and decried the illegitimacy of

---

35 Election results in the USSR often were not published, which shrouded those elections in secrecy and kept anyone from challenging the results. “Ob itogakh referenduma SSSR, sostoiavshegosia 17 marta 1991 goda,” Pravda No. 74 (27 March 1991), 2.
the putschists. Distressed and disheveled, Gorbachev arrived back in Moscow on August 21. The putsch ultimately failed, but it kept the new union treaty from going into effect. The road from coup to collapse was short. In early September, the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies convened to dissolve itself, marking the end of the congress system that had transformed the Soviet government. In Ukraine, the republican government organized presidential elections the same month, which brought Leonid Kravchuk to power. In October, Gorbachev disbanded the Soviet Communist Party, which the hardliners had discredited beyond salvation in the putsch. On December 1, 1991, Ukraine held a popular referendum on whether to follow the path of the Baltic States and claim independence. The wording of the referendum was convoluted, the official results were never published, but apparently 92 percent of the population voted YES. Kravchuk, Shushkevich, and Yeltsin met at Belavezh on December 8 to dissolve the federal Union government and establish the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) with no shared foreign policy, military or president in its place. Leaders of all remaining 12 Soviet republics gathered to sign the accords on December 21 in Alma-Aty, Kazakhstan, where Gorbachev, however, was not invited.

Nadir of Democracy

Leaders in the Cold-War West read the Soviet collapse as the triumph of democracy over communism, but many letter writers experienced it as the nadir of democracy. What was democracy in the Soviet Union in 1991/1992? In general letter


My thinking on democracy here is influenced by the work of Temma Kaplan. Kaplan distinguishes between representative and direct democracy, defining the former as “depend[ing] on constitutions, laws, and legislative, judicial, and executive bodies.” Direct or participatory democracy, in her words, “includes
writers saw a democracy as a state in which their voices were heard. This collection of letters also demonstrates the surprising extent to which Soviet people had come to see it as representative democracy, defined by documents that limited the government’s power, including a legal code and constitution—which had existed in the Soviet Union since 1918—and also by direct election of political leaders, a development that took place under Gorbachev in 1989. The word choice of a letter from Sergei Nikonov, a retired teacher and historian from Pokhvistnevo, Russia, underscored how far representative democracy had come in the USSR during Perestroika. Throughout his letter, he referred to fellow Soviet people not as compatriots, comrades, or citizens, but as “voters,” casting their identities in terms of the processes of representative democracy.38

It is important to note that by the end of Perestroika “democrats” and “democracy” were not the same. Democrats were a political group of Soviet liberals who believed in a multi-party state and, by 1989, even embraced a market economy. It was the group to which Sakharov and Yeltsin belonged, though in 1989 Sakharov had not an inkling of a suspicion that the Union would fall apart. It is impossible to predict how he would have assessed it if he had lived past December 1989. This fact underscores how quickly democrats’ thinking evolved between the First Congress and Belavezh. After 1989, democrats’ support for marketizing the Soviet economy made them incredibly unpopular, for market reforms caused economic hardship that became increasingly acute after the

forming committees to write and distribute flyers and pamphlets and backing up opinions in public debates, demonstrations, sit-ins, and hunger strikes. It sometimes means wearing distinctive costumes, changing slogans, painting signs and murals, and otherwise performing in public and hope of enhancing the common good. It entails the transformation of public spaces, such as streets, plazas, courtrooms, and media outlets, into democratic spaces where people can express themselves and invite others to respond.” Temma Kaplan, *Taking Back the Streets: Women, Youth, and Direct Democracy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 11.

miners’ strikes began in summer 1989. Democrats also supported the strike. Democrats never longed for the Soviet collapse, but they were optimistic when it happened. Some of them hoped that dissolving the federal structures would give republican presidents the opportunity to further liberalize politics and marketize the economy. Amongst the letter writers, Koiadina alone did not blame the democrats for creating the crisis of collapse. “It’s not the democrats who brought the country to this point,” she wrote. Yet other letter writers begged to differ. “Those damned democrats went crazy,” stated a collective letter from the Cub “Young Technician.” “I’m afraid to call them ‘democrats’,” wrote a woman by the last name Pavlova from Petropavlovsk, Russia, “for I don’t see democracy.” The close relationship between these two terms mattered because it changed how people regarded the word democracy. Many letter writers did not use the term, and others used it critically. This was just one way in which for letter writers, at least, the Soviet collapse marked the nadir of democracy.

Another way, as at least sixteen letter writers emphasized, was that the decision to dissolve the federal structures of the undermined democracy ignored the March 17 referendum. “At the all-union referendum, the majority of peoples of all republics expressed by secret ballot the wish to save the Union of sovereign republics,” wrote Sergei Nikonov, a retired teacher and historian from Pokhvistnevo, Russia. In fact, not all republics participated in the referendum, but his point that the majority of people voted for it held true. He asked: “How did our people’s deputies and president, our dear elected

---

39 See Mark Harrison, “Coercion, Compliance, and the Collapse of the Soviet Command Economy,” *Economy History Review* 55 (2002), 397-433. While the title of this article is problematic, Harrison makes the excellent point that Perestroika did not begin with economic crisis but created one. Harrison’s data points to the second half of 1989 as the onset of this crisis.
40 V.V. Koiadina to KP, 04 February 1992 (date on envelope). RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2., d. 197, l. 111.
41 Club “Young Technician” to KP, 2 February 1992 (date on envelope). RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2, d. 197, l. 121.
officials, fulfill this wish? Why did you not meet the demands of your voters?”43 V.V. Bondarenko from Krasnoiarsk, Russia echoed this sentiment: “On March 17, 1991 the majority of the people voted for a RENEWED UNION in the first REFERENDUM in the history of the people. Yet again elected presidents and little presidents (prezidentiki) in the republics and at home along with their governments destroyed the UNION in spite of the people’s will.” He appealed to the press to help enforce the referendum.44 A letter that was signed simply “SOLDIERS” also pointed out that the majority of voters wanted to maintain the USSR, and appealed to the armed forces to enforce the referendum. In most cases, armies are used to halt democratic movements, but the author(s) of this letter seemed to think the military could also effectively carry out the will of the people. These “SOLDIERS” walked a dangerous line.45

The Soviet collapse also undermined popular support for elections in general. The problem for Z.G. Soloveiko, a 61-year-old pensioner from Makeevka, Ukraine, was that the voting process duped her. “Even though I voted for Ukrainian independence,” she wrote, “I did not vote against signing the Union Treaty.” One wonders how she understood “independence” in the December 1 referendum in Ukraine. It is easy to dismiss her words as naïve, but she had a point. The language of “sovereignty” had been used since the founding of the USSR. It reemerged with verve in the late 1980s. But how did “sovereignty,” which apparently did not necessarily threaten to bust the federal government asunder, differ from independence? Moreover, the wording of the Ukrainian referendum was intentionally misleading, emphasizing the future prosperity of Ukraine over the dissolution of federal Union structures. Soloveiko insisted that she was not the

44 V.V. Bondarenko and others to KP, 10 March 1992. RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2, d. 197, l. 23.
only one to ask this question or to assume that independence could still mean staying in the Union. As a result, she vowed never to take part in elections again. “Let them swindle the people without my involvement,” she wrote.\textsuperscript{46}

For many letter writers, the Soviet collapse also represented the nadir of democracy because it marked the failure of the Congress system, the constitution, and the legal code. Some letter writers begged for these institutions to be resuscitated. Vladimir Aleksandrovich Mishchenko from the Ukrainian village Gorlovsk-14 reminded congressmen that their term had not yet expired. “Use your rights and your heads,” he told them. He addressed his letter to the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies as if to will this body into existence despite the fact it had dissolved itself in September 1991.\textsuperscript{47} E.I. Istomin, a veteran of war and labor from Dnepropetrovsk, Ukraine, also emphasized the role the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies should play in the decisions made at Belavezh. In an article titled “Restore a State System in the Country,” which he hoped the newspaper would publish, he argued that only the Congress could determine the fate of the federal government, and that it was illegal and unconstitutional for three republican leaders to do so on their own. He also asserted the illegality of Gorbachev’s dismissal from the post of President. The USSR Congress of People’s Deputies singularly held the authority to make this decision. He called for an extraordinary session of the Congress to convene to take up these points so that if the Soviet Union were to pass into history, it would at least do so constitutionally.\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{46} Z.G. Soloveiko to KP, 29 January 1992 (date on envelope). RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2, d. 197, ll. 87-87b.
\textsuperscript{47} V.A. Mishchenko to KP, 7 March 1992. RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2, d. 197, l. 139c (unnumbered page between 139 and 140).
Istomin’s letter aimed to remind his readers that constitutions and legal codes, programs and decrees existed on paper in the Soviet Union. He encouraged the government to use them. In doing so, he made a case for one of the goals at the center of Perestroika since the All-Union Party Conference in June-July 1988: the creation of a legal state (pravovoe gosudarstvo). The architects of reform argued that only a legal state in which governmental processes were subordinated to the constitution and political leaders lived by the letter of the law could prevent a recurrence of the darkest pages in Soviet history, namely the Stalin period. Many letter writers had become cynical about the potential for creating a legal state. Politicians would not have undertaken such dramatic changes, wrote V.D. Romanov from Belaia Tserkov’, Ukraine, “if they really knew that they would have to live by general laws.”\(^49\) For Istomin, Romanov, and others, the Belavezha Accords subverted the process of creating a legal state set in motion by Perestroika.

Other writers also encouraged using the courts to sort out the political situation. At least one letter from Dmitrii Timofeevich Shaposhnikov, a resident of Kzyl-Orda, Kazakhstan, called for the People’s Courts to try Yeltsin, Kravchuk, and Shushkevich for breeching the March 17 referendum.\(^50\) The People’s Courts were the lowest level of the Soviet judicial system—not a place where top leaders would be tried. Yet in this branch of the judiciary system, a judge decided the fate of those on trial in conjunction with two people’s assessors, which perhaps for Shaposhnikov promised that the people would have their say in dealing with these leaders.\(^51\) P.S. Ivanov and the members of his workshop

alternately demanded that Yeltsin put Gorbachev on trial. They wrote: “If you, Boris Nikolaevich, do not achieve justice, then this six-year jibber-jabber about justice, about a lawful government, will not be worth anything (ne budet stoiat’ i vyedennogo iaitsa), and your authority will significantly decline.” They compared Gorbachev to Communist Romanian leader Ceausescu and GDR leader Honecker, who, they said, had been held accountable. The execution of Ceausescu on December 25, 1989 was broadcast on Romanian national television and aired in the Soviet Union as well. Ivanov explicitly connected the use of the court system to try Gorbachev to the long attempt to create a lawful state.

If the Soviet collapse marked the nadir of representative democracy, it did not necessarily rule out the potential for direct democracy, including taking to the streets to stage protests, hold meetings, create spectacles, and wage strikes. Over the course of Perestroika, the number of demonstrations and demonstrators who participated increased dramatically, reaching a high point in terms of number of demonstrators in fall 1988 and in terms of number of demonstrations in summer 1990. The peak in fall 1988 might be connected to Popular Front demonstrations in the Baltics, and the peak in summer 1990 to increasingly acute economic crisis, which drew people to the streets to demand affordable food. This remarkable period of protest included the miners strikes in the Donbass region in summer 1989, the remarkable Human Chain across the Baltics in August 1989, and increasingly common protests for a minimum standard of living, which included affordable food and basic provisions. By 1991 demonstrations also included independence movements, like the one in Kazakhstan in December 1991 that

---

Komsomol’skaia pravda depicted on its pages. Perestroika, as some scholars suggest, became the age of collective action in the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{54}

By the end of 1991, however, many became skeptical of street politics, revealing another way in which the Soviet collapse marked the nadir of democracy. The authors of letters in this collection expressed a unanimously negative opinion of such protests. “It’s wrong to have a political meeting for everything—it undermines the value of the meeting,” wrote Tatiana K.M. from Kovrov, Russia.\textsuperscript{55} Anatolii Aleksandrovich Luzan from Sloviansk, Ukraine warned that you cannot resolve important political questions at meetings, and that trying to do so would only stoke “the righteous anger of the people.”\textsuperscript{56} Many of the letter writers described protests as “chaotic,” implicitly comparing them to riots. The letters thus raise a perennial question about when a demonstration is an organized political action and when it’s a mob.

Would the letter writers have felt differently about street politics if protesters criticized the Soviet collapse? In at least one case this was true. The authors of one of the collection’s few genuine anonymous letters (anonimki) seemed to support a large Communist demonstration in Moscow on February 23, 1992, in which demonstrators criticized the Belavezha Accords. The letter writers especially lamented the violence used against the demonstrators, comparing the event to Bloody Sunday in 1905, when the tsar’s troops opened fire on peaceful protestors who came to Palace Square in St. Petersburg to demand that the Tsar rule in conjunction with the Duma. Though 12 years before the Bolsheviks gained power, this event had gained a prominent place in Soviet

\textsuperscript{55} Tatiana K.M. to KP, undated. RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2., d. 197, l. 56.
\textsuperscript{56} A.A. Luzan to KP, undated. RGAPSI, f. M-98, op. 2, d. 197, l. 162.
historical mythology and was used to justify the October Revolution. Comparing
February 23, 1992 to January 22, 1905 implied the necessity of another Communist
revolution. The authors of the letter said they could not identify themselves because the
response to the protest made it clear what politicians thought of people with their political
sympathies. 57 Another letter writer, Voronika Nikolaevna Sigitova from Abakan, Khakassia (Russia), suggested that demonstrations were legitimate only as an undesirable
last resort. Her letter focused on her son who was studying in Riga. His miserly stipend
couldn't even afford food, and she warned that students in the Latvian capital would
follow the example of students in Tashkent and go on strike if their situation did not
improve. 58

Yet for most letter writers, the negative assessment of public protest went far
deeper than a desire to be surrounded by one’s own political values. Letter writers
thought public protest was immoral. A collective letter from Pushkin, Russia, criticized
schoolteachers in Leningrad for going on strike. What could students possible learn from
such undisciplined teachers?, they asked. They called for an end to all strikes. “They took
the example from America,” they wrote. “Don’t strike, but work[!]” 59 Besides insinuating
foreign conspiracy, their comments suggest they saw protest as immoral because it kept
people from working. Work, in the Soviet ethical lexicon, was synonymous with morality.
Only social predators failed to work. That they criticized teachers is also important,
because the widespread social expectation of teachers was that they train the moral
conscience of students. G.S. from Stavropol’skii krai, Russia made a similar point. He
called the miners’ strikes that spread across the Soviet Union in summer 1989 “foolish.”

57 Anonymous to KP, undated. RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2, d. 197, l. 130b.
“Quit sitting around,” he ordered. “Our ‘dear leaders’ need to have a stern talking to them. Or, or, or work and work well!”

If letters writers disdained public protest, was direct democracy out of the question altogether? A collective from Pushkin offered another means of achieving justice: violence. If Gorbachev, who they blamed for the Soviet collapse, was not “handled” by authorities, then they vowed to “take care” of him themselves. While this collective believed it was immoral for schoolteachers to go on strike, roughing someone up or killing them, apparently, was not. Not many letter writers advocated justice through violence, though the Pushkin collective was not the only one. G.S. recommended putting Gorbachev in a small room with a television and a pistol and making him watch videos of all the suffering across Russia with the volume turned all the way up. The pistol, he wrote, was not there for Gorbachev to shoot the television. More often than recommending violence as a means to justice, letter writers feared it, especially in the form of civil war. Those with family members in the army further worried that their own family members would be pitted against each other, should Soviet successor states go to war with one another. Whether violence is a legitimate tool of direct democracy is a matter of debate, though one thing is clear: its inclusion would mark no high point of democracy.

**Letter Writing after Socialism**

If taking to the streets seemed immoral, a form of direct democracy that appealed to the authors in this collection—indeed one in which each of them participated—was public letter writing. Unlike street politics, letter writing was never associated with

---

60 G.S. to KP, undated. RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2, d. 197, l. 203.


foreign influence, nor was it discredited as immoral. The missive from V.V. Bondarenko, who emphasized the subversion of democracy in the reversal of the March 17 referendum, exemplifies how the public letter was far more than an act of correspondence. He referred to his letter to Komsomol’skaia pravda as an “appeal” with “a statement to readers.” He hoped the newspaper would publish his letter not just to give him a wide audience, but to help mobilize the population for action. He wrote:

Let everyone who is not indifferent to the fate of his Homeland, who is for justice and against the mafia and nationalists, who is for peace and against war[—][let every one [of them]] cut this appeal out of the newspaper, sign it, and send it to his representative to the First USSR Congress of People’s Deputies.63

Bondarenko had in mind a letter campaign—one that he did not wait for the newspaper to generate, as it often did, but that he would launch himself. It only required a pair of scissors for clipping, a pen for signing, and a stamped envelope for sending. This form of mobilization did not involve taking to the streets, except to visit the post office.

Though only a fraction of the whole picture, Bondarenko’s letter suggests that across the 1991 divide, the practice of letter writing changed very little. The public letter constituted a form of political participation at least since Lenin, and letter writing campaigns enjoyed an active life throughout the Soviet period. This long tradition shaped every letter written in the period following the Soviet collapse, as suggested in a letter from Z.G. Soloveiko, a 61-year-old pensioner who lived in Makeevka, Ukraine. Her letter opened: “I’ll begin my letter with the words of many readers: ‘Never before have I written the newspaper but this time decided to.’”64 This statement demonstrates a self-conscious attempt to attend to the form of the public letter. It suggests that Soloveiko paid attention to the letters she read in the newspaper, and to the training many received in

schools on how address public figures in writing. In fact few published letters actually began with this phrase, which suggests it was more training than reading that led her to open her letter as she did. Her opening was not just a convention of the genre, but an attempt to give weight and credibility to her letter. Saying that one had never written before suggested that the issue motivating the person to write must be very important. It also meant that the author was no “kliauznik,” a kind of “muckraker” discredited by sending too many complaint letters to authorities.  

As before the collapse, letter writers also remained attentive to the language of letter writing. Gorbachev and others repeatedly called for civic language in communications with public figures. He encouraged missives to be “businesslike” and “professional”. Many letter writers went to great lengths to control their emotions, at times even rage, to pen a measured communication to the newspaper. One reason for doing so was that only civil communications stood the chance of publication. This did not mean every letter writer employed such language, but they were often self-conscious about it when they did not. One letter writer rudely addressed President Yeltsin on “ty,” the informal “you,” telling him “and his little wife to take their royal life elsewhere—like nowhere.” She acknowledged her crass language by recognizing that the newspaper would not publish her letter, and signed it half-anonymously as “Baba Valia”. The Pushkin collective that threatened violence on Gorbachev also remarked on the

---


inappropriate tone of their letter. “Respected editors, forgive this letter,” they wrote by way of conclusion.67

This collection of letters provides little evidence of change in the reasons for writing a letter to a newspaper editor in particular. Letter writers continued to address the newspaper in hopes of shaping and participating in broad social discussions—this was the main contribution of the public letter to democracy. Vladimir G. from Perm’, Russia asked the newspaper to “publish my letter and open up discussion on it.”68 E.I. Istomin noted that perhaps not all the KP editors would agree with his views, but they should publish his article “in the name of well-rounded glasnost.” He believed his letter would call forth many responses, and in the main readers would support it.69 Others hoped not just for broad discussion, but influence. G.S. asked the newspaper to “publish this letter for the edification of the people.”70 Nikolai Il’ich Kamyshnikov from Aktau, Kazakhstan explained to the newspaper: “You need to publish my letter. Not because it’s mine. Because it’s necessary to save the elderly, the sick, the intelligentsia, culture, and in general the people, the country.”71 He believed his letter would contribute to the improvement of society. Similarly, Valentina Vasil’evna Koiadina, with whose letter this chapter began, wrote her letter “not for myself, but for my children and grandchildren.”72

Another way the letter to the editor continued to function as a lever of democracy was that it went to the newspaper, which, in the eyes of many letter writers, remained an important connecting link between the people and the state, even after the Soviet collapse,

70 G.S. to KP, undated. RGASPI, f. M-98, pp. 2, d. 197, l. 203.
72 V.V. Koiadina to KP, 04 February 1992 (date on envelope). RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2., d. 197, l. 109.
when *Komsomol’skaia pravda* suddenly had an international audience. This point is clear from the fact that many people addressed their letters not just to the newspaper, but to state figures. One letter from a collective of “elderly pensioners with veterans of labor among them” was addressed to Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and Kravchuk. They wanted to send their letter to Gorbachev directly but did not have his address. They trusted the editors of *Komsomol’skaia pravda* to forward it to him.73 One woman did not ask the newspaper to go through the trouble of sending her entire letter to Kazakh President Nazarbaev, but requested that they “give him a big thank you” for “ruining the Union.”74 Others did not address state figures directly, but saw the press as an institution that could hold the government responsible for its promises of social welfare to the people. Thus Sigitova wrote *Komsomol’skaia pravda* about the lousy stipend of her son studying in Riga, and Galina Baskakova asked the newspaper to help her son get medical treatment. Though these concerns deeply shaped their personal lives, they were not exactly individual concerns. Stipends, education, and medical care were state issues. So was a minimum standard of living, which depended on cheap food and medicine.

Though letter writing did not cease to be an important form of direct democracy immediately following 1991, evidence suggests the gradual breakdown of the tradition of letter writing starting not with the collapse but in the last years of Perestroika. Throughout the Gorbachev era, the practice of letter writing remained robust, even increasingly so. The staff of letter departments across institutions in the USSR registered greater and greater quantities of mail starting in 1985 and especially 1986. The trend appears to have continued until 1989. At least according to one telephone questionnaire

---

conducted by R. Baruzdina, vice editor of the Letter Department at Literaturnaia gazeta, the quantity of mail that year began to fall. This was the case at Pravda, Izvestiia, Ogonek, Sovetskaia kul’iura, and Moskovskie novosti. Ogonek, the weekly glossy that built its Perestroika-era reputation in part on work with letters, reported a fifty percent decline in the volume of mail.\textsuperscript{75} It is unclear what precipitated the decline. Perhaps letter writers selected different destinations for their letters, such as public figures like Sakharov or television stations that allowed them to watch important political events in real time. Perhaps people were standing in lines to procure foodstuffs and basic necessities, as the economic crisis grew increasingly acute in mid-1989. Perhaps people exercised their right and civic duty to political participation by taking part in meetings, demonstrations, discussion clubs, or other events, though it seems unlikely, given the broad disdain for protests expressed by letter writers.

After December 1991, the tradition of letter writing further broke down in letter writers’ perception of its effectiveness, marking yet another low point of democracy. As much as letter writers hoped the newspaper would connect them to their leaders, they believed this connection had become weak or even lost altogether. P.S. Ivanov and 45 people in his work collective, who sent Komsomol’skaia pravda an open letter addressed to Yeltsin, said they mailed it to the newspaper because they believed Yeltsin would not read it if they sent it to him directly. If it appeared in print in such a prominent newspaper, however, they sneakily surmised he could not avoid it.\textsuperscript{76} Similarly, Tatiana K.M. had already written six letters to Gorbachev, and wanted to write a seventh, but refrained from doing so because she had come to the conclusion that she could not make herself

\textsuperscript{75} RGALI, f. 634, op. 6, d. 87, ll. 12-13.
sound smart enough for Gorbachev to actually read and respond to her letters. She had her fingers crossed for an invitation to meet with Gorbachev in person. Considering the volume of mail he received, her hope was unrealistic, but that did not cross her mind. She still sought his attention. She wrote to Komsomol’skaia pravda thinking that they could express her thoughts to Gorbachev in a language he respected. In both cases, for P.S. Ivanov and Tatiana K.M, their reflections underscored the belief that their political leaders had abandoned them, though they wanted their attention. Sending a letter to the editor was a last resort for being heard in the highest echelons of the state.

Though P.S. Ivanov and Tatiana K.M. hoped they had a last resort, many letter writers had lost hope altogether. Anna Ivanovna Kulesheva from Novomoskovsk, Russia wrote that the prominent conservative Communist Party member Ryzhkov had received countless letters but replied to none of them. Even Tatiana K.M. asked: “How many letters were sent by me in my conscious lifetime for different reasons? Nobody responded to me a single time. Not to mention [that the letters were not] published.” She added to her list of woes the experience of her brother. He had once sent a public letter, she wrote, and the fact he received no response made him depressed, convincing him that he did not mean anything to society. Where were all those unread letters going? The question generated gossip. “There are rumors going around,” wrote the Pushkin collective who had threatened Gorbachev’s life, “that our letters are thrown into an urn and aren’t read and acted on.” This explanation helped justify the rude language and violent aspirations expressed in their letter. In an effort to pad their egos, they told the newspaper: “No need

---

77 A.I. Kulesheva to KP, 1 February 1992 (date on envelope). RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2, d. 197, l. 104b.
78 Tatiana K.M. to KP, undated. RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2., d. 197, ll. 54b-56.
They might have been tickled to learn their letter was actually sent to the archive.

Could these remarks have coincided with a real decline in editorial response to letters? If we read these expressions of despair as a rhetorical strategy, it seems unlikely. Letter writers throughout the Soviet period complained about lack of response. Doing so signified an attempt to engage the law, for the Soviet legal code required at least newspapers and other official institutions to respond to every piece of mail received. At *Komsomol’skaia pravda*, the responses were often formulaic, but employees of the letter department claimed that they tried their best to respond to each piece. Emphasizing the lack of response also engaged the social contract. A response acknowledged the dignity of each letter writer. Finally, underscoring the lack of response was an affective strategy. It aimed to stir the concern or at the very least pity of the newspaper editor, who then out of that feeling might be more likely to respond. Complaints about lack of response had been used in these ways throughout the Soviet period.

Nonetheless, some evidence points to a real decline in responses to mail by 1991/1992. It would have been a logical outcome of the long awaited law on the media, finally passed by the Supreme Soviet in June 1990. The law is best known for unhinging the press from the Communist Party. Consistent with laws dating back to imperial times, the code stipulated that periodicals could publish readers’ letters and redact them for publication, but they must remain true to the author’s sentiment. Also in keeping with the past, the new law regulated the publication of citizens’ responses to materials in the newspaper that concerned them. In the case that someone believed materials published in

---

80 Interview with Natalia Morzhina and Lidia Titova conducted by Courtney Doucette, 15 March 2015, Moscow, Russia.
the newspaper were false, they could compose a reply that the newspaper was legally obligated to publish on the same page and in the same font as the material to which the person was responding. The important change regarded the requirement to respond to each piece of mail. In contrast to previous laws, this iteration did not require newspapers and journals to respond to every piece of mail received. The law offers the simplest explanation of why letter writers gossiped that their letters “were sent to the urn.”

It would be impossible to find out if any letter writers represented in this collection received a response from the newspaper. Of 87 authors, I was able to make contact with just one: Anatolii Aleksandrovich Luzan from Sloviansk, Ukraine. He received no response to his letter, which he addressed to the Russian Supreme Soviet and Yeltsin and mailed to Komsomol’skai pravda. By 1991 the newspaper printed fewer and fewer letters as well. None of the letters in this collection achieved publication. In fact Komsomol’skai pravda rarely published letters on the collapse. On January 10, 1992 the newspaper published a solitary letter signed D. Molchanov (meaning “of those who do not speak”) about the end of the Soviet period. He wrote that nobody had explained why the Soviet flag was removed from the Supreme Soviet building in the middle of the night without anyone knowing about it, why Gorbachev was not arrested as an “enemy of the people,” and why it was necessary to join NATO and share state secrets with the USA. Publishing the letter under the title “They do not ask me. But I will say” highlighted the sense of being cut off from the government that many letter writers expressed. The editors also published the letter in an ad hoc column titled “Without a Rubric,” which in a

---

sense further spotlighted the sense that there was no place for such voices, or subtly implied they wanted to create no regular place for letters of this sort.  

