

Perestroika and glasnost in the Soviet armed forces**

During the year of the INF Treaty, Mikhail Gorbachev's buzzwords *perestroika* (restructuring) and *glasnost* (public openness) have become part of our political vocabulary, but we are still puzzled and confused about their meaning. Does the Soviet leader harbor a plot to deceive the gullible Western public, or is he genuinely interested in liberalizing Soviet society? To explore possible answers to these questions, this essay will examine how Soviet generals have been implementing Gorbachev's policies in the armed forces.¹

Perestroika: changing the leadership and command concepts

Shortly after Mikhail Gorbachev came to power, he outlined the policy of *perestroika*, which stressed the role of the individual in revitalizing the sluggish Soviet economy and ossified party bureaucracy. To restore trust and confidence in the system and make Soviet citizens responsible for their work, Gorbachev claimed, corruption should be eradicated, the public should enjoy more freedom, and party leadership should respond to the public's needs. The leader made it clear that he expected restructuring to be implemented in all Soviet institutions, including the military.

The USSR's history of experiments with reform

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suggests that in the past civilian reform leaders relied on the military to support their programs. For their part, the military establishment usually approved economic changes when it could anticipate from them the long-term growth of its own capabilities. Conforming with this historical pattern, the current Soviet military has appreciated the urgency of Gorbachev's economic reforms for developing sophisticated military technologies and weapon systems², but has a hard time understanding the link between enhanced military power and a more open society. Initially, officers at different levels of command, from the defense minister down to platoon leaders, resisted the restructuring policy.³ They were naturally confused about ways of implementing *perestroika* in the armed forces: the very idea of granting more autonomy to subordinates ran counter to the core premise of the centralized Soviet military system, which is rooted in deference to authority and unquestioned obedience to the commander. As the new defense minister, Army general Dimitri Yazov, admitted:

*Generals, admirals and officers have no profound understanding of restructuring, they have not identified their role and place in it and have not come to understand that they have to start restructuring with themselves. They do not serve as models in enforcing discipline, upgrading professionalism, and ideological tempering of troops.*⁴

It was only after June 1987, when Gorbachev had reshuffled the Soviet high command following the Cessna aircraft incident in Red Square, that restructuring of the armed forces got off the ground. ▷

² For a perceptive analysis of Gorbachev's economic reforms and the military see: P. Petersen and N. Trullock — *Gorbachev and the Soviet force development process* (unpubl. manuscript). US Dept of Defense, Washington DC.

³ The military's initial response to restructuring is discussed in great detail in: D. Herspring — On *perestroika*: Gorbachev, Yazov and the military. *Problems of Communism* 36(1987)(7/8)99-107.

⁴ D. T. Yazov — Restructuring in the work of the military cadres. *Voyenno-Istoricheski Zhurnal* (1987)(7)3-12.

Restructuring the Soviet army meant some decentralization of decision making to lower levels, reduction of red tape, and a freer exchange of views, especially regarding shortcomings in training and cadre policies. Initiative and individual suggestions are now encouraged, some criticism of command decisions is permitted, and closer interpersonal relations between leaders and those being led are sought.⁵ Not unlike Western military experts, under *perestroika* reform-minded Soviet commanders stress realistic and flexible training, 'accessible leadership', and self-motivated commitment in place of subordination and blind obedience.⁶ Traditionally, Soviets regarded the highly centralized senior command authorities which implemented elaborate operational plans as the linchpin of total combat power. Today, Soviet military reformers emphasize smaller combat units, junior leaders and individual combatants as critical elements of success on the ever-changing modern battlefield, which is characterized by an accelerated tempo of operations, unforeseen changes in situation, and massive disruptions in command and control systems. This shift in Soviet thinking has been reflected in the gradual transition to the regimental/brigade structure as the building block of the Warsaw Pact armies.⁷

There is nothing new or surprising about Soviet attention to flexibility and soldiers' initiative; these discussions have continued in the military press for years. What seems new today is that the debate has evolved into an authoritative, doctrinal reappraisal of the rigid, centralized military system, which is now seen as a potential liability in modern combat. The Soviets have come to recognize the positive relationship between a more accommodating military system in peacetime and a soldier's motivation and initiative on the battlefield during war. In reexamining some of their leadership and training concepts, the Soviets have responded to Western technological as well as doctrinal developments (e.g. high-precision weapons, assault

breaker techniques, AirLand Battle doctrine, and Follow-on forces attack), which will fundamentally change the nature of battlegrounds of the future. As First deputy minister of defense, Army general P. Lushev, has noted:

*The main component [in combat readiness] is the human element (. . .) Achieving high training standards is a difficult mission (. . .) This is due to changes in military affairs, the conduct of operations under conditions of use by the enemy of high-precision weapons, when defenses against fire, strike and reconnaissance complexes will have to be set up.*⁸

Gorbachev's new military establishment favors *perestroika* precisely because it recognizes the potential benefit of making the Soviet soldier more effective on the technologically complex modern battlefield.

