
Thomas C. Wolfe, Governing Socialist Journalism

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REFERENCES

Thomas C. WOLFE, **Governing Socialist Journalism. The Press and the Socialist Person after Stalin**. Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 2005, 240 p.

- 1 What was the Soviet press? It is a question Moscow's foreign correspondents asked themselves and wrote about from time to time. They were, after all, dependent on the Soviet press to do their own jobs. Western journalists tried as hard as any Kremlinologist to read the inky tea leaves of *Pravda*, and they also mined Soviet papers for good stories, especially stories with a social angle. (If you ran across a column in an American or French paper about "hooligans" in Cheliabinsk in the 1950s, you could be almost entirely sure it came from a Soviet press account rather than shoe-leather reporting, and it would often say as much.) Yet even a seasoned hand like the *New York Times*'s Hedrick Smith was bemused when he visited *Pravda*; with none of the familiar hustle-bustle –most of the paper would have been typeset at least a day before– it hardly looked like a newsroom at all to Smith. Foreign correspondents often knew their Soviet colleagues as good gossips and better drinkers, but their status as journalists was murky at best. Certainly there was no question that they would ever "scoop" them on a story. Were Soviet journalists anything more, or less, than a mechanism for conveying official views–transmission belts–for the regime, in the words of Nikita Khrushchev?
- 2 In *Governing Soviet Journalism: The Press and the Socialist Person after Stalin*, Thomas Wolfe offers a new answer. Journalism in the Soviet Union was a "technology of government" (p. 73); journalists were "an important class of governors" and "technologists of the self" (p. 18). This is "governing," then, of the Foucauldian variety ("governmentality") –not institutional, per se, but discursive: governing as defining identities, setting frameworks for conduct and, ultimately, locating the activity of governing within the selves produced

in this process. For Wolfe, journalism in the USSR presents a variation on a modern(ity) theme: the Soviet press and the western press were “different strands of a common phenomenon,” (p.11) distinguished less by process than by organization. While governmentality in liberal, capitalist states has functioned as a web, connecting subject to subject, the Soviet variant was “radial, emanating outward from a center composed of those thinkers who understood what socialism was to be.” And at the center, Wolfe says, were journalists, who would “teach Soviet citizens how to act upon themselves.” Soviet government was, indeed, “government by journalism.” (p. 18).

- 3 Wolfe’s historical arc is as follows: In the post-Stalinist 1950s and 1960s, he says, Soviet journalists underwent an extraordinary renaissance in their commitment to serving as “technologists of the self” –that is, to the task of teaching people how to be “socialist persons.” Their method for doing this in their work was to achieve a deep focus on the everyday lives of individuals and, inevitably, to delve into social and moral problems. Wolfe argues that this journalistic stance –at once critical and didactic– was both encoded in the Soviet system as a “modern” phenomenon and specifically encouraged by its political leadership during the thaw. But because it also raised the specter of an internal opposition (embodied, says Wolfe, by Aleksei Adzhubei), it was ultimately rejected by a conservative political establishment. (In chapter three, Wolfe makes a case that anxiety over journalists’ growing power under Khrushchev was a major factor in his fall.) The Brezhnev era he sees as one of “journalism against socialism, socialism against journalism” –a once activist, civic-minded press muzzled, reduced to nipping at the heels of the increasingly decrepit bureaucracy. Meanwhile, the capitalist world was rapidly building a high-tech, globalized media environment that political elites in the USSR found hard to comprehend and harder still to control, as its imagery seeped across their borders. When one leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, finally grasped the necessity of reforming socialism and sought to reanimate the press’s “governing” role, he found that after so many years in a position of latent opposition, many journalists were now suspicious and antagonistic. Many were more interested in telling the truth about the past than in teaching socialist personhood in the present, and a good number also turned to exploring new kinds of personhood altogether –individualistic, hedonistic, even immoral selves by Soviet socialist standards, and also more in line with the liberal selves produced by governmentality in the capitalist West. This, argues Wolfe, made the journalism of glasnost both the last gasp of socialism and a bridge to post-Soviet cultural space and its promises of personal empowerment via consumption.
- 4 Although *Governing Soviet Journalism* makes a historical argument that spans several decades, the heart of this project is the 1960s moment. Trained as an anthropologist, Wolfe went to Moscow in the early 1990s to investigate the contemporary media scene and, as he explains, it was his interviews with journalists of the 1960s generation that prompted him to plumb the past. You cannot miss his admiration for the people he identifies as “journalists of the socialist person” –and even more, for their professional heroes, Abram Agranovskii and Aleskei Adzhubei. *Governing Soviet Journalism* is rich with stories about the behind-the-scenes work of the Soviet press and about its practitioners’ sensibilities and struggles. Wolfe had the kind of conversations and access to archival documents that his main predecessors, Mark Hopkins (*Mass Media in the Soviet Union*, 1970) and Thomas Remington (*The Truth of Authority*, 1988) did not, and he can bring us far closer to the ground. But as compelling and important as this information is, you also cannot avoid the sense that this is an author deep in an ethnographical bear hug with his subjects. Much of Wolfe’s story is very familiar because, in effect, it is *their* story: a true

socialism smothered in the cradle by a political establishment threatened by its power. This is the *shestidesiatniki* narrative, romantic and flattering to its authors. (And who better to narrate it than professional journalists?) But does it ring true?

- 5 Surely it could. Agreeing with your subjects is no *a priori* sin. Your subjects can be right – and in this case, there is some truth to the *shestidesiatniki* journalists’ interpretation of the 1960s moment. There is no question that there was a renaissance of socialist idealism in Soviet culture after Stalin’s death, and especially after Khrushchev’s denunciation of the Stalin cult in 1956. The “return to the person” was a leitmotif of the Thaw, much like “truth telling” and “sincerity.” But print journalists had no corner on this market; there were people working on these themes in cinema, poetry, theater, in all the arts, and as a rule, they were all working in the same pedagogical vein. Teaching people how to be “socialist persons” was the Soviet intelligentsia project writ large; they were all “technologist of the self.” Under Khrushchev, the regime famously wavered between encouraging these efforts and balking at the directions it feared they might take. Under Brezhnev, as Wolfe says, the regime moved more definitively to put a lid on the exploration of the past and to establish canonical definitions of Soviet identity and Soviet society in the present. But judging by the amount of ink spilled and meetings held, the regime was typically much more concerned about literary figures and filmmakers than about everyday newspaper journalists – unless, of course, they did something considered to have real cultural punch, like publish a story in a thick journal or a book. What made Adzhubei a lightning rod for criticism of Khrushchev was not his journalistic activities, but rather his maneuvering on the international stage outside the purview of official regime structures. While he may have used his credentials as a newspaperman to establish contacts, according to Sergei Khrushchev, he had also taken to calling himself an “unofficial diplomat” and had his eyes on the Foreign Ministry. Adzhubei’s approach – willful, egotistical, and risky in the eyes of the establishment – was also the essence of its critique of Khrushchev himself. Similarly, the “Press Group” Adzhubei headed was controversial because it was independent of the Central Committee department structure; “Press Group” was a modish name for a unit whose actual activities – information gathering, speech writing, and so on – were straight-up *apparat* functions.
- 6 Where does this leave the Soviet press? There were outstanding figures like Abram Agranovskii who pushed the boundaries of the permissible (and whose essayist work, which Wolfe describes and analyzes very effectively, might well be better seen as literature than journalism). There were also some newspapermen and women who buzzed the ears of the establishment as gadfly reporters. Wolfe’s sources seem to have indicated that this was something new and radical; in fact, pointing out shortcomings and airing complaints had always been one of the basic functions of all Soviet media, provided that they followed the golden rule: criticize, but never generalize. Yet protracted controversies involving the press stood out for a reason, just as there was a reason everyone Wolfe spoke with mentioned Agranovskii: they were unusual.
- 7 The governmental role of Soviet journalists was a good deal more literal than the picture conveyed by *Governing Soviet Journalism*. The masthead of *Pravda* (organ of the Central Committee of the Communist Party) and *Izvestiia* (organ of the USSR Council of Ministers) deserve some thought. At the upper levels in the central press and on a regional level, too, the staff of the Central Committee departments and the editorial ranks overlapped. People worked on both sides in rotation and were on the same

nomenklatura lists. All editors met regularly with their CC *kurator* to receive instructions on the overall line the paper should be taking, to vet specific topics, and to pick up copy they were required to publish. The overwhelming majority of rank-and-file journalists (close to 80% at the Journalist Union's founding congress in 1959) were party members or candidates, and that meant they were subject to party discipline in addition to ordinary employment regulations and censorship. And the majority of these people were rarely engaged in what we, and probably they, would call "journalism" at all; much of what they did was more akin to copy editing –rewriting articles from other papers and tweaking wire reports to fit their own, writing and editing reader letters and responses to them, and just plain copying. Soviet newspapers, like all Soviet mass media, were under tremendous pressure to churn out product and fulfill plans, and they did.

- 8 This does not mean that there was no room for other things to happen on the pages of a Soviet newspaper. Nor does it mean that the Soviet press as a cultural *space* could not take on all sorts of unexpected roles in people's everyday experience. (Funny things can happen to ideas as they roll along a transmission belt on their way to consumers...) But Wolfe's story is about journalists or, in his words, "how journalism existed in the Soviet Union as a cultural project." Wolfe certainly knows all about the mastheads, the *kuratory*, the mandatory copy; he knows, but like his interviewees, this is not the history that interests him. And maybe it was not that interesting. By and large, day-to-day, Soviet newspapers were not that interesting either, as any Soviet journalist would tell you. The problem is, this is the main way journalism existed in the Soviet Union as a cultural project; this was its governmentality, and there was not much room for any other. And this makes Soviet journalism very different than its contemporary counterpart in the capitalist West.
- 9 There is no question that newspapers have a framing function; they rule some things in and other things out; they set the parameters for conduct and promote models of self-fashioning and fulfillment. The best chapters in *Governing Soviet Journalism* are those that deal with journalism in transition from glasnost to post-Soviet framings. But the organization of Soviet-era media in what Wolfe describes as a "radial" manner was more than just a variation on a modern theme because of how severely it limited access to other frames. Even for journalists, the choice was narrow – and perhaps it is worth emphasizing, narrowed as a conscious matter of policy. Wolfe presents his *shestidesiatniki* (and they present themselves) as having novel ideas of what socialism and socialist persons should be. I have my doubts that their notions at the time were quite so divergent from official party norms; when, for example, Wolfe concludes in a fascinating discussion of a letter written by Aleksandr Chakovskii to Brezhnev criticizing Soviet media practices that the editor of *Literaturnaia gazeta* was "trying to imagine a new practice of governing, one that would enable the party to enjoy a non-Leninist kind of resurrection and reclaim those alienated citizens with timely information about the world," I question very strongly whether Chakovskii would have agreed (p. 135). And, in any event, even if some or even many journalists saw themselves as a kind of opposition to the party status quo, they *were* the party. There was no anti-socialist press in the USSR; there was an anti-capitalist one in the West. Moreover, even if we accept that the Soviet press had governmentality functions in the manner Wolfe suggests, it seems critical to remember that the government had other more physical and far ruder frames: borders to a state you could not leave without permission, police forces to call you in and remind you who was who and what was what. In a concluding section, Wolfe offers a narrative of the rise and fall of the Soviet Union in order to suggest, in his words, "how

much the terrain of foreign affairs has been influenced by the identification of socialism as a *problem* for democratic societies.” (p. 214) Wolfe’s *Governing Soviet Journalism* suggests how much of a problem socialism was for *socialist* societies –and not some abstract socialism, but the real existing kind as experienced by the people whose ideals he describes so well.