In at least one case, a letter writer saw the breakdown of letter writing as a factor contributing to the collapse of the USSR. Tatiana K.M. wrote: “I could show logically how simple elementary disrespect for the fully developed person (k lichnosti) brought on the destruction of an enormous country.” For her, the lack of responses to public letters constituted a sign of disrespect. So was Gorbachev’s refusal to hear the lowly unintelligent people like herself. So was the feeling republic leaders had when they decided to dissolve the Union. So was their failure to invite Gorbachev to the December 21, 1991 treaty signing in Alma-Aty. Tatiana K.M. alone linked the tradition of public letter writing to the Soviet collapse. Yet she was hardly alone in insisting that the public letter had lost its ability to shape society and as yet another way in which the Soviet collapse marked not the height but the nadir of democracy.

**Remembering Perestroika**

On December 25, 1991 in a televised address broadcast across the USSR Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev acknowledged the formation of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which dissolved the federal structures of the Soviet Union. He said that he did not agree with the course of events, that he believed them undemocratic, and that he could not participate in the governing of these states without a federation. Nor was there a place for him to do so. The CIS would have no president. His speech marked the conclusion of the Soviet era and the end of Perestroika. In it, he took stock of what

---

82 D. Molchanov, “They do not ask me. But I will say,” in *Komsomol’skaia pravda* No 6 (10 January 1992), 2.
83 Tatiana K.M. to KP, undated. RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2., d. 197, l. 54.
had happened since he came to office. “I find it necessary to inform you of what I think the road that has been trodden by us since 1985,” he stated. While drawing an epoch to a close, he simultaneously inaugurated the ongoing process of historicizing the reform period that he oversaw. The efforts of letter writers dovetailed with this process when they sat down to write Komsomol’skaia pravda in the days following his speech.

One of the remarkable aspects of Gorbachev’s retrospective entailed his rewriting of the start of Perestroika. “When I found myself at the helm of this state it already was clear that something was wrong in this country,” he stated. While the country was rich in “land, oil and gas, [and] other natural resources” as well as “intellect and talent,” the standard of living in the USSR was not as high as other industrialized countries. What caused this?, he asked. He answered: “The reason was obvious even then. This country was suffocating in the shackles of the bureaucratic command system. Doomed to cater to ideology, and suffer and carry the onerous burden of the arms race, it found itself at the breaking point.”

True to the origins of Perestroika, his explanation captured the aspiration of reform to liberate the people, here described as “suffocating” and “shackled.” Early on, Gorbachev had also criticized the disembodied nature of ideology, as if it were something external to the people, a written code to which people subscribed, rather than a way of life that manifested itself in everyday realities. He appealed to the press to spruce up their own relationship to ideology so that the people, too, saw it as a living phenomenon.

The origin story told in Gorbachev’s resignation speech was a distinctly post-1987 narrative. “This country was going nowhere and we couldn’t possible live the way

---

we did,” he stated. “We had to change everything radically.” This language had its origins in the January 1987 Plenum of the Central Committee, where the General Secretary called Perestroika a “revolution” for the first time. The same year (1987) the economist Gavriil Popov coined the term “bureaucratic command system,” which caught fire rapidly and razed leaders acceptance of Stalin’s centralized economy as the best economic foundations for the Soviet state. To the best of my knowledge, reformers, at least, did not use this word before 1987. Yet it provided a powerful lens for interpreting the years that came before and the problems facing the Soviet economy, just as Gorbachev deployed it in his December 1991 speech.

In his speech, Gorbachev expressed hope that the Soviet collapse would not mean the end of liberation for the people. Soviet people were more free, on his account, than they had ever been. Though he saw the Soviet dissolution at definitively undemocratic and in conflict with the will of the people, he believed Perestroika had given way to a democratic society in which people could actively participate in the life of the state. He worried about “the fact that the people in this country are ceasing to become citizens of a great power,” which, as the letters to Komsomol’skaia pravda demonstrate, did in fact distress the population. Yet by peacefully stepping down and not hindering the dissolution of the Union, he hoped that the crisis of provisioning bare necessities would come to an end and the Soviet successor states would continue to develop along democratic lines.
Perestroika: A Human Experiment?

Letter writers also began to historicize Perestroika in their communications to Komsomol’skaia pravda as they grappled with the Soviet dissolution and significant material hardship. Among the letter writers, there were several who defended Perestroika or tried to sort out how it could have worked. Tatiana K.M. called Gorbachev “the last chance” to move “from bureaucratism to developed socialism.” The anonymous collective of Communist sympathizers counseled Gorbachev that he had made a big mistake putting Stalinist-Brezhnevites in charge. He should have installed “honest people,” and he should have allowed for the people to exercise greater control. They accused Gorbachev of becoming weak after the August putsch, and wrote that if he had remained strong, he could have saved the Union. The first part of their letter was addressed to Gorbachev and the second part to Yeltsin. That the former modeled a deliberate civic tone while the latter expressed screaming rage suggested that they supported Gorbachev’s efforts, though the outcome was undesirable.85

Yet by and large letter writers rejected Gorbachev’s narrative of events, collectively criticizing each reform policy. The 63-year-old Anatolii Fokeevich Sozinov from Staryi Oskol, Russia derided the anti-alcohol campaign for “millions of material losses.”86 P.S. Ivanov and the 45 members of his working collective from Melitopol’, Ukraine concurred that the campaign “cost the government 23 million rubles (according to AiF [the newspaper Argumenty i fakty]) and promoted drug addiction.”87 Regarding glasnost, Ivanov wrote that it was the only thing the “simple people” received from

85 Anonymous to KP, undated. RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2, d. 197, l. 129.
Perestroika, but “in light of all the people’s suffering [. . .] it was not worth it.” For some, even the structures of representative democracy came under fire. A letter from one person whose signature is illegible stated: “today a seeding machine on a kolkhoz’s field is more valuable than ten Congresses of ‘People’s Deputies’.” Others rejected one of the fundamental premises of Perestroika that the people should have agency in running the state, even appealing to the authoritarian past. One letter whose author’s name is illegible called for establishing “a dictatorship for 1-2 years” to make up for the problems caused by reform. “We don’t need democracy,” he wrote, “but Stalin.”

The general theme in letters that criticized Perestroika was, as Anna Ivanovna Kulesheva put it, that Gorbachev had ruined a great state “with his stupid Perestroika.” Letter writers largely rejected Gorbachev’s suggestion that in 1985 there was a problem necessitating “radical change.” P. P. Volosenok, a 77-year-old pensioner from Aleksandrin, Ukraine, countered: “Until the start of Perestroika we lived not too shabbily (bezbedno). The stores were filled with industrial and commercial goods, on holidays the people relaxed on the streets and made merry with songs and had fun.” After the democrats came along, however, “nothing was left in stores or at home. They drove the country to the precipice, ruined the Union, drove the people to hunger, and for all this they accused the Communists.” The pensioner Valentina Mikhailovna Ivanchikova from Simferopol’, Ukraine (Crimea), echoed Volosenok’s sentiment. She wrote that before Gorbachev came to power, she always criticized acquaintances who decided to leave the country. But then, she wrote, “they started Perestroika and

---

90 Illegible to KP, 8 February 1992. RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2, d. 197, l. 149b.
91 A.I. Kulesheva to KP, 1 February 1992 (date on envelope). RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2, d. 197, l. 103.
restructured until they could not restructure anymore (*doperestroivalis*’), came to a deadlock, and there’s no way anything could be worse.”

While many letter writers came to criticize Perestroika because it ended in the collapse of the USSR and the loss of pride that came with living in what they had long believed was one of just two global superpowers, many criticisms grew out of the failure of Perestroika to fulfill the very basic promise of Soviet socialism: a minimum standard of living. P. Ivanovskaia, with whose letter this chapter began, complained that Stalin was able to win a war and abandon the rations system within two years, while Gorbachev during a time of peace “turned us into beggars who await aid from capitalist countries.” She bemoaned the fact that she had not been able to buy sugar for two months. The children, she wrote, just wanted sweet kasha. They did not even know the taste of simple candy. It is odd, perhaps, that someone would take time to write a letter about sugar and porridge and candy, but she was hardly the only one. Her lamentation constituted a trope across the letters. The anonymous letter from the communist sympathizers begged for sugar and candy to make the children happy. “Our children are forgetting what candy and sugar are,” wrote a man by the last name Alistratov. A woman by the last name Pavlova included the price of candy and sugar in her itemized list that showed the extent of inflation of prices for basic goods. These ingredients were at the heart of Brezhnev’s concept of developed socialism. If not luxurious, socialism was at least supposed to be sweet. Gorbachev claimed that he would make the material conditions of

---

93 V.M. Ivanchikova to KP, no date. RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2, d. 197, l. 67.  
95 Anonymous to KP, undated. RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2, d. 197, l. 129.  
96 Alistratov to KP, 2 March 1992 (date on envelope). RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2, d. 197, l. 146b.  
life not worse, but better. Yet what had been available earlier had suddenly become scarce, if it had not disappeared altogether.

If scarcity and collapse tempered people’s views of Perestroïka, it did not necessarily change their minds on Soviet ideology. In other words an importance difference existed between the failure of Perestroïka and the collapse of the Soviet state. Besides Koiadina, the second letter writer with whom this chapter began, only one letter writer explicitly called for an end to communism. Iurii Ivanovich Mushchkov wrote: “I am against communism, I think it’s a utopia, and I in no way want to return to the way of the absurd words ‘authentically scientific’, ‘authentically populist,’ and so on.” What he did want, he wrote, was to be able to cross borders regardless of the nationality stated in his passport.98 Others were vocally indifferent to ideology. A letter writer who identified himself by the name Markin called for another revolution. “Let it be Bolsheviks or fascists,” he wrote, “but let there be social justice. [W]e will not allow the moneybags to exploit us like livestock.”99 In a similar vein, V.S. Kuznetsov specified that he lost no sleep over the choice between communism or no communism, “but I am not indifferent to the fate of Russia.”100 The expressions of ideological indifference reiterate the way in which scarcity and political upheaval prove demoralizing and collapse hope in the power of ideas to change a situation.

Yet not all letter writers ended up cynical towards Soviet ideology or even the values that reformers had highlighted as its most admirable quality. This point is evident in the continued close association between morality and work reflected in criticisms of street politics. To work was synonymous with being moral. Some letter writers even

99 Markin to KP, undated. RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2, d. 197, l. 26b.
expressed continued faith in the power of workers as a class. M. Krikunenko suggested that the solution to contemporary political woes included the professional unions, which she claimed had come out of Perestroika healthy, as well as the working people itself.\(^\text{101}\)

The 50-year-old Nikolai Vasil’evich Lanisov concurred. He called on workers at all factories to come together with one another and advocate for the reunification of the republics.\(^\text{102}\)

More often than appealing to the strength of the working class, letter writers expressed their commitment to one person in particular who remained a central symbol of Soviet socialism: Lenin. “Please! Don’t touch Lenin,” implored one letter, “this is our history. If anything I will lay down my body for him (to ia za nego kot’mi liagu).”\(^\text{103}\) A.D. Volozheninov defended Lenin, along with Kirov, Sverdlov, and Kuibyshev, saying he was guilty of nothing.\(^\text{104}\) The thirty-year-old Annanur Annasakhatov wrote that he respected Russians because of Lenin.\(^\text{105}\) Letter writers from the Club “Young Technician” stated that only Lenin and Stalin stood for the common people. “How are we going to live,” they asked, “without ‘pioneers’ and without our ‘Lenin’?” By way of conclusion, they added: “We want to live, not survive,” as if a life without Lenin meant a life void of moral conviction.\(^\text{106}\)

The last line of the letter from the Club “Young Technicians” raised a point that several letter writers underscored: Lenin, and a country built on his ideas, offered the chance for a full life and even liberation. The 77-year-old P.P. Volosenok, who argued

---

\(^\text{102}\) N.V. Lanisov to KP, no date. RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2, d. 197, l. 98.
\(^\text{103}\) Illegible to KP, 8 February 1992. RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2, d. 197, l. 149b.
\(^\text{104}\) A.D. Volozheninov to KP, 17 June 1992. RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2, d. 197, l. 188.
\(^\text{105}\) A. Annasakhatov to KP, 13 February 1992. RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2, d. 197, l. 64.
\(^\text{106}\) Club “Young Technician” to KP, 2 February 1992 (date on envelope). RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2, d. 197, l. 122.
that life was not so bad before Perestroika began, recounted how the Komsomol and communism changed his life forever. He was born in the countryside and worked as a shepherd from age eleven. He was in the fields from dawn to dusk and slept in the stables with the horses. “I would have been a shepherd till old age,” he reflected, “if it wasn’t for the Komsomol and Soviet power. The Komsomol gave me an education, led me to the people, from indolence I began to feel myself a person.” The description of his life reflected the darkness to light narrative common to Soviet autobiographies. Yet in reproducing the conventions of a genre, the ideas were no less important to him. He warned his readers that “you cannot blacken the entire past.” In contrast to the argument that everything was forever until it was no more, he insisted even after the collapse that “the ideas of V.I. Lenin are immortal (bessmertny).”

Volosenok was not the only one to express this point. A second example came from a collective from the village of Smolianinovo in Primorskii krai, which included men and women, veterans of war and labor, invalids and pensioners between the age of 50 and 90, numbering 1,128 people in total. They wrote in an inexperienced hand: “It’s very painful to hear and read about how Lenin was incorrect, and the revolution caused today’s Hardships. Allow us to disagree. Lenin alone thought about the simple people, gave them freedom and dreamed about how to turn a wage slave (naemnyi rab) into a competent leader.” They went on to defend Lenin from the errors of recent leaders. “Can you really accuse Lenin for the fact that the leaders who came after him were not able, or more accurately did not want to continue his cause?”