Although the Soviet high command may find *perestroika* compatible with the army's military-technological requirements, Gorbachev's policy has not been easily accepted by military bureaucrats with vested interests in the old system. As with civilian bureaucracies, groups of senior officers who owe their careers to the traditional ways obviously feel threatened by a more open military where their performance is subject to greater scrutiny. The right to criticize command decisions granted to the lower ranks has provoked angry complaints from seasoned officers that *perestroika* is eroding the sacred unity of command.⁹ To mitigate the conflict between competing interests within the military, general Yazov has reassured officers that the marxist dialectical approach can reconcile subordinates' criticism with the unity of command. Holding out a carrot to opponents of military *perestroika*, Yazov has promised his military improved housing and consumer services as part of the military restructuring package.¹⁰ Again, as in the civilian sector, losers in the military restructuring are the older, less technically competent career officers and NCO's, who are entrenched in the military bureaucracy and are used to manipulating it for personal gain without having their performance subjected to scrutiny. On the other hand, restructuring is more fully supported by the younger, motivated, and technically versatile

⁵ *Krasnaya Zvezda* (1987)(19 Aug); (1988)(23 Jan).

⁶ For a perceptive discussion of Western concepts of leadership on the modern battlefield see: R. Gal — *Military leadership for the 1990s: commitment-derived leadership* (paper 1987 Leadership conference, US Naval Academy, Annapolis Md).

⁷ Gorbachev and the struggle for the future (memorandum for the Assistant deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and plans for force development). Soviet armed studies office, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas (1987)10.

⁸ P. Lushev — High military readiness of the Soviet armed forces the most important factor in defending socialism. *Voenno-Istoricheski Zhurnal* (1987)(6)8.

⁹ *Krasnaya Zvezda* (1987)(9 June).

¹⁰ *Krasnaya Zvezda* (1987)(18 July).

combat arms officers, many of whom have grown to maturity in the fighting army in Afghanistan.

Military glasnost

In Russian history, *glasnost* in the military, as in civilian society, was designed to occasion an exchange of opinions and ideas which was in the best interests of the leadership. In mid-19th-century Russia under Nicholas I, the champions of *glasnost* promoted critical debates to correct the failures of the bureaucracy and thwart corruption, which thrived among Russian officers of the time. The grand duke Konstantin Nikolaevich, who sponsored such discussions in the naval establishment, believed that an artificially induced debate (*iskusstvennaia glasnost*) would promote a constructive ferment of opinion about new naval regulations.¹¹ These debates — held within limits strictly defined by the central government — contributed to Russian naval professionalism and made the military system of the time more effective.

Not unlike its predecessor in Imperial Russia, *glasnost* in the military today stands for discussions critical of bureaucratic mismanagement and corruption. During the *glasnost* campaign in the military and civilian press, senior military officers and the ministry of defense as an institution have been criticized for inefficiency and misappropriation of funds.¹² The Soviet public has learned, for instance, that its highly revered two-star generals have built private saunas and spas at the army's expense, and have made profits on the side by sending cadets to work on local farms. By castigating these activities, Soviet military reformers believe, public openness will assist in correcting some of the army's present discipline and morale problems.

Glasnost is also used to promote discussions in the military on topics ranging from awards and punishments to shortcomings in training and exercises. Commanders are now requested to solicit recommendations from junior personnel on issues related to education and training.¹³ According to the

Chief of the political administration of the Air Force, colonel general L. Batekhin, public openness should be used to discuss possible improvements in training standards, specifically, to introduce higher standards of combat readiness.¹⁴ A new deemphasis of indoctrination (*vospitanie*) in favor of training (*obuchenie*) means that the Soviet military can tailor *glasnost* to promote *perestroika*, that is, improve training methodologies and the quality of Soviet military manpower on an individual basis, especially within its junior command component.

Another aspect of *glasnost* encourages grass-roots initiative in suggesting improvements in military hardware and training procedures; changes intended to make the military system more cost-effective. For instance, within the framework of *glasnost* Soviet logistics experts are encouraged to improve the efficiