

## **Glasnost v. *Glasnost'*: A re-evaluation and reinterpretation of the Chernobyl disaster in Soviet media**

**Abstract:** This paper investigates media coverage following the Chernobyl disaster and argues that reinterpretation and re-evaluation are required. Specifically, the existing literature's interpretation of Chernobyl as either a glasnost failure or success will be challenged based on an alternate understanding of *glasnost'* that is not so significantly coloured by now extinct, but previously predominant, ideological and political imperatives. While using *Soviet Life* magazine's coverage as a case study to demonstrate the validity of this reinterpretation based on a more holistic understanding of *glasnost'*, this paper will concurrently draw attention to the importance of properly grounding any evaluation in a firm understanding of the contextual factors affecting both subject matter and evaluator. As will become evident through the progression of the paper, the need for reinterpretation is rooted in the inability of past commentators to sufficiently separate themselves from the influence and effects of their own worldview on their interpretative lens.

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In the early morning hours of April 26<sup>th</sup>, unit four of the Chernobyl Atomic Power Station was taken offline for a scheduled shutdown, which created a unique window of opportunity within which to run a voltage regulator test. The test, however, did not proceed as planned.<sup>1</sup> A steam explosion ripped apart the reactor core and propelled the 1000 ton biological shield from the top of the reactor through unit four's roof (Mosey 1990; Silver, 1987). By the time a second explosion blew a "fireworks display" of graphite and other radioactive material out of the building, all of the containment structures were rendered ineffective or destroyed (Bailey, 1989; Mosey, 1990).

Twenty-nine firemen and operational staff perished, and countless others were injured extinguishing the thirty-seven fires in the reactor's vicinity over the following four hours (Medvedev, 1991). Fourteen days and 5,000 tons of lead and sand were required to 'plug' the reactor and prevent continued radioactive release (International Nuclear Safety Advisory Group, 1986) By this time, thousands of Soviet citizens had been evacuated from their homes and an exclusion zone with a radius extending 30 kilometres from the reactor had been created.<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

The disaster and its immediate aftermath are not the focus of this paper. Instead, this paper will investigate Soviet media coverage of the disaster and argue for reinterpretation and re-evaluation. Specifically, existing interpretations of Chernobyl as either a *glasnost* failure or success are challenged based on an updated understanding of *glasnost*. Reinterpretation is supported through analysis of *Soviet Life* magazine's Chernobyl coverage as a case study and the importance of properly grounding any evaluation in firm contextual understanding of both subject matter and evaluator is emphasized.

Before continuing further, it is necessary to outline the progression of the argument and make note of key terminology. First and foremost, the term *glasnost* needs explanation both generally and specifically for use within this paper. *Glasnost*, as traditionally understood by Western observers, was a general move towards more transparency and liberalization within the press and information management systems during the mid-to-late eighties, under the direction of Mikhail Gorbachev. It is considered to be either a part of, or a companion to, Gorbachev's more general restructuring, *perestroika*.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For technical accounts of the accident sequence and subsequent disaster see: Flavin, 1987; Haynes & Bojcn, 1988; Josephson, 1996; Medvedev, 1991; Megaw, 1987; Mosey, 1990; Young, 1987.

<sup>2</sup> The number of evacuees is disputed and officially ranges from 116,000 to 135,000 without children who were evacuated in a wider area and would raise the total to 500,000. Limiting the count to the exclusion zone, 90,251 persons were removed from the Ukrainian side and 18,000 from the Belorussian side (Marple, 1988, p. 31).

<sup>3</sup> While Western consensus may have been that *glasnost* was as important as or a distinct policy from *perestroika*, it has been argued that this was a misconception and that *glasnost* was merely a necessary component of, and subservient to, *perestroika* (Young & Launer, 1991, p. 102).

The use of both glasnost and *glasnost'* is not the result of poor copyediting, but intentional. Where traditional Western interpretation is at issue, the non-italicised and anglicised glasnost is used. Where reinterpretation consistent with the policy as intended by Gorbachev is at issue, *glasnost'*, italicised to reflect its character as a non-English term, is used. This approach is intended both to promote clarity and recognize the political origin of each conceptualization.

The following investigation will begin by outlining the development of the Soviet press through various Soviet regimes. In order to understand the significance of Gorbachev's reform, it is necessary to have an appreciation of the press upon which it was imposed and the historical background of Soviet media theory. Furthermore, this investigation will reveal the Leninist roots of Gorbachev's reform.

Against this historical backdrop, the investigation will move to consider the competing conceptualizations of glasnost and *glasnost'*. Glasnost, as traditionally understood by Western commentators to be a movement towards Western style free press, will be outlined, as will existing evaluations of Chernobyl as a glasnost test. Subsequently, a reinterpreted *glasnost'* with an emphasis on Gorbachev's intentions and the Leninist press policies it returns to, will be examined. This interpretation, less influenced by Western preconceptions of what a liberal press entails, is argued to be a more appropriate understanding.

Resetting *glasnost'* as distinct from glasnost necessitates a re-examination of Chernobyl as a *glasnost'* test. In order to re-evaluate the relationship between *glasnost'* and Chernobyl, this investigation will use coverage of the disaster in *Soviet Life* magazine as a case study. *Soviet Life* was an English language publication intended for an American audience that, while formally independent, was closely tied to the Soviet State.<sup>4</sup>

An examination of *Soviet Life's* Chernobyl coverage reveals official interpretations of events to have been followed closely throughout. Gorbachev's initial television address on Chernobyl set the official interpretation of the disaster. Analysis of subsequent Chernobyl coverage in *Soviet Life* reveals it to be consistently faithful to this interpretation. Furthermore, *Soviet Life's* anniversary coverage was consistent to official interpretation and changed only in ways that reflected intervening evolutions of the official narrative. While previous conceptualizations of glasnost would render such a construction of events a failure, the reinterpretation of *glasnost'* proposed herein would render such deference to official interpretation a resounding success. It is argued that *Soviet Life's* portrayal of Chernobyl was not unique and that the domestic press similarly took their cues from the official interpretation.

Finally, the later evolution of *glasnost'* will be noted in order to provide further context and to vindicate to some extent its misinterpretation by Western commentators. Both *glasnost'* and perestroika continued to evolve "far beyond their original, well-limited definitions" (Young &

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<sup>4</sup> Further detail on *Soviet Life* magazine, its appropriateness as a case study, and the effect of its intended audience being American instead of Soviet is provided within the body of the paper below.

Launer, 1991, p. 102). Study of the Soviet Union during this period was, as described by McNair, a “moving target” (1991, p. ix). Key to the *glasnost*’ and Chernobyl reinterpretation proposed herein is the fundamental importance of understanding the subject of evaluation and using the appropriate metrics – in this case being careful to avoid measuring the Soviet press against the standards of a liberal democratic or Western press system.

## **Politics, the Soviet Press, and Gorbachev in Historical Context**

In order to examine Gorbachev’s *glasnost*’ reforms it is necessary first to have an understanding of the post-revolutionary press system they were intended to reform. Unlike media typical of liberal democracies, Soviet press was not independent but considered an “ideological apparatus of the state” (McNair, 1991, p. 1). Soviet media was a “means of mass information and propaganda” intended to function as “engines of ideological production; machinery of social knowledge, to be harnessed and consciously directed to solving the tasks of socialist construction” (McNair, 1991, p. 1). In the Soviet Union there was one ‘publisher’ – the Party (Remington, 1988, p. 98).

Strict state control and use of the media followed shortly after solidification of Soviet rule. By March 1919, the entire media apparatus was under Bolsheviks’ control and operated to secure support for the newly formed state (McNair, 1991). According to Markham (1967), Lenin envisaged four functions for the media: i) “To expose beneath-the-surface manifestations, that is to make ‘revelations’ in order to stimulate popular political awareness”; ii) “to elucidate doctrine, especially for the leaders”; iii) “to ‘inform’ all levels of the population”; and iv) “to promote unity of thought” (p. 99). All four purposes further, rather than monitor or counter, state interests.

The term *glasnost*’, now most commonly associated with Gorbachev, was also used by Lenin. Lenin’s four key press control principles included: “i) partiality (*partiinnost/ideonost*); ii) linkage with the masses (*massovost/narodnost*); iii) truthfulness and objectivity (*pravdivost/obyektivnost*); and iv) openness (*otkritost/glasnost*)” (McNair, 1991, p. 18). According to Lenin, *glasnost*’ had two dimensions. First, the media was to be positive about Soviet economic life and cover the positive phenomena active in socialist construction. Second, although *glasnost*’ included criticism, Lenin held that “criticism and self-criticism in relation to negative economic and social phenomena would help to maintain the revolutionary momentum necessary for successful socialist construction” (McNair, 1991, p. 28-29). Criticism was to remain firmly rooted in Soviet ideology and be both “leadership-initiated and leadership-regulated” (McNair, 1991, p. 29).

The essence of this system was surmised well by Markham (1967) who wrote that

While the Soviet system flatly denies freedom of expression to those who would use it against the state, the press is free within prescribed limits to engage in

loyal criticism. In fact, the press and other mass media had the duty of criticism and of participating in the national activity of self-analysis... Press and people are expected to expose fault and inefficiency in the ongoing work of communism. (p. 107)

With little deviation, this formed the practical and theoretical basis of Soviet media policy from Lenin through to the fall of the Soviet Union.

The most significant deviation was the result of Joseph Stalin's reinterpretation of Marxist-Leninist thought. Stalin restricted journalistic prerogatives more than other leaders and effectively eliminated the critical dimension of *glasnost*. While Lenin initiated the Communist Party's information monopoly, Stalin brought it to full realization (Brooks, 2000). In the absence of *glasnost*'s critical aspect, "the Soviet system of public information precluded reflection and discussion" (Brooks, 2000, p. xiv).

Following Stalin's death, overtures of reform and de-Stalinization were made by Khrushchev. With respect to the press, however, these reforms had little effect. During de-Stalinization, Khrushchev maintained a press "devoted to our cause" and reinforced its role as an agent of state power and policy (Markham, 1967, p. 121). Furthermore, any liberalization that did occur under Khrushchev was reversed by Brezhnev (McNair, 1991). "The press largely retained its monopoly of information after Stalin's death... until Mikhail Gorbachev introduced *glasnost* – 'openness' or 'transparency' – after 1985" (Brooks, 2000, p. xiv).

Of equal importance to the historical evolution of the Soviet press in evaluating Soviet media is one's understanding of the use of socialist realism. This style of presentation showcased Soviet citizens from modest beginnings as heroes whose triumph over adversity led to the success of communism (Clark, 2000). Fitzpatrick (1991) has provided perhaps the best description of socialist realism:

What I mean by "socialist realism" is a method of representation characteristic of the Stalin period and Stalinist *mentalité*... It was ubiquitous in Soviet journalism of the 1930s... In the socialist-realist view of the world, a dry, half-dug ditch signified a future canal full of loaded barges, a ruined church was a potential kolkhoz clubhouse, and the inscription of a project in the Five-Year-Plan was a magical act of creation. (p. 217)

Although this method of hyper-positive presentation later spread to literature and art, it had its origins within, and remained a prominent feature of, the Soviet press, which actively participated in socialist realist construction (Lenoe, 2004).

Both in its tendency to report events through a socialist realist lens and its close alignment with the Party, the practices of the Soviet press remained largely unchanged from Lenin through to

Gorbachev. Becker (2002) claimed that although Gorbachev's predecessors were aware of the limitations within the media system they inherited from Stalin,

they were too focused on an ideological war with the West to make the necessary changes to revivify the press. They settled for conservatism and certainty; in short, stagnation. It took the Gorbachev leadership, with its commitment to reform in all elements of Soviet society, to make real changes.  
(p. 36)

But how real were the changes Gorbachev envisioned, and to what extent did they represent a functional break with traditional Soviet media policies?

## **Glasnost v. *Glasnost'*: traditional versus new interpretations**

A key claim of this investigation is that there exists a pervasive, yet fundamentally flawed, understanding of *glasnost/glasnost'* within existing literature. To establish this, the traditional Western understanding of *glasnost* as a significant break from Soviet press policies will be outlined. Subsequently, the existing literature on *glasnost* and Chernobyl will be outlined before the reinterpretation of Gorbachev's policies as *glasnost'* is argued.

### **Traditional: Glasnost as Significant Break**

After being elected General Secretary of the Communist Party in March of 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev began what Sakwa (1990) called the "long-delayed" process of modernizing the Soviet Union's political and economic institutions. Gorbachev believed that economic revitalization could not be successful without a concomitant political revitalization that would come from increased selfcriticism and democratization of Soviet society – *glasnost*. Gorbachev promised to "call things by their name" and professed that to know one's own errors was the "best medicine against arrogance and complacency" (Piotrowski, 1993, p. 289-90). At the 27<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), he claimed that "frankness in the party and society" was vital to the health of the Soviet Union (*Soviet Life*, 1986c, p. 5).

Lapidus (1988) argued that *glasnost* was more than merely a means to an end, a mode of rejuvenation to ensure economic success. In 1988, she claimed that *glasnost* also represented an expression of the Soviet leadership's trust in Soviet society, a "recognition by the Soviet leadership of the maturity of the Soviet people, and a partial repudiation of the patronizing notion that only a small elite could be entrusted with truth" (p. 9). Chernobyl was the first test of this trust, the first opportunity for the Soviet leadership to take *glasnost* from policy statement to reality. Would Chernobyl demonstrate Gorbachev's claim that "acceleration and radical transformation in all spheres of our life are not just a slogan but a course the party will steer firmly and without wavering" (*Soviet Life*, 1986c, p. 5)?

## Traditional Glasnost and Chernobyl

Many have commented upon Chernobyl as a glasnost test and the existing literature on the subject can be divided into three broad schools of thought. The first claims that Chernobyl exhibited the empty nature of glasnost and exposed it as hollow politics rather than substantive policy. The remaining two argue that Chernobyl acted as glasnost catalyst, either by forcing Gorbachev and the Soviet leadership to recognize need for change, or by allowing Gorbachev to make changes he already intended.

Bohlen (1988) argues that Chernobyl was proof of continued and effective Soviet news management because while “newspapers in the West were running stories with charts on roentgens and rems, the Soviet press was running soothing comments from Ukrainian doctors” (p. 83). Pryce-Jones (1995) similarly argued that “glasnost or not, the censor instructed that news of the catastrophe was to be restricted” (p. 82). He further alleged that had radiation not been detected in the West, Gorbachev would not have made his televised address on Chernobyl (Pryce-Jones, 1995). Davis and Kelley (1992) agree with these claims and add that subsequent disaster coverage remained consistent and thus condemn not only the Chernobyl experience but the entire glasnost project.<sup>5</sup> White (1991) argued that Chernobyl represented a signal failure for glasnost and Laquer (1989) claimed it belied any “fundamental change” (p. 51).

In contrast to the above noted commentators, however, the majority of literature argues that Chernobyl has been a transformative pivot point for both Gorbachev and the Soviet regime. Tarasulo (1989), for example, has written that

The nuclear power plant explosion at Chernobyl in April 1986 dramatically changed both Gorbachev and the nation’s perception of *glasnost*. *Glasnost* proved to be necessary for informing the population about the nuclear catastrophe and avoiding exaggerated rumours. By Soviet standards, in contrast with American perceptions, the coverage of the Chernobyl disaster was a media breakthrough, utilizing high-tech television equipment and soberly assessing the dangers of nuclear power... After a disaster of that magnitude, it became easier to televise and write about industrial and transportation accidents, earthquakes, and floods in the USSR. (p. xxi-xxii)

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<sup>5</sup> Press coverage of ethnic riots in Alma-Ata in December 1986 and crises in Nagorno-Karabakh in February and March of 1988 were said to follow the Chernobyl approach of an initial news blackout followed by biased and constrained coverage (Davis & Kelley, 1992, p. 142).

Despite this positive review, the Soviet press' coverage of Chernobyl has not generally been viewed as a start-to-finish glasnost success.

The literature instead tends to divide the Soviet media's Chernobyl coverage into two distinct phases, the first being a media blackout following Chernobyl and the second being a period of unprecedented openness. The second stage is argued to begin sometime between May 10<sup>th</sup>, when the first newspaper correspondents were allowed to visit Chernobyl,<sup>6</sup> and May 14<sup>th</sup>, when Gorbachev, in a televised address, announced to the Soviet nation and international community that "Chernobyl represents a lesson that cannot be avoided" (Miller, 1993, p. 67-8).<sup>7</sup> Whatever date is used, it is generally agreed that a marked change in policy occurred at some point during the Chernobyl accident (Bregante, 1989; Cockburn, 1989; Crouch, 1989; Daniels, 1998; Hardgrove, 1993; Lapidus, 1988; Mevedev & Chiesa, 1998; Miller, 1993; Sakwa, 1989; Weiner, 1993).

