



Changing of the guard Mikhail Gorbachev (left) and Andrei Gromyko on Moscow's Red Square



# Ideas + Reviews

---

SECOND LOOK

---

## Gorky peek

*The Second Russian Revolution* gave viewers an unprecedented glimpse inside a rapidly liberalizing Soviet Union

BY ANN COOPER

In the spring of 1989, after decades of being kept out in the cold by Communist secrecy and propaganda, journalists in Moscow were given unprecedented access to a Kremlin building—the boxy, modernistic Palace of Congresses. Inside the palace, the Soviet Union was taking its first cautious steps toward democracy. An unlikely mix of Communist bosses, nationalist firebrands, teachers, and ordinary laborers, among others—all chosen in what were often described as the country's first "quasi-democratic elections"—had come together to serve in a new legislature, the Congress of People's Deputies.

Their deliberations were open to the Moscow press corps, and, in the frequent breaks during sessions of the new Congress, journalists could roam the palace's vast lobbies, where it was possible to corner Andrei Sakharov, listen to the pontifications of Boris Yeltsin, and even, on occasion, probe the thoughts of Mikhail Gorbachev or his fellow Politburo members Yegor Ligachev and Alexander Yakovlev, the political yin and yang of the Communist leadership.

What a feast for access-starved journalists, who, in the pre-Gorbachev era, could waste weeks or months seeking meetings with even the most low-level officials. I was National Public Radio's Moscow bureau chief at the time, and along with my colleagues, I enjoyed the improved access we had largely thanks to Gorbachev and his policy of glasnost, or transparency. Our editors hungered for details on everything—independence movements, agitators for multiparty politics and a market economy, profiles of those Politburo players who still resisted radical change. We filed constantly, working to bring sense to huge, historic events.

In London, a journalist named Brian Lapping watched all this unfold as he looked for his next video project. There was little that tied him to the Gorbachev story beyond the fact that Lapping's father was Russian (he had left the country as a child after the 1917 revolution). Lapping himself didn't speak Russian and hadn't reported on the Soviet Union.

What Lapping could boast on his resume, though, was an acclaimed Granada Television project called *End of Empire*—a 14-hour documentary made in 1985 (and broadcast on Britain's News Channel 4), in one of Lapping's earliest video partnerships with a young American producer named Norma Percy.

*End of Empire* chronicled the last days of British rule around the globe, through the remarkably candid reminiscences of both colonizers and the colonized. After *Empire*, Lapping founded his own video production company, whose proposals got serious attention in part because of *Empire*'s success.

When Lapping and Percy pitched *The Second Russian Revolution* to BBC2, they proposed applying the same techniques—long, detailed interviews with the top Soviet decision makers—to tell the story of key moments in the Gorbachev era. The *Russian Revolution* project would differ from *Empire* in some important ways. The British story was already history when that project began, but in the Soviet Union, they would be covering history-in-the-making, its final outcome uncertain. And to tell the intimate stories Lapping and Percy wanted would require getting interviews with leaders of what had been one of the most secretive societies of the 20th century. "I think I had no good reason for thinking that we could succeed," says Lapping. "I pretended to a degree of confidence that I didn't really have."

Like the rest of us reporting there at the time, Lapping and Percy benefited from glasnost. But the astonishing access they got and the insightful interviews they recorded for *The Second Russian Revolution* were more than just good timing. They were the fruits of intrepid journalism, the kind that Lapping and Percy have since applied to other great moments in recent history—the fall of Yugoslavia, the Watergate scandal, the collapse of peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians. Their documentaries, including *The Second Russian Revolution*, have won bushels of awards and stand as examples of the best of their genre.

The BBC aired *The Second Russian Revolution* in the summer of 1991, just before hardliners attempted to overthrow Gorbachev that August. The timing was extraordinary, the analysis prescient. Viewed today, it's a poignant record of an epic struggle over a central question that informed so many of those decisions: Who has the right to control news and information? In 1991, when *The Second Russian Revolution* ends, that struggle had been won largely by the champions of free speech. But, as we see now, in the speech-constricted era of Vladimir Putin, it was not a permanent victory.

### The technique

Whole books and journalism courses are devoted to the art of the interview,

While the interviewers' questions are rarely heard, the responses they elicit are often memorable in their candor, detail, and pathos.

journalism's master key to unlocking secrets and revealing personalities. "How not to" examples abound, perhaps most famously Barbara Walters's much-lam-pooned query to Katharine Hepburn in 1981, "What kind of a tree are you?" We all remember the question; the response was barely noted.

In the documentaries of Brian Lapping and Norma Percy, the interviewer's questions are rarely heard, but the responses are often memorable in their candor, their detail—and sometimes their pathos.

Here is a sample, from part three of *The Second Russian Revolution*, when Mikhail Poltoranin, an adviser to Boris Yeltsin, recalls a closed-door meeting of Moscow party officials in 1987. The party had gathered to formally accept the resignation of Yeltsin as the city's Communist boss, and many gleefully seized the opportunity to kick the (temporarily) disgraced Yeltsin while he was down.

Poltoranin:

**It was a horrific scene. It lasted over four hours. I was sitting across from Gorbachev. I was in the fourth row. I couldn't get any closer. I watched his face get redder and redder. His eyes were darting all round the hall.**

Finally, says Poltoranin:

**Then the lynching was over. The last speeches had been made, and the crowd was leaving. Many of them had the look of victory on their shining faces. Yeltsin was slumped over the table, his head in his hands. They were all walking out. Gorbachev looked back from the doorway and saw Yeltsin. He went back, took his arm, and helped him out of the hall.**

I asked Percy how the documentary team elicited these fly-on-the-wall accounts from men who worked in a system that for decades had treated vital public information as its private secrets.

Percy's formula: Learn all you can

in advance about the event you want to discuss. Skip generalities or anything too open-ended ("Who's the most interesting person you ever met?" is a Percy no-no). Focus on specific moments and the tiniest of details to tell the larger story. ("I was in the fourth row," Poltoranin begins, perhaps because he's just been asked exactly where he sat. But he quickly moves from seating arrangements to the Shakespearean tragedy that ends with Gorbachev supporting the battered Yeltsin's exit.)

Oren Jacoby, at the time a young filmmaker whose Russian studies at Brown University helped him get a gig working on the *Revolution* series, recalls Percy's suggestions for how to interview the Soviet officials: get them to provide physical details, like where they were sitting when the phone rang. The goal: to give viewers "the feeling that you were there while history was being made," says Jacoby.

There's almost no detail too small for the Lapping-Percy team. In an interview with Nikolai Ryzhkov, whom Gorbachev promoted early on to deal with the stagnant Soviet economy, Ryzhkov describes being in Gorbachev's office with masses of documents that revealed the country's true economic state:

**We spread them all over the floor. We took our jackets off and picked our way through the papers: "This one's interesting.... This is useful.... That one's no good!" We felt we were really doing things. You couldn't see the carpet for documents.**

It was the early, giddy days of Gorbachev's tenure, when the documents spread on the floor could become ammunition in a war to reform the decaying socialist system. After the documents session, we see Gorbachev lambasting party officials in Leningrad, revealing the dirty little secret about the centralized Soviet economy: It was collapsing.

"Your technology is hopeless,"

Gorbachev tells the stunned audience in Leningrad. "Productivity is low and the quality of goods unacceptable." There's a tongue-lashing for Soviet economists, too. "We've not been getting our sums right, comrades," he says. Information, in this case dismal economic figures, was the weapon Gorbachev needed to push for change.

### The Soviet journalists

In that early glasnost period, it was possible as a foreign correspondent to file stories from Moscow nearly every day about freshly revealed information: data on past political executions, new reports on economic decline, investigations of political corruption. Among our sources were reform-minded Soviet journalists, some of whom made a remarkable transition from propaganda to accountability journalism.

The shift began in 1986, after the explosion in the Chernobyl nuclear-power plant in the Soviet republic of Ukraine. For three days, a radioactive fire burned out of control, but, as *The Second Russian Revolution* reminds us, "not a single word about the accident appeared in any newspaper, nor on radio, nor on television."

Gorbachev was in power by then. So was the liberal Alexander Yakovlev, the Politburo member in charge of party propaganda, who explains the party leaders' silence for the BBC team.

**There was no ban [on reporting the accident] as such. But we didn't know what to say. We were afraid. Would we cause needless panic?**

It's possible to think, fleetingly, that the earnest, sympathetic Yakovlev has a point – until you remember the extremely dire consequences of that official silence. Invisible radiation spread out over the unsuspecting population of Ukraine, and was soon detected in Sweden.

That was three days after the explosion, but in the Soviet Union, media were still only reporting that "An accident has occurred at Chernobyl nuclear-power station. One of the atomic reactors has been damaged." The usual "measures" had been taken "to eliminate the consequences," victims were being aided, and a government commission was named to deal with the problem.

Vladimir Gubarev, science editor for *Pravda*, tells *The Second Russian Revolution* that newspapers like his were forbidden to publish anything beyond the official statement.

After a train trip to Ukraine to see the panic and death caused by Chernobyl, Gubarev spoke truth to power – not in *Pravda's* news columns, but quite literally to two of the country's most powerful men, who summoned him to a meeting upon his return to Moscow:

**It's twilight. The desk lamp is on. Gorbachev and Yakovlev are sitting there. I'm telling them about Chernobyl. I was furious. I'd seen so much incompetence. I'd seen so much stupidity. It was such a disgrace.**

The two leaders send Gubarev off to write a brief for them by the next morning:

**I think that report is the best thing I have written.**

Gubarev picks up the report and reads from it: "The main reason for the panic in Kiev is the lack of information. Nothing about what had happened, not even on radiation in the city, not one Ukrainian leader has appeared on TV to explain."

Gorbachev didn't acknowledge Gubarev's criticisms publicly, but he began to make moves that repudiated the old policies of secrecy and censorship. Vitaly Korotich, an editor in Ukraine, had publicly labeled the Chernobyl coverup "criminal." Instead of being punished, he was rewarded with a new job in Moscow editing the national weekly magazine *Ogonyok*. Under him, it became one of the liveliest Gorbachev-era publications.

*Ogonyok*, like all Soviet media, was still serving the cause, but now the cause was reform, warmly embraced by Korotich and other liberal editors. Far from relinquishing control, though, the Politburo continued to debate what could, and could not, be said in the media, the arts, and elsewhere.

And here is where glasnost proved particularly helpful to the producers of *The Second Russian Revolution*. It had emboldened lower-level reformers – including journalists like Korotich, Gubarev, and Ivan Laptev, editor of *Izvestia* – who were happy to recount what they knew of behind-the-scenes

struggles. Those accounts could then be leveraged with higher-ups – we know this version of events, now tell us yours. The technique worked, perhaps because of glasnost (even hardliners could get caught up in the new, freer way of speaking); or because of the BBC's international reputation; or because of what Brian Lapping describes as Norma Percy's "absolute, overpowering will" when it comes to getting an interview. As Robert Hanks put it in a 2005 *Independent* article: "A lot of her [Norma's] interviewees say no to the first request – because they have a country to run, or because the issues being discussed are too sensitive, or because they don't know Percy and haven't yet realized that it's going to be simpler just to do what she asks."

### Second look

I first watched *The Second Russian Revolution* on VHS tapes, sent by a friend in London who recorded them as they aired on BBC the summer of 1991. Then they sat untouched until last year, when, in a major media housecleaning, my husband and I culled our vast VHS holdings. *The Second Russian Revolution* was among the few I kept for conversion to DVD. I was curious to see if my memory had embellished its quality.

Far from it. I was struck immediately by the range of sources who spoke with BBC and the depth and thoughtfulness of each interview. The long sit-downs with Yakovlev, the liberal reformer, and his Politburo nemesis Ligachev, the embodiment of the old guard, provide the framework for many key moments. Ligachev stands proudly for the old ways – it's one thing to criticize Stalin, quite another to ridicule him, he says. Yakovlev describes deft maneuvers that sometimes, but not always, overcame hardliner opposition.

In the end, the two Politburo powerhouses represent the dueling world views that surrounded Gorbachev. Yakovlev describes the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe as an inevitability, not worth sending soldiers out of their barracks to fight over. For Ligachev, though, "It wasn't just the Berlin Wall collapsing, but our whole system."

Gorbachev himself did not speak with BBC for the original series; he did grant an interview after August

1991, when **BBC** returned to produce two more post-coup episodes on Gorbachev's revolution. The entire package was shown later that year by Discovery in the US, but with at least one crucial change: Instead of translating the hours of Russian into subtitles, as **BBC** did, Discovery used English voiceovers. What's lost in the Discovery version is important nuance; Ligachev's bombast is muted, Yeltsin's slyness is less obvious.

But it's impossible to mute another key element of *The Second Russian Revolution*: the high drama of so many debates at party and government meetings, which in the glasnost era were often televised live. Many of the most sensational moments came in May 1989, during that first session of the Congress of People's Deputies, the body created by Gorbachev when he got his Communist Party to approve competitive elections to a new legislature—a step designed to make the party more responsive to the people it had ruled by fiat for 70 years.

Though billed as a bold experiment in democracy, the Congress was still in the firm grip of the Communist Party, whose loyalists held most seats. Given the numbers, the new legislature could never be much more than a debating society.

But what debates! For two weeks, the Soviet Union was transfixed by daily dramas in the auditorium of that grand Palace of Congresses. Andrei Sakharov, the dissident conscience of the nation, addressed the entire country on day one—and later was denounced by numerous deputies for allegedly insulting the Soviet military. Newly elected deputies took the podium to decry historic and current human-rights abuses, to criticize Gorbachev and other party leaders, to demand radical changes—or to stop the reform process altogether.

Gorbachev had created the Congress, forcing it on party conservatives who resisted any democratic change. But by the end of its first session, it was clear that Gorbachev was no longer in charge. "He was like a coachman with a runaway cart," says the writer Ales Adamovich, a liberal member of the Congress, in his interview with *The Second Russian Revolution*. "It would career to the right, then to the left, then downhill. It could easily have crashed."

Another liberal, Anatoly Sobchak from Leningrad, says that during the Congress Gorbachev complained that while "radicals" from Moscow and Leningrad could easily promote bold ideas because they represented liberal, urban constituencies, "I must think of the whole of Russia and the other republics." Says Sobchak of Gorbachev's lament: "He was right."

I am struck by the sympathy of Sobchak's view, shared with **BBC** at a time when liberals were publicly excoriating Gorbachev, charging he had turned away from reform. By 1990, the liberals had a new patron saint: Boris Yeltsin, who was undergoing an extraordinary rehabilitation that further complicated Gorbachev's political life.

Just how pressured Gorbachev felt is made clear in an audio recording the **BBC** producers obtained. "Comrade Yeltsin jumps at every chance to denigrate me," Gorbachev complains, as he meets with politicians who in the spring of 1990 were about to decide whether to elevate Yeltsin to a new, powerful job as chairman of the Parliament of the Soviet Republic of Russia. A woman asks:

Mikhail Sergeyevich, what will you do if we elect Yeltsin as chairman of the Russian Federation?

Gorbachev responds:

I will give you a straight answer. At this critical time, if I were you, I would never risk it.

Like so much of what Gorbachev had to say by 1990, this advice was ignored.

### Reverse glasnost

At the end of *Revolution*, the narrator asks whether Gorbachev can "finish what he began, or has he become a hostage of his own revolution?" That question aired just a month and a half before Gorbachev was put under house arrest by hardliners hoping to halt the reforms. When the coup attempt against him collapsed that August, the Soviet Union still existed, but it was a vastly different place, more open than Gorbachev's glasnost had ever intended.

Soviet TV aired *The Second Russian Revolution* that September. And when Norma Percy returned to Moscow the same month, to work on a post-coup

addendum to the project, officials all but lined up to be interviewed—even, eventually, Gorbachev.

A couple of decades later, the Lapping-Percy team returned to take on a new subject: *Putin, Russia and the West*. Some of the same Russia experts involved with the Gorbachev documentary worked on the Putin one, too. As before, they sought high-level interviews and candid responses. As before, they put together a smart, highly polished production that won acclaim.

But much of the insight in *Putin* comes from interviews with western officials, and from those Russian officials selected by the Kremlin to speak (Putin did not grant an interview). Percy describes the making of the Putin documentary as far more difficult, with access far more restricted than in the Gorbachev era.

"Russia has become a place where people are scared" to talk, she says. Percy describes the atmosphere in Putin's Russia as "reverse glasnost."

Nevertheless, Putin is said to have liked the film, and **NTV**, owned by Gazprom, the Kremlin-controlled natural gas monopoly, aired it last year just before Putin won election to a third presidential term.

"An **NTV** chap told us: 'He thinks it shows him as a strong leader,'" wrote Percy and Paul Mitchell, series director of *Putin, Russia and the West*. "What liberals saw as a revelation of Putin's brutal suppression of dissent, his supporters saw as the strongman standing up to western enemies or greedy oligarchs."

But Percy notes that **NTV** was careful to run the broadcast before the election, which Putin won handily despite months of opposition protests and allegations of election fraud.

Gone were the days of Gorbachev, when—at least temporarily—public opinion mattered, elections were at least "quasi-democratic," and the press could hold officials accountable. "Vladimir Putin still calls the shots," wrote Percy and Mitchell as Russians went to the polls last March. "And if all goes to his plan, by today he will no longer have to worry about public opinion." **CJR**

ANN COOPER is a professor at Columbia Journalism School. She was NPR's Moscow bureau chief from 1987 to 1991.