108 Ibid., l. 118b.
109 Collective letter to KP, no date, RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2, d. 197, l. 40b.
leaders of thinking only of “their own stomachs and pockets,” while the simple people went “impoverished, hungry, and unclothed.”

The letter from Koiadina suggests that the influence of Soviet values is evident not only in the life stories of those who criticized the Soviet collapse, but those who remained hopeful about the dissolution of the state as well. Her letter rendered a long list of grievances against the state: a fellow she knew from the village suffered such terrible hazing in the army that he needed an operation. Her husband served valiantly in World War Two, was imprisoned in a concentration camp after the Nazis captured him, but survived and returned home, only for the Soviets to arrest him several years later and sentence him to hard labor. Yet Koiadina interspersed her grievances with affirmations of how she had always lived a moral life precisely by the standards of Soviet socialist morality. To wit, she emphasized how hard she worked. During World War Two when she was just sixteen, she drove tractor to grow “grain for my Homeland, though I was half starved.” When authorities carted her husband off to the camps, she raised a twenty-month-old and six-month-old on her own. What embittered her most in February 1992 was that she had nothing to show for her years of devoted hard work. She lived in the way the state promoted and received little in return. “Thank you, Sir Communists,” she wrote, “we’ve finally arrived at the bright future.”

---

110 Ibid., l. 42b.
111 V.V. Koiadina to Komsomol’skaia pravda [hereafter KP], 04 February 1992 (date on envelope). RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2., d. 197, l. 109.
112 Pairing the words “gospodin” and “kommunist”, as Koiadina does here, is a contradiction in terms. The word “gospodin” (singular, plural “gospoda”), which translates as “gentleman” or “sir” or “mister”, was a bone of contention in 1991-1992. In the Soviet Union, people referred to one another as “comrades”. “Gospodin” was the bourgeois alternative. This word increasingly replaced “comrade” in the language of those who rejected the Communist Party in 1990-1991, and after the Soviet dissolution, it became far more common, though still contested. V.V. Koiadina to KP, 04 February 1992 (date on envelope). RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2., d. 197, l. 112.
Gorbachev set out on the course of reform with the aim of realizing Lenin’s ideas as he understood them. His goal was to reinvigorate an ideology that he believed promised liberation to the people by allowing them, much as Volosenok wrote of his own life, to be full people, educated people, and competent leaders. The collective from Smolianinovo suggested that he failed to achieve his goal. A pervasive trope in the letters was that Perestroika did not liberate people but turned them into beggars and slaves. In the last five years, wrote M. Akramkodzhaev, “our country became an experiment, a mockery of the person.”

He criticized merchants and speculators of preparing “to buy all of humanity and turn it into slaves.” Anna Ivanovna Kulesheva concurred: “What will happen next is all these swindlers will buy everything and turn people into slaves.”

This sentiment repeated itself across the letters. Of course, one need not look far for evidence that some people in fact felt liberated. Koiadina might be a case in point. At the very least, she saw the worst as being behind her. Where Koiadina and other letter writers disagreed was on the point of whether the Soviet project itself maintained any moral value. In fact the collapse did not convince the majority of these letter writers that Soviet ideology no longer held the key to liberation, yet everyone seemed to agree that the collapse definitively discredited Perestroika as an attempt to achieve that freedom, marking the end of the last attempt to create the new Soviet person.

115 A.I. Kulesheva to KP, 1 February 1992 (date on envelope). RGASPI, f. M-98, op. 2, d. 197, l. 103b.
When Gorbachev came to power in March 1985, he launched a far-reaching reform program that aimed to transform the Soviet population. Perestroika responded to what reformers saw as a pervasive moral crisis, signaled by lackluster performance in the workplace and ennui in society at large. Reformers sought to activate the population, turning disenchanted workers into fully engaged citizens. The vision of socialist man that flourished in earlier Soviet periods remained central to Perestroika. Reformers regarded the separation of private and public life, characteristic of the liberal subject, as a sign of “double speak” or “double morality.” They sought to create socialist people whose private and public lives seamlessly merged.

The democratic impulse of Perestroika distinguished it from earlier attempts to create the new Soviet person. Reformers regarded activated citizens as co-producers of Perestroika. In part for this reason, public letter writing, which had long provided a channel of communication between authorities and citizens, became a championed medium of reform. Soviet leaders had long regarded letter writing as a sign of the actively engaged Soviet citizen. Reformers foresaw it as a means of activating the citizen as well. Public letters appeared not only as a valued communication between state and citizen, but as a sign that Perestroika was working, and that Soviet people had become active agents of reform.

Letters to public institutions like Komsomol’skaia pravda and public figures such as Gorbachev and even Sakharov show the mechanisms of popular engagement and subjectivization. Letter writers regarded their medium as a means of making demands on
the state and to wrestle with their own moral worth to Soviet society. Letters show that Soviet people were not estranged from or apathetic to the state, but were acutely attuned to Soviet politics and actively engaged in a shared effort to improve the workings of socialism.

Reformers’ understanding of how Perestroika would unfold shifted over time in response to the intended and unintended outcomes of activating the population. Initially, they planned to work through the Party and traditional mechanisms such as national discussions of Party documents conducted, in part, through public letter campaigns. In their attempt to make the population at large co-producers of Perestroika, reformers also reserved a prominent seat that the table for the intelligentsia, who had long been regarded as a moral guide for society. Giving great autonomy to creative unions reflected reformers’ more general conviction that the state could no longer treat citizens like children who blindly followed their parents’ rules. They needed to make decisions for themselves, and those decisions were valued as part of the production of reform and a sign of activation. Greater autonomy for creative unions allowed for seminal works to go public, including Abuladze’s “Repentance” and Rybakov’s *Children of the Arbat*. Gorbachev allowed the work of intellectuals to influence his own take on Soviet society and its history.

The unintended consequences of activating the population appeared not in the work of the intelligentsia, but among Party conservatives. Nina Andreeva’s famous letter to the editor of *Sovetskaia Rossiia* demonstrated how an activated subject could use the moral language of Perestroika and the championed medium of implementing reform to question its chief goals—namely, the creation of Soviet citizens as co-producers of
socialism. In her letter, Andreeva demanded the very child-parent relationship between citizen and state that Gorbachev sought to do away with.

In part in response to Andreeva and her significant following, which is to say in response to the unintended outcome of activating Soviet citizens, Gorbachev aimed to institutionalize the means by which Soviet citizens could be co-producers of reform. In 1988 he introduced legislation for the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies, the first partially popularly elected parliament in Soviet history. Gorbachev couched the creation of the Congress in Leninist terms, but it reflected the evolution of his reading of Lenin: whereas in 1985 the practice of letter writing provided the basis of Soviet democracy, by 1988 representational institutions came to be seen as necessary to creating socialist democracy. As communications with Sakharov suggest, the public letter nonetheless remained an important part of how democracy functioned in the Soviet Union.