Following Chernobyl, information was distributed to the press with little censorship, a practice "unprecedented in the USSR" (Tatu, 1991, p. 87). It was argued that this led to later issues such as drug abuse and prostitution being reported honestly and extensively in marked contrast to pre-Chernobyl practices (Bregante, 1989). McNair (1991) wrote that Chernobyl was the incident that "delivered a fatal blow to 'Brezhnevian' journalism, boosting the process of radical reform and restructuring of information policy which had begun one year earlier with the election of Mikhail Sergeyivich Gorbachev as General Secretary of the CPSU" (p. 3).

Though there is agreement that a change took place, the nature of that change is contested. Describing this change, Miller (1993) wrote:

The first reaction of the administration to Chernobyl' was to impose a traditional cover-up. We know nothing of the high politics of the next eighteen days. Did Gorbachev or others take time to realise the seriousness of the accident and its implications, or was there a struggle about its public handling? (p. 67-8)

It is the process of what happened within these eighteen days that divides the literature arguing Chernobyl acted as a glasnost catalyst into two streams of thought. While one claims that Chernobyl forced glasnost upon the Soviet leadership (Cockburn, 1993; Daniels, 1998; Weiner, 1999), the other contends that Chernobyl gave Gorbachev and other reformers within the party the opportunity to push through the reforms they already had planned (Martin, 1989; Piotrowski, 1993; Silver, 1987). Both camps agree though that at some point in Chernobyl coverage glasnost truly took hold.

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<sup>6</sup> The newspaper correspondents were shortly followed by radio and television reporters as well. Medvedev and Chiesa (1989) further claimed that at this point a policy decision was made to restrict the power of the official censors such that real glasnost began.

<sup>7</sup> Miller (1993) has claimed that from this point onwards Gorbachev was a changed politician and the event marked a significant turning point not only for glasnost, but the entire reform project.

Despite the above noted writers, Chernobyl's relationship with glasnost is the subject of little scholarly attention. The majority of print on the subject appears within much larger works on either Gorbachev or glasnost more generally.<sup>8</sup> When Chernobyl is mentioned, it is done so in order to illustrate some larger process rather than to evaluate it as a subject in its own right. Moreover, the majority of writing was published either immediately before or immediately after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and tends to be coloured by then current ideological imperatives. McNair's (1991) introductory remarks are telling. He wrote that his

book was written at a time of unprecedented change in the Soviet Union... On literally the last day of writing, the Brandenburg Gate was opened and President Ceausescu of Rumania fell from power. Keeping up with the changes has not been easy. As all who work in this field are aware, the Soviet Union currently represents, from an academic point of view, a 'moving target.' (p. ix)

With due respect to work completed during that period of immense transformation, a new interpretation is needed. All schools of thought within the literature are equally affected by misguided interpretations of glasnost. Aided by the passage of time and the softening of ideological imperatives, this paper proposes a reinterpretation of *glasnost'* that reveals a fundamentally different relationship between it and Chernobyl.

### **Reinterpretation: *Glasnost'* as Firmly Rooted in Marxist-Leninism**

In order to accurately evaluate the interaction between *glasnost'* and Chernobyl, it is imperative to first have an understanding of *glasnost'* itself. This paper is not the first to suggest that existing literature has not properly grasped *glasnost'*. Identifying a key problem with Western interpretations of Gorbachev's policies, Becker (2002) wrote that

Gorbachev's communications policy has traditionally been characterized with reference to the Russian word *glasnost'*. However, there has been confusion over the meaning of this word and its significance for the press. Western analysts... have been trapped by the difficulties of translating an abstract term (literally meaning voice-ness). (p. 39)

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<sup>8</sup> With the exception of Young and Launer (1991), none have investigated the relation between Chernobyl coverage and glasnost reforms specifically. A number of articles have analyzed the Soviet media's Chernobyl coverage as a topic in and of itself: Luke (1987) has written about how Chernobyl was 'packaged' within both the Eastern and Western blocs in order to keep nuclear programs moving forward. Friedman, Gorney, and Egolf (1987) have written about the lack of information on either radiation or exposure risk within media coverage of Chernobyl. Rubin (1987) has written on the official information policies which were followed at an institutional level by the Soviets and Metropolitan Edison, the owners of Three Mile Island (TMI), following the Chernobyl and TMI nuclear accidents. Young and Launer (1991) analyzed domestic Soviet media and came to similar conclusions as proposed herein on the need to recontextualize *glasnost'*.

In addition to translational problems, Cohen claimed that Western journalists tended to 'get Russia wrong' (Baer, 2002). He based this claim on a 1996 survey which revealed that American correspondents to have imposed meaning on the Soviet Union by viewing it "through the prism of their own expectations and beliefs" (Baer, 2002, p. 503).

The twin culprits of translation and a Western lens are responsible for the existing literature's confusion between a glasnost that eventually resulted from Gorbachev's policies and the *glasnost'* the Soviet leader intended. While existing literature tends to evaluate glasnost based on information release and reliability, *glasnost'* was never meant to bring about an entirely free press comparable to that of a Western democracy. Rather, *glasnost'* was intended as a return to a pre-Stalin press system resembling the one established by Lenin.

Gorbachev claimed that

The main task of the press is to help the nation understand the ideas of restructuring, to mobilize the masses to struggle for successful implementation of party plans... We need *glasnost'*, criticism and self-criticism in order to implement major changes in all spheres of social life (Becker, 2002, p. 40).

Gorbachev's regime approved of controversy in the press. Becker (2002) argues, however, that the singular purpose of such "organized pseudo-controversies" was to increase popular support of reform policies. Problems in Soviet society were displayed only to sell change – "the utilitarian side of *glasnost'*" (p. 42-3).

However, how encompassing was the utilitarian nature of reform? During the course of the reforms, Dejevsky (1989) asked this very question.

The overriding question about *glasnost'* is still: is it an end in itself, or is it merely a means to an end? Is its prime purpose to give the people of the Soviet Union access to more information because the leadership recognizes that as a good and necessary aim in itself, or is its main purpose to help Mr Gorbachev consolidate his authority, discredit his predecessors and his opponents, and improve his image in the Soviet Union and abroad? (p. 33)

To this rhetorical question she answered, that "for the time being at least, *glasnost'* in the Soviet press will mean exactly what Mr Gorbachev and the Communist Party leadership want it to mean: no more and no less" (Dejevsky, 1989, p. 39).

And Gorbachev meant for there to be strict limits on *glasnost'*. Unlike glasnost as interpreted by Western observers, Gorbachev's *glasnost'* did not mean to create true (or Western-style) freedom of the press. Controversy and negative reporting were intended only in order to further the socialist cause. Commenting on the limitations of *glasnost'*, Gorbachev said he was

for *glasnost*' without reservation or limitations, but for *glasnost*' in the interests of socialism. To the question of whether *glasnost*', criticism and democracy have limits we answer firmly: If *glasnost*', criticism and democracy are in the interests of socialism and the interests of the people they have no limits! This is our criterion. (Dejevsky, 1989, p. 39)

Despite the cleverly worded claim, there clearly were limits. In 1987, Gorbachev told editors that *glasnost*' did not permit publication of anything. Rather, it was meant to "strengthen socialism and the spirit of our people" (Becker, 2002, p. 44). Criticism of shortcomings was acceptable only when it would not lead to "the undermining of socialism and socialist values" (Becker, 2002, p. 44).

In fact, Gorbachev's use of the media as "an instrument of restructuring" even caused him to believe that the Party's role in directing the press would increase throughout the reform process (Becker, 2002, p. 45).

The more active role of the press and masses in society engendered by the reforms and press liberalization did not mean that under *glasnost*' the Party would give up its role in the press or otherwise as the ultimate arbiter of policy. It might allow for a relatively wider sphere of legitimate controversy, but it was still to determine where the boundaries of deviance lay. Diversity was always to be sanctioned in accordance with the priorities of the government. (Becker, 2002, p. 44)

If we accept the alternate interpretation of *glasnost*' as provided by Becker, then Gorbachev's reforms ought to be viewed as a return to the pre-Stalin press policies of Lenin, rather than either a departure from, or a completely new development in, Soviet press policies.

Ebon (1987) argued during the reforms themselves, that Gorbachev was consistent with Lenin and Trotsky when it came to the press. Stalin altered the system and built in additional controls, but Gorbachev, according to Ebon (1987), was returning to Leninist basics. Gorbachev, in 1988, stated journalism was to "advance the ideas of restructuring, and affirm positive, progressive trends, and to overcome everything negative" (Becker, 2002, p. 45). This claim is ideologically consistent with those of Lenin. *Glasnost*' was not a departure from, but rather a return to, socialist fundamentals. While Remington (1988) described the change by writing that under Gorbachev "the orchestra had begun performing in a new key" (p. 28), it is important that this key differed only from the one which immediately preceded it and was grounded firmly within traditional sources of socialist thought. While *glasnost*' changed the orchestra's key, it was no move towards atonality.

## ***Glasnost'* and Chernobyl**

Reinterpreting *glasnost'* necessitates a new examination of its relationship with Chernobyl. Using *glasnost'* as intended by Gorbachev, rather than glasnost as understood by Western observers, reveals a relation between it and Chernobyl that differs significantly from that described in existing literature. Based on this reinterpretation, Soviet media coverage of Chernobyl was neither, as the literature has suggested, a failure nor a turning point. Rather, the media's Chernobyl coverage exemplified *glasnost'* as was intended.

Although this paper recognizes that at some later point Gorbachev's reforms gained unanticipated momentum and moved beyond their intended reach (Young & Launer, 1991), and *glasnost'* was replaced by a glasnost more in line with Western understandings of media independence, it was not during Chernobyl. Like most evolutions, the suggestion of any specific point of departure is artificial and the process by which *glasnost'* transmogrified to glasnost was both complex and continual. Indeed, as has been suggested elsewhere, the emergence of glasnost was part of the immense change and many processes that led to the crumbling of the Soviet project more generally.

Chernobyl, however, represented a point in time where *glasnost'* operated exactly as Gorbachev intended. While failures were discussed in the press, their presentation was not only sanctioned by the leadership, but was used to support existing policies. In order to demonstrate this *glasnost'* success, this paper will use *Soviet Life's* Chernobyl coverage as a case study. The magazine followed official interpretation of Chernobyl flawlessly, providing support for government policies and exemplifying *glasnost'* in action.

## ***Soviet Life* Magazine**

In order to examine how Chernobyl was covered by *Soviet Life*, it is necessary to first provide context and introduce the magazine. Formerly published as *The USSR*, *Soviet Life* was the result of a bilateral, cross-cultural agreement between American and Soviet governments. While *Soviet Life* was published by the Soviet government and distributed in the USA, the American government published *Amerika* in the Soviet Union. Despite bearing the stamp of the Soviet Embassy in Washington, *Soviet Life* has been recognized as an "unofficial" publication of the Novosti press agency, itself an "unofficial" news agency of the Soviet government (Turpin, 1995). Officially, Novosti was a co-operative whose shares were owned by the Soviet

people (Gerol & Molyneux, 1988, p. 176). In practice, however, state control of Novosti made the Soviet Embassy seal entirely appropriate.<sup>9</sup>

*Soviet Life* magazine presents an ideal source for this case study investigating the relation between *glasnost* and Chernobyl, as it is published in English. While other Soviet press publications are partially available in English translation, it is not possible to examine their Chernobyl coverage in its entirety. In contrast, it is possible to examine *Soviet Life*'s coverage from the onset of the disaster through the following year. The magazine's close relationship with the Soviet government also makes it an ideal source within which to examine *glasnost* as it was intended by the party leadership. Although the American audience of *Soviet Life* was significantly different from that of the domestic press, this does not alter its effectiveness as a case study as Chernobyl coverage was consistent with that of the domestic press (Taylor, 2007; Young & Lauder, 1991).

Despite the unique nature of this publication, as a Soviet-printed English language magazine distributed in America, it has been the focus of little scholarly attention. The website of *Russian Life*, the successor to *Soviet Life* published since the fall of the Soviet Union, includes a brief commentary on its history that incorporates a description of its predecessor publication. Within this account, *Russian Life*, now owned and published by a private American corporation, claims that while *Soviet Life* was never "a blatant red propaganda tool", it nonetheless did "hew to the government line" (Russian Life, 2009).

Turpin has written the sole work investigating *Soviet Life* and the effects of *glasnost*/*glasnost* upon its content and argued that the magazine changed dramatically as a result of Gorbachev's policies. In an in-depth study on the Soviet media's foreign publications, specifically *Soviet Life* and the *Moscow Daily News*, Turpin (1995) contrasted the content and nature of *Soviet Life* during a two-year period under Brezhnev with a two-year period under Gorbachev. Through this analysis, Turpin (1995) concluded that over the first three decades of its publication, the purpose of *Soviet Life*, "to sanitize Soviet affairs and convince international readers, especially in the United States of America (USA), that the Soviet Union was a democracy" (p. 25), remained unchanged.

However, the advent of Gorbachev's media reforms provoked a dramatic change in content. Turpin (1995) quoted the magazine's Washington-based editor, Sergei F. Ivanko, who in 1990 said that *Soviet Life*'s purpose, "has always been to present the Soviet Union and its people to the American people ... now that perestroika and glasnost are in full swing, it is much easier for

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<sup>9</sup> Ebon (1987) refers to Novosti as independent only in a most sarcastic manner. Hollander (1972) also disputed the unofficial nature of Novosti writing: "Officially, Novosti is a "public" news agency, while TASS is the government agency. In reality, the difference is one of purpose. TASS is the official state news agency as the term is understood in the West, while Novosti functions more as a public relations agency for the Soviet Union" (p. 32). Gerol and Molyneux (1988) further alleges that Novosti was tied to the KGB and international correspondents were instrumental in the Soviet Union's worldwide information gathering networks.

us to present life in the Soviet Union as it is” (p. 25). Turpin (1995) concluded that *Soviet Life* had changed with Gorbachev’s reforms:

Soviet Society was more realistically presented, no longer as a model society, but as one fraught with social, economic, and political problems. The United States no longer represented the evil capitalistic society. The policies of perestroika, democratizatsiya, and glasnost promoted radical changes in Soviet society: the content of *Soviet Life* showed these changes. (p. 76)

As she was examining primarily the magazine’s content rather than the theories that underlay it, Turpin did not provide a definition or demonstrate an understanding of *glasnost*’ entirely in agreement with that used here, nor did she draw attention its manifestation within the publication. Nonetheless, her presentation of *Soviet Life*’s content supports the reinterpretation of *glasnost*’ presented herein.

Turpin’s examination, however, used coverage that began two years after Chernobyl, and never commented on either Chernobyl or its relation to *glasnost*’. Thus, while Turpin’s investigation showed *Soviet Life* to have exemplified the goals of *glasnost*’, in order to demonstrate how, as *Russian Life* suggested, it hewed to the government line and fulfilled Gorbachev’s *glasnost*’ goals, this paper will examine *Soviet Life*’s Chernobyl coverage in close detail.

## ***Glasnost*’, Chernobyl, and Soviet Life**

Like the domestic Soviet press, *Soviet Life* initially delayed reporting on Chernobyl.<sup>10</sup> The accident was not covered until after Gorbachev’s televised address had both legitimized Chernobyl as a news topic and established an official interpretation of the accident to be reported. In order to demonstrate *Soviet Life*’s loyalty to this interpretation, we will begin by examining Gorbachev’s address and the Soviet leadership’s interpretation of the events. Next, *Soviet Life*’s coverage of Chernobyl during the year that followed the accident will be examined to demonstrate the magazine’s conformity to the official line and the *glasnost*’ principles that made it acceptable to report problems. Finally, the magazine’s ‘one year later’ Chernobyl

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<sup>10</sup> This blackout was maintained despite the fact that, by chance and coincidence, *Soviet Life*’s Chernobyl coverage embarrassingly predated the accident by two months. The magazine’s February edition contained a seven page section on the safety of nuclear power plants in the Soviet Union (*Soviet Life*, 1986a, p. 6-11). This section offered “a glimpse of life in a town next to a nuclear power plant”, “a town born of the atom”, Pripjat, and promised to “Explain how nuclear power related to the issues of resources, safety, pollution and weapons.” It was reported that the plant had emergency core cooling systems and could be shut down in a matter of seconds. Chief engineer, Nikolai Fomin was reported as saying that “even if the incredible should happen, the automatic control and safety systems would shut down the reactor.” After the accident, however, no mention of this report, or the claims made within it, was ever seen in the pages of *Soviet Life*.

update will be examined to demonstrate the magazine's continued loyalty to official interpretation and *glasnost*' principles.

### **Setting the Stage: Gorbachev's Televised Address**

*Soviet Life* commenced its Chernobyl coverage by publishing the text of Gorbachev's May 14<sup>th</sup> television address in its June 1986 issue (*Soviet Life*, 1986c, p. 13).<sup>11</sup> Reprinted in its entirety, this address established official interpretation of the accident. While it recognized the disaster as tragic, official interpretation nonetheless presented a story of success. Presented in typical socialist realist manner, efforts to combat the accident's effects were portrayed as indicative of the Soviet people's heroism. Technical or critical accounts of how or why the accident occurred were conspicuously absent. The disaster's magnitude was downplayed and Western media was attacked for sensational reporting. Attention was shifted away from the disaster itself, and directed towards the policy lessons that ought to be learned from it.

Gorbachev's address began by acknowledging that "a misfortune has befallen us – the accident at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant" (*Soviet Life*, 1986d, p. 13). The misfortune instantly claimed the lives of two plant workers and later those of seven firefighters, while an additional 299 casualties had later been hospitalized for "radiation disease of varying degrees of gravity" (*Soviet Life*, 1986d, p. 13). Although Gorbachev acknowledged the tragedy of these consequences, Chernobyl was presented as a success. The disaster provided the opportunity for the state and its people to triumphantly overcome adversity. According to the address, the almost three hundred hospitalized responders, for instance, were being given "every possible treatment" and the Soviet Government would ensure the care of the deceased persons' families and loved ones (*Soviet Life*, 1986d, p. 13). In order to "limit the scale of the accident", many were reportedly taking part in unspecified "vigorous work", Pripyat was "evacuated in a matter of hours", and the politburo<sup>12</sup> and government commission were working around the clock (*Soviet Life*, 1986d, p. 13). According to Gorbachev, Chernobyl precipitated a successful Union-wide effort in which, "the scientific, technical and economic potential of the entire country has been put to use" (*Soviet Life*, 1986d, p. 13).

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<sup>11</sup> Although the text of a May address appearing in June may seem like a large delay in reporting, this was consistent with *Soviet Life*'s other reports, which were typically delayed by two months. A statement by Gorbachev on the elimination of nuclear weapons made in January, for instance, appeared in the March issue (*Soviet Life*, 1986b, p. 2-3). Gorbachev's comments at the 27<sup>th</sup> Congress of the CPSU in February likewise appeared in the May issue (*Soviet Life*, 1986c, p. 3-4).

<sup>12</sup> The politburo was the functional executive of the Communist Party and while different in several key respects including their being a party as opposed to government body (though politburo members held many key government positions and the lines between party and government were more theoretical than functional) acted similar to Cabinet in a Westminster governance structure. Functionally the politburo was responsible for key policy decisions.

The triumphal success story provided by Gorbachev did not in any way, however, comment on either the nature of the accident or any of its potential causes. The following selection was typical; “Despite the entire gravity of what happened, the damage turned out to be limited” (*Soviet Life*, 1986d, p. 13). This statement, although acknowledging Chernobyl’s severity, neglected to inform the reader how it occurred. Damage was described only as “limited”.

The official interpretation of events included descriptions of a villainous Western media establishment. In his address, Gorbachev ferociously attacked the way Chernobyl had been dealt with by the “governments, political figures and mass media in certain NATO countries” (*Soviet Life*, 1986d, p. 13). He alleged that these groups had “launched an unrestricted anti-Soviet campaign” in order to “defame” the Soviet Union and its foreign policy (*Soviet Life*, 1986d, p. 13). Specifically, the attacks were said to be motivated by attempts “to lessen the impact of Soviet proposals for the termination of nuclear tests and for the elimination of nuclear weapons” (*Soviet Life*, 1986d, p. 13). In this manner, Gorbachev not only criticized the Western media, but redirected focus from the accident to implications for a pre-existing foreign-policy initiative.

This theme would become fundamental to the official interpretation of Chernobyl. In his televised address, Gorbachev transformed the internationally embarrassing domestic catastrophe into a vindication of international foreign policy aims.

We realize that it is another sound of the tocsin, another grim warning that the nuclear era necessitates a new political thinking and a new policy... It should not be forgotten that in our world, where everything is interrelated, there exist, alongside problems of atoms for peace, also problems of atoms for war. This is the main thing now. The accident at Chernobyl showed again what an abyss will open if nuclear war befalls humankind. For inherent in the nuclear arsenal stockpiles are thousands upon thousands of disasters far more terrible than the one at Chernobyl (*Soviet Life*, 1986d, p. 13).

Gorbachev directed focus away from domestic and civilian nuclear power. Although the two problems may have been related, “the main thing now” was international policy on military arms control.

Gorbachev not only spoke of the need for international agreement, but also acted in order to demonstrate the Soviet Union’s support for nuclear arms control. Specifically, within his Chernobyl address, Gorbachev announced;

the Soviet Government, having considered all circumstances connected with the security of its people and all of humanity, has decided to extend its unilateral moratorium on nuclear tests through August 6 of this year, that is, the date on which more than 40 years ago the first atomic bomb was dropped on

the Japanese city of Hiroshima, as a result of which hundreds of thousands of people perished (*Soviet Life*, 1986d, p. 13).

In doing so, not only was the Soviet Union presented in a favourable light, but by referencing Hiroshima, Gorbachev alluded to the fact that while the Soviet Union accidentally caused the Chernobyl explosion, the United States had intentionally caused the Hiroshima explosion. To end his address, Gorbachev announced: "I confirm my proposal to President Reagan to meet without delay and to agree on a ban on nuclear testing" (*Soviet Life*, 1986d, p. 13).

Within his televised address, Gorbachev established the officially sanctioned interpretation of Chernobyl, which described the disaster as tragic and presented it, in typical socialist realist fashion, as a story of Soviet triumph. Technical or critical appraisals were excluded and Western media was lambasted for inaccuracies and speculation. Most importantly, Chernobyl was presented as justification for Soviet efforts at disarmament.

### ***Towing the Line: Soviet Life Articles***

The Chernobyl coverage that followed in *Soviet Life* remained in lockstep with Gorbachev's official interpretation. In order to demonstrate this adherence, the entirety of the magazine's Chernobyl coverage, mostly from the August and September issues, is examined. The August issue contained an article that focused on the press conference held by American doctor Robert Gale, describing his efforts to assist the victims of Chernobyl. The September issue included a twelve page special section on Chernobyl containing numerous articles focusing on the Soviet test ban, the accident, the evacuations, and the cleanup.

The investigation into these articles is organized thematically and illustrates their loyalty to Gorbachev's interpretation of the accident. Consistent with the official version, while *Soviet Life* recognized that the accident had been tragic, Soviet heroics and success stories from the cleanup were emphasized. Critical or technical accounts were absent. *Soviet Life* downplayed the disaster's significance and lambasted reports of Western media. Consistent with Gorbachev's address, the issue allocated the most column space was continuance of the test moratorium and nuclear détente.

The loyal mirroring of Gorbachev's account within *Soviet Life* alone signified a *glasnost'* success. Rather than being concealed, as would likely have been the case under former leaders and press policies, Chernobyl was openly discussed, but only in ways consistent with the official narrative and only in furtherance of the socialist cause. Such reporting was consistent with the goals of *glasnost'*.

Chernobyl was not hidden from *Soviet Life* readers. The magazine echoed Gorbachev's acknowledgement that two people died "at the moment of the accident" and another three hundred were affected by radiation (*Soviet Life*, 1986f, p. 34). The tragedy was said to be "torture" for attending doctors (*Soviet Life*, 1986f, p. 38). Such torture, however, was not without benefit as the accident's aftermath provided a unique educational opportunity for Soviet medical workers (*Soviet Life*, 1986f, p. 38). Doctors were provided a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to gain first-hand experience with radiation sickness, a subject previously limited to textbooks.

Furthermore, the accident showcased the triumphant success of the Soviet health care system. *Soviet Life* reported that doctors, "when they faced the real and imagined consequences of the accident... had to quickly mobilize all resources and reorganize all work" (*Soviet Life*, 1986f, p. 36). Not only was the reorganization presented as a success consistent with Gorbachev's official interpretation, but it exemplified the rationale for reporting problems under *glasnost'* reforms. Problems were legitimate press material as long as their presentation illustrated triumphant conquering of the problem by Soviet workers - here, health care workers.

*Soviet Life* not only reported the success of health care mobilization and reorganization, but also the successes of treatment. An article on Dr. Robert Gale, an American bone marrow specialist who travelled to Moscow to treat the most heavily radiated patients, emphasized the incredible accomplishments of the doctors – both American and Soviet. The magazine reported Gale's acknowledgment that, "the high level of specialized equipment already in the Moscow clinic made it possible to perform complicated surgeries within a short period of time and to successfully treat serious cases of contamination" (*Soviet Life*, 1986e, p. 2).

Despite the casualties it caused, Chernobyl was reported as a success story for Soviet technology and medicine. Furthermore, the focus of reporting was wholly consistent with purpose of news media under *glasnost'*. Gale's actions were highlighted to support a Soviet policy aim. His ability to overcome political concerns and differences with the Soviet Union and display compassion that transcended national borders to aid those in need was important news at a time when Gorbachev was pursuing a policy of international cooperation and détente.

Like the coverage of the doctors, *Soviet Life* portrayed first responders to have been triumphant. The magazine's reports were embedded with socialist realist descriptions of how despite having occurred shortly before one thirty in the morning, "by 5:00 the fire was extinguished" (*Soviet Life*, 1986f, p. 34). Like Gorbachev's address, *Soviet Life* recognized the tragic nature of the accident, but emphasized the Soviet heroism of the response.

While heroism was heralded, the accident's origin was overlooked – had it been reported, the triumphal motif would have been more difficult to maintain. Lockstep with official interpretation, technical or critical accounts of the accident were absent from *Soviet Life*. In fact, an article in

the magazine's September issue opened with, " 'Blind chance sweeps the world along' of the 41 operational reactors in the Soviet Union, chance chose one of the newest, which went into service in 1983" (*Soviet Life*, 1986f, p. 34). While the accident was certainly improbable, it was in no way a natural result of "blind chance".

Furthermore, the brief description that was published omitted key causal information.

On the night of April 25-26, during the routine shutdown of one of the four reactors at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant (about 130 kilometres north of Kiev, the Ukrainian capital), the reactor's power suddenly increased. Significant release of steam and the subsequent reaction created hydrogen gas, which exploded, and a fire. (*Soviet Life*, 1986f, p. 34)

Nowhere was any mention made of the test that had taken place and directly caused the explosion. According to *Soviet Life's* presentation, the power had increased suddenly without any explanation. The steam release and the subsequent hydrogen explosion were likewise unexplained.

As in Gorbachev's address, *Soviet Life's* coverage was void of technical or critical explanation of the accident. Rather, the accident and its consequences were presented as "unlikely", "almost impossible", and something "no one could have predicted" (*Soviet Life*, 1986f, p. 35). *Glasnost'*, as espoused by Gorbachev – and Lenin before him – was not about exposing truth for its own sake. Criticism was a tool appropriate for use only in the pursuit of policy goals. In the absence of a policy goal, critical investigation was omitted.

Like Gorbachev's , which address that claimed damage was "limited", *Soviet Life's* presentation of Chernobyl downplayed the disaster's magnitude. Chernobyl was compared to prior nuclear accidents in the United States and Britain to make it seem more commonplace. Furthermore, the construction of these comparisons made it appear as if Chernobyl had been, in some respects, less drastic or better managed.

The manner in which Chernobyl was compared to Britain's Windscale accident is revealing. *Soviet Life* reported that the Chernobyl fire had been extinguished by five o'clock in the morning, two had died during the accident itself, "some" later, and about 300 were hospitalized with radiation sickness. A "similar" fire at Windscale, however, "had raged for 12 hours, and the radiation leak had caused about 260 cases of thyroid gland cancer, 13 of which resulted in death" (*Soviet Life*, 1986f, p. 34). Although the presentation suggests otherwise, the magnitude of disaster at Windscale, while serious, was not comparable to Chernobyl. The opposite illusion was created by comparing duration rather than magnitude of fires, and through the oblique reporting of death tolls. While *Soviet Life* attributed 13 deaths to Windscale, "some" were a result of Chernobyl despite the fact that by that point 29 deaths had been officially attributed to radiation sickness from Chernobyl (Marples, 1988, p. 34).

*Soviet Life* similarly compared information disclosure policies of the American Three Mile Island (TMI) meltdown and Chernobyl.

U.S. experts know from the experience of the Three Mile Island Nuclear Plant accident how difficult it is to ascertain the cause of such incidents. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) received information about the Three Mile Island accident almost two months later. The IAEA and the governments of other countries received information about what happened at Chernobyl on April 28. (*Soviet Life*, 1986f, p. 34)

The two accidents, however, are largely incomparable as the amount and type of radiation, as well as the scale of the accidents and their cleanup efforts, differed immensely. Left unsaid was that unlike Chernobyl, TMI did not send a radioactive plume across international borders, thus reducing the role of the IAEA. Furthermore, while the IAEA may not have been notified of TMI immediately, news of the accident was broadcast on a local radio station a mere four and a half hours after it occurred and the story appeared on national news wires within five hours – a stark contrast to the initial media blackout following Chernobyl (Rubin, 1987, p. 42).

*Soviet Life* downplayed Chernobyl through comparisons designed both to make it seem less extraordinary and to showcase the Soviet state's superior handling of the accident. Yet these comparisons, and the ways in which *Soviet Life* made them, are problematic. For a number of reasons, including, but not limited to, those mentioned above, Chernobyl is simply not comparable to either Windscale or TMI. Like Gorbachev's speech, and consistent with *glasnost'*, the twin purposes of comparison were to downplay the disaster and showcase Soviet triumph.

Just as Gorbachev's address vilified Western media's Chernobyl reporting, so too, did *Soviet Life*. In its report on Dr. Gale's Moscow press conference, the magazine reported many of the questions asked to have been "bred by the lies that some members of the Western media had been feeding their readers and listeners during these disquieting days" (*Soviet Life*, 1986e, p. 3). The magazine alleged Western media to have exploited Chernobyl as an opportunity to discredit the Soviet Union. This critique was consistent both with Gorbachev's speech and the press principles of *glasnost'*. Allegations of Western alteration were ironic, given the way both Gorbachev's address and *Soviet Life* altered the focus of the Chernobyl coverage from nuclear power explosion to international arms race and nuclear détente.

Following Gorbachev's lead, *Soviet Life's* Chernobyl coverage transformed an internationally embarrassing domestic catastrophe into a justification for existing policy aims. The magazine quoted Dr. Gale as lending support to Gorbachev's position.

The most important lesson of the accident at Chernobyl, according to the American doctor, is that it demonstrated that science and medicine have no national boundaries. "One thing that the events of the past few weeks clearly

show is how limited is the possibility of reacting to nuclear catastrophes. If anyone believes that quick medical aid could be given during a nuclear war, it is regrettably out of the question. (*Soviet Life*, 1986e, p. 2)

Gale's Soviet counterpart, Dr. Vorobyov, was also quoted as supporting this position, adding that the accident demonstrated the vital need for international cooperation (*Soviet Life*, 1986e, p. 3). Although these certainly were the opinions of Dr. Gale, as he has restated them elsewhere (Gale and Hauser, 1988), *Soviet Life* included them in its coverage only because they lent support to the official narrative. The accident proved nuclear war was possible and Soviet efforts to reduce nuclear stockpiles and nuclear testing were righteous.

The twelve page Chernobyl section in *Soviet Life's* September issue opened with a two page timeline that detailed "The Year of Taming the Uncontrolled Atom" (*Soviet Life*, 1986f, p. 30-31). The timeline revealed the extent to which focus had shifted from accident to arms. Of the eleven entries on the timeline, only one mentioned Chernobyl. The first nine chronicled Gorbachev's efforts towards disarmament. The tenth entry, which finally mentioned Chernobyl, was dated May 14<sup>th</sup> rather than April 26<sup>th</sup>. While the accident occurred in April, it was May 14<sup>th</sup> that Gorbachev addressed the nation "in connection with the Chernobyl accident" (*Soviet Life*, 1986f, p. 30-31). The timeline reprinted the following excerpt of Gorbachev's address.

Now that attention to nuclear problems has increased, the Soviet Government, having weighed all circumstances connected with the security of its people and all of humanity, has decided to extend its unilateral moratorium on nuclear explosions through August 6 of this year. (*Soviet Life*, 1986f, p. 30-31)

The timeline addressed the accident exclusively as justification for disarmament. The focus shift embedded in Gorbachev's address and the official interpretation of the accident was supported entirely by *Soviet Life's* atom taming timeline.

The timeline was followed by a dense two-page article on the test moratorium within which Chernobyl was only briefly covered. After explaining the nuclear weapons ban and its history in great detail, the article quickly and curtly explained the lessons of Chernobyl.

The accident at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant was a new, serious warning to everyone. It showed how dangerous nuclear energy can become if it gets out of control. But in spite of the importance of the problems involved in the peaceful uses of nuclear power, the problem of its military use is much more important in our interdependent world. A nuclear accident like the one at Chernobyl is nothing like a nuclear war. True, there is a need to arrange effective international cooperation in the peaceful uses of nuclear power, but first of all we must redouble our efforts to stop nuclear testing and ban nuclear

weapons. This is the conclusion that has been drawn in the Soviet Union.  
(*Soviet Life*, 1986f, p. 33)

Military use of the atom was portrayed as much more important, or dangerous, than civilian to shift reader focus from the civilian disaster to policies of military detente.

After quoting a section of Gorbachev's television address, the article proceeded to cite a number of Western scholars and politicians who supported Gorbachev's policies. For instance, Dr. Bernard Lown, co-chairman of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, an organization which united doctors from over forty countries, called the test moratorium "an unprecedented act of statesmanship" (*Soviet Life*, 1986f, p. 33). US Congressman Edward Markey, and British Member of Parliament Denis Healy, were also quoted as supporting Gorbachev's test ban (*Soviet Life*, 1986f, p. 33). According to *Soviet Life*, it had been more than a year since the Soviet Union had conducted any tests, as the USSR "rose above national considerations, tactical considerations and differences and disputes" to strive towards much more important goal – "peace and a secure future" (*Soviet Life*, 1986f, p. 33).

*Soviet Life's* test moratorium article concluded that,

Having accepted the challenge of the atom that had gotten out of control and having limited the Chernobyl accident to a minimum, the Soviet Union was now even more determined to prevent a global nuclear catastrophe. In spite of the effectiveness of the measures to control the after effects of the Chernobyl disaster, we saw clearly that nothing could eliminate the after effects of a catastrophe that would be a thousand times more destructive. The accident was behind us, but its lesson remained: Humankind has set in motion truly fantastic forces that must be kept securely in check. (*Soviet Life*, 1986f, p. 33)

The success of the Soviet response did not change the need for disarmament – the world needed to reduce its nuclear arsenal.

Throughout *Soviet Life's* coverage, readers were redirected from Chernobyl to nuclear arms. Not only did this obedience to official interpretation embody a *glasnost'* success, but the way it was reported did so as well. Throughout Chernobyl coverage, the problem was presented as justification for policy reform; such reporting was consistent with the limitations of *glasnost'* as Gorbachev intended. Publication of problems and criticism was acceptable when used to further Soviet goals.

*Soviet Life* faithfully adhered to the official interpretation established by Gorbachev's address throughout its coverage of Chernobyl. Although tragedy was acknowledged, the heroism and triumph of the Soviet state was emphasized. Critical or technical accounts were absent, the significance of the accident was downplayed, and the focus was shifted towards policy. There were only two ways in which *Soviet Life's* coverage of Chernobyl differed from Gorbachev's

address. While the factual accuracy of Gorbachev's address is corroborated by later documentary accounts, the magazine made a number of false claims and included quotes and content designed to mislead readers. Interestingly, the use of both tactics was done in furtherance of the official interpretation.

The magazine's coverage of the accident's liquidation, for instance, claimed no civilians were taken with radiation sickness (*Soviet Life*, 1986e). While this claim facilitated the socialist realist transformation of tragedy into triumph through the implication that the accident had been successfully contained, it was categorically false. Firsthand accounts have documented that local residents were indeed affected by radiation sickness and some died as a result.<sup>13</sup>

The article about Dr. Gale contained similarly erroneous claims regarding radiation sickness. As previously mentioned, *Soviet Life* portrayed treating victims as a unique opportunity for doctors to deal with an illness they had previously only known theoretically. According to both Dr. Gale and Grigori Medvedev, however, this was not the first time Soviet doctors had seen such exposure. Dr. Gale noted how the Soviet doctors had a familiarity with radiation burns that was indicative of "obvious" pre-Chernobyl experience in treating them (Gale and Hauser, 1988, p. 56). Moreover, Medvedev had been treated in Moscow Hospital No. 6 in the early seventies for radiation sickness, during which time he was in the radiation wing with many other patients. Some of the patients suffered from the same symptoms and high doses as the Chernobyl first responders, some of whom did not survive (Medvedev, 1989).

In addition, *Soviet Life* reported that work in high radiation fields was undertaken almost entirely by robots (*Soviet Life*, 1986f, p. 36). This also has been countered by several firsthand accounts (Taylor, 2009). Although in this respect *Soviet Life's* reporting departed from Gorbachev's address, it did so not in purpose, but in content. Although these claims were false, they were made in an attempt to uphold the official Chernobyl narrative.

Another departure from the official narrative was *Soviet Life's* inclusion of misleading quotes from Western sources. The same article that blamed Chernobyl on "blind chance" cited the *New York Times* as reporting that Chernobyl had been equipped with all of the latest safety systems (*Soviet Life*, 1986f, p. 35). While the *Times* was referenced to add credibility to the claims, the article in *Soviet Life* neglected to mention that these safety systems had been disabled and overridden in order to complete the voltage regulator test.

In a similar manner, *Soviet Life* quoted an American source to claim that Chernobyl was equipped with an outer containment shell. Western media had been critical of Chernobyl not being equipped with such an outer containment structure – the large concrete shell typical of

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<sup>13</sup> Some local fishermen were on the water at the time of the explosion and received extremely high doses. Like the first responders, they were subsequently taken to Moscow to receive treatment for radiation sickness. Some survived while others did not (Chernousenko, 1991, p. 4; Medvedev, 1989, p. 86-87).

Western reactors. The magazine countered this, however, by quoting an American nuclear scientist, Dr. Edwin Zebroski, who

attested that the Chernobyl reactor had been inside a massive dome 200 feet long, 70 feet high and 70 feet wide. Zebroski had visited Soviet reactors and analyzed the design drawings. Assessing the sturdiness of the protective structure, he said that it had steel walls 1-2 feet thick, reinforced with concrete walls 6-8 feet thick. (*Soviet Life*, 1986f, p. 35)

Although it is unclear what containment Zebroski was describing, the sheer size of the Chernobyl plant makes it impossible for him to have been referring to an outer containment structure that pictures accompanying the article clearly show Chernobyl to have been lacking. While this would be immediately obvious to an expert, it would likely be lost on the average reader. It appears that *Soviet Life* intentionally misconstrued information in order to uphold the officially established narrative which maintained Chernobyl's safety.

Throughout both Gorbachev's address and *Soviet Life's* press coverage, Chernobyl, although tragic, was presented as a Soviet success story which justified current policy goals. Both the magazine and the address downplayed the accident's significance while attacking the Western media for its insensitive and anti-Soviet reporting. Most importantly, the issue was transmogrified from one of domestic nuclear power into one of nuclear disarmament.

Following the September and August issues of *Soviet Life*, Chernobyl coverage largely disappeared from the magazine's pages. The few times it appeared, it did so in association with the issue of nuclear disarmament. In the November issue, for instance, a reprinted Gorbachev speech claimed that both Chernobyl and NASA's Challenger accident illustrated the immense threat humans posed to themselves.

They were a brutal reminder that people are just beginning to master the fantastically potent forces they have themselves created, that they are only learning to make these forces serve progress. These events were a lesson in what would happen if nuclear weapons were used. (*Soviet Life*, 1986g, p. 1)

While limited, Chernobyl's continued existence in *Soviet Life* was, as in Gorbachev's initial television address, inexorably linked to the issue of nuclear armaments.

## Canonization of the Official Interpretation: Chernobyl One Year Later<sup>14</sup>

The May 1987 issue of *Soviet Life* revived Chernobyl coverage with a one-page special report. The special report consisted of a question and answer interview between correspondent Pavel Antonov and Soviet scientist Victor Sidorenko (*Soviet Life*, 1987, p. 7). Throughout the interview, the official line established during Gorbachev's television address the prior May was upheld with only one deviation. When questioned about the accident itself, Sidorenko replied that while it had been the result of many factors, chief amongst them was "the irresponsibility, negligence, incompetence and technological indiscipline of the operating staff", who had run "an experiment in criminal violation of procedural rules" (*Soviet Life*, 1987, p. 7). Although this pointed accusation deviated significantly from both *Soviet Life's* prior coverage and Gorbachev's televised address, it was no deviation from the official narrative – the narrative had evolved in the intervening months. The Politburo's government commission on Chernobyl had officially laid blame on the operators, and *Pravda* reported this commission's findings in July (*Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, 1986).<sup>15</sup> *Soviet Life* then proceeded to explain the nature of the experiment which, like the blame, was now included in the official interpretation.