Another unintended consequence of moral reform included shortages. While at the outset of Perestroika, reformers promised a higher standard of living to accompany the activation of citizens, a deficit resulting in part from the anti-alcohol campaign, and inflation from responding to the deficit by printing rubles, gave way to greater distribution bottlenecks and shortages. Activated citizens took to the streets in protest and picked up the pen to complain via public letter. Couching their complaints in the moral language of reform, they argued that shortages were fundamentally immoral and a sign of the moral decay of society. Reformers did not stifle complaints by force, as previous Soviet leaders had, nor did they forbid the press from publicizing information that shaped popular assessment of the extent and nature of the economic crisis. They even attempted
to make complaints useful to reform, giving Soviet people a seat at the table as documentarists of shortage, and regarding the complaining masses as activated citizens.

Ultimately, it was the activation not of the intelligentsia, not of conservatives, and not of complaining masses, but of activated republican governments that burst the Union asunder. In the wake of the Soviet collapse, citizens continued to regard the letter as a confessional and autobiographical document, and a means of evaluating one’s moral worth to society. The individual life stores of letter writers reflect the fragmentation of values in the wake of the collapse, and suggest that the collapse not only burst asunder fifteen once united republics, but fractured the imaginary horizons that at least for a time had unified the population in a quest to produce the new Soviet person. In time, too, the letter lost its place as a practice by which citizens became co-producers of state policy.

This study reframes our understanding of Perestroika as a moral project, shifting our attention away from the well-research political and economic vectors of reform. It brings the study of Soviet subjectivities to the late Soviet period by showing the centrality of the socialist conception of man to reformers’ vision. Letters to public figures reveal the mechanisms of popular engagement and subjectivization. The strictly historical methodology employed here resists teleological readings of the period, situates actors in their time, recreates the open-ended historical horizons of the reform project, and takes into view the mostly Soviet and Russian precedents that informed the architects of Perestroika. In so doing, it shows Perestroika not as a transition to liberal capitalism, but as the last attempt to create the new Soviet person.

It no longer suffices to conceive of Soviet people as apathetic to or estranged from late-Soviet politics. Nor is it accurate to conceive of them strictly as opponents of the
state who through complaints and protests sent the Soviet project to the dust heap of history. Even complaints and protest show the extent to which the broad population shared a political language with reformers. The very course of Perestroika attests to the ways Soviet people as activated citizens became co-producers of the script of reform.

Letters have long constituted a source by which scholars of the Soviet Union have gained insight into their subject matter. Work with letters in almost every instance begins with the words on the page as the source of understanding public opinion and subjective experience. This study recommends an additional methodology that begins not with the words themselves but the forces that brought the documents into being. To best understand public letters during Perestroika, we must consider their political meaning and significance, the institutions that handled them, and the expectations associated with letter writing.

Contextualized in this way, public letters challenge the interpretation of citizens’ statements during Perestroika as a sign of newfound freedom that allowed citizens to speak up and out and finally give voice to the critical thoughts cultivated in a private realm that was carefully guarded from the public sphere. In contrast, letters here reflect a rigorous conversation between state and citizenry, of which the letter comprised just one component. The words of letter writers show an attempt not to mark greater distance between public and private, but to merge the two spheres as they brought their personal lives to bear on the life of the state, and vice versa.

In many ways, in the quarter century that has passed since the end of Perestroika, the practice of public letter writing, like the Soviet Union in which it thrived, has been relegated to history’s dust heap. It is not just changing political circumstances that have
made the letter an artifact of a bygone age, but the emerging digital age, too. Unvetted comment sections on online publications have largely replaced letters to the editor. Online comments serve many political purposes, and yet those purposes are different from the public letter in Soviet times. This shift underscores the importance of historicizing letter writing and attending to the cultural and political specificities of the practice during Perestroika.

The mountains of archived letters from the late Soviet period offer a reminder of the elaborate institutions designed to process them and the political significance assigned to the letter. The significance public letter writing achieved in the Soviet Union was unique. By comparison, such traditions and institutions have rarely taken hold in the United States. Franklin Delano Roosevelt became famous for his work with citizens’ letters. Barack Obama reportedly received 10,000 letters a day and supported an entire apparatus of readers who processed his mail, archived it, responded to it, and produced a collection of ten letters a day for the president to personally review. The first to refine the system for working with citizens’ letters, the staff of Obama’s mailroom drew up a protocol for working with mail that they offered to the next administration.

To the reader of Soviet history, what’s striking about Obama’s letter department is not that they received 10,000 letters a day, not the commitment to working closely with letters, not the desire of the President to read select communications, but the fact that it took so many years to organize this work. These institutions long thrived in the Soviet Union. The practice of letter writing constituted a central part of everyday life. The public letter became a hinge joining citizenry to the state and, despite Cold War narratives that often overshadowed the point, a practice of democracy even under socialism.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES

ARCHIVES

Arkhiv Sakharova (Moscow)
f. 1 Andrei Dmitrievich Sakharov

Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Akademii Nauk
f. 1977 Institut Sotsiologicheskikh Issledovanii

Gorbachev-Fond

Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF) (Moscow)
f. A-420 Komitet norodnogo kontrolia
f. 9654 S’ezd narodnykh deputatov
f. 10063 A.N. Iakovlev
f. 10124 Soiz zhurnalistov

Gosudarstvennyi Muzei Politicheskoi Istoriyi Rossii (St. Petersburg)
f. 2

Houghton Library (Cambridge)
Ms Russ 79 Andrei Sakharov Archives

Publichnaia Istoricheskaia Biblioteka (Moscow)
Netraditsionnaia pechat’
Pochta Prezidenta SSSR

Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Sotsio-Politicheskoi Istoriyi (RGASPI) (Moscow)
f. 438 Redaktsiia zhurnala “Kommunist”
f. M-1 Tsentral’nyi Komitet VKLSM (1918-1991)
f. M-98 Redaktsiia gazety “Komsomol’skaia pravda”

Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Noveishei Istoriyi (RGANI) (Moscow)
f. 9 Postoiannye komissii i komisii po otdel’nym voprosam deiatel’nosti TsK KPSS;
materialy soveshchanii pri TsK KPSS (1967-1990)
f. 89 Kollektziia kopii dokumentov, rassekrechnykh pri vypolnenii
tematicheskikh
zaprosov v protsesse nauchno-issledovatel’skoj raboty (1920-1991)
f. 90
f. 96 Redaktsiia gazety “Sovetskaia Rossiia” (1956-1991)
f. 100 Podotdel pisem Obshchego otdela TsK KPSS (1953-1991)
Argumenty i fakty
Glasnost'
Izvestiia
Kommunist
Komsomol'skaia pravda
Leningradskaia pravda
Molodaia gvardiia
Moskovskie novosti
Ogonek
Pravda
Sovetskaia Rossiia


SECONDARY SOURCES


———. “Pis'ma iz proshlogo.” *Svobodnaia mys'l* no. 6 (1993): 79-87.


Kenney, Padraic. 1989: *Democratic Revolutions at the Cold War’s End; A Brief History with Documents.* Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2010.


Lazarev, V. “Poslednaia bolezn' Stalina: Iz otchetov MGB SSSR o nastroeniiaakhv armii


Vychub, G.S. *Pis’ma trudiashchikhsia v sisteme massovoi raboty gazety.* Moscow: Izdatel'stvo MGU, 1980.