While *Soviet Life's* coverage would indeed be representative of a monumental failure were it to be evaluated based on traditional Western interpretations of glasnost, when examined through the lens of *glasnost'* as Gorbachev had intended, the magazine's coverage is revealed to be a shining success. *Soviet Life* not only presented Chernobyl in agreement with the officially established interpretation, but consistent with the principles *glasnost'* established for reporting Soviet problems. The Soviet system was presented as triumphing over the disaster, while the Western media was portrayed as opportunistically misrepresenting the situation. Moreover, the one-year post Chernobyl interview again used the catastrophe to support policy – the continuation of the test moratorium and gradual nuclear disarmament.

### ***Soviet Life* not unique**

Although the rationale for the examination of *Soviet Life's* Chernobyl coverage has been articulated, it is important to note consistency with domestic media. Previous examination of Chernobyl coverage in the domestic press revealed reporting consistent with *Soviet Life* (Taylor, 2009). Young and Laudner's (1991) investigation of Chernobyl coverage in *Pravda*,

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<sup>14</sup> Referring to this solidification of the official interpretation as canonization is to borrow from Young and Launer (1991) who have argued that Soviet information dissemination through the domestic media, both prior to and after Chernobyl, followed a six stage process – the sixth and final stage being "the rhetorical reconstruction... and canonization of the official interpretation" (p. 105). The six stage analysis was not used elsewhere in this investigation, but like the domestic press they studied, Chernobyl coverage in *Soviet Life* is consistent with their model.

<sup>15</sup> Although at first glance it is curious that a change in the official narrative in July would not have been reflected in *Soviet Life's* August and September issues, this is consistent with *Soviet Life's* typical delay of about two months. Furthermore, the findings were published late in July – the 20<sup>th</sup>.

*Izvestia*, and *Pravda Ukrainy* revealed similar consistency. Like *Soviet Life*, the domestic press took tragedy and, in typical socialist realist fashion, transformed it into triumph. Western media was similarly brandished for poor reporting, and Soviet reporting hewed to the official narrative. The incident was transformed from domestic disaster to salient example of the need for international arms agreements. Although the test moratorium featured less prominently in the domestic press than it had in *Soviet Life*, the disaster was used to provide justification for other policy changes, particularly after the official inquiry established a guilty party whose example was to be avoided. Although the domestic press later questioned the disaster's handling, coverage remained consistent with the goals of *glasnost'* – both the regime and socialist values were supported without question. The period during which *glasnost'* operated exactly as Gorbachev intended would not last long, but continued throughout Chernobyl and its cleanup.

## **Continual Evolution: *Glasnost'* becomes Glasnost**

Despite the success of *glasnost'* when examined in relation to Chernobyl's reporting, Gorbachev's reforms did not proceed as intended. With time, and for a variety of reasons, Gorbachev's *glasnost'* evolved into glasnost as it has traditionally been understood in the West. During the late eighties, the press Gorbachev attempted to revivify rebuked his ideas and went beyond the limits of *glasnost'*. The complex and multifaceted reasons for this are well beyond the scope of this investigation. Nonetheless, to contextualize *glasnost'* at the time of Chernobyl and to vindicate the existing literature's misinterpretation, a brief outline of the evolution to glasnost is provided below.

In the Soviet Union, the Gorbachev leadership took a calculated risk. It believed that a liberalized press could be used to support its reform programme and to help revitalize socialism. At the same time, it believed that the process could be controlled and limited. In the final instance it lost its wager. Forces outside its control took over the liberalization process and pushed change in the Soviet policy and in the press beyond the boundaries which anyone had imagined. (Becker, 2002, p. 37)

While a few *glasnost'* successes followed Chernobyl, thereafter the press increasingly began to defy Gorbachev and move beyond the limitations his reforms had intended.<sup>16</sup> By the time the Soviet Union began its collapse, the press had questioned the nature of Gorbachev's reforms themselves and instead identified the Western media as its model (Dejevsky, 1989; Becker, 2002).

In addition to events within the media establishment, the Soviet public was not particularly receptive to *glasnost'* inspired media. Though *glasnost'* was intended to revivify the press,

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<sup>16</sup> Dejevsky (1989) claims not only that Chernobyl was a *glasnost* failure, but also that it was followed by a number of similar failures – reporting on plane crashes, a rail accident, and a high jacking; – given this paper's proposed reinterpretation, however, these too may be seen as *glasnost'* successes.

reader response to the 'new' media was less than enthusiastic. When asked about his reaction to *glasnost*, one Russian replied that he had originally been

blown away! It was as if the floodgates were thrown open, and at first we accepted, we believed everything that we heard. But it gradually became clear that much of what was being said was a bunch of nonsense... Back then it was looked upon as a breath of fresh air. People read everything and believed everything... It was as if *glasnost* were indeed for real. There was a particular naïveté during the first year or maybe two when I believed all of it, that is, all of the literature... now I trust only certain publications. (Raleigh, 2006, p. 150-51)

Although *glasnost* intended to mobilize the populace in support of the socialist cause, at least some Soviet citizens were less than impressed with its results.

Gorbachev's *glasnost* took on a life of its own and gradually evolved into *glasnost*. This transformation was significant not only in its challenge to Gorbachev's reform agenda, but as a threat to the stability of his leadership and to the unity of the Soviet state. It is important to resist the impulse to oversimplify the process and anachronistically evaluate Soviet events based on the resultant *glasnost*, rather than based on the *glasnost* that was envisaged. A recognition of the changing character of *glasnost*/*glasnost* will lead to better understanding of not only Chernobyl but also the entire Gorbachev era.

## Conclusions

The early morning explosions at Chernobyl on April 26<sup>th</sup> "reveal[ed] more about the Soviet Union than the hazards of nuclear power" (Luke, 1987, p. 353). As the *Kursk* explosion later tested Vladimir Putin, Chernobyl tested Gorbachev's leadership early in his rule. Like Putin, Gorbachev was faced with the decision of whether to break with tradition or retrench and employ an approach consistent with his predecessors.

Based on a reinterpretation of *glasnost*, this paper posits that Gorbachev's Chernobyl response constituted a significant break with the press policies of his immediate predecessors. The break, however, was not as revolutionary as some of the existing literature has suggested. This paper's definition of *glasnost* reveals the break to have been firmly rooted in Marxist-Leninist thought and consistent with Lenin's own press policies. Though a reformer, Gorbachev remained a Party member and lifelong Communist. Despite the fact that his rule ended with, and his reforms may have aided or caused, the collapse of the Soviet Union, Gorbachev was a devoted socialist and wholeheartedly believed in the Soviet system and state. His reforms were intended to strengthen, not hasten, the demise of the Soviet state.

Analysis of *Soviet Life* content illustrates how the magazine did loyally "hew to the government line" (*Russian Life*, 2009). Rather than interpreting the magazine's Chernobyl coverage as a

glasnost failure, the coverage should be seen as a *glasnost'* success. In *Soviet Life*, Chernobyl was presented entirely in agreement with official interpretation. The disaster was portrayed as a triumph of the Soviet people and system. Furthermore, the nuclear accident and its consequences supported Gorbachev's policy goal of nuclear détente and disarmament. Although *Soviet Life* provided an ideal sample for this investigation, its presentation of Chernobyl was not unique, but rather representative of that within the Soviet domestic press.

In light of the more nuanced reinterpretation of *glasnost'* proposed herein, this paper disputes the conclusions drawn by much of the existing literature. It is paramount that those evaluating the success or failure of a policy not let the lens of their own personal experience and cultural norms interfere with analysis of their subjects. Key to the *glasnost'* and Chernobyl reinterpretation proposed herein is the fundamental importance of understanding the subject of evaluation and using the appropriate metrics – in this case being careful to avoid measuring the Soviet press against the standards of a liberal democratic or Western press system. As Tatu (1991) has claimed, the Soviet media simply “cannot be compared to conditions in the West... where the most reactionary country is infinitely more “transparent” than the Soviet Union” (p. 86). Rather, like any subject, examinations of the Soviet Union must be examined within its own context and on its own terms.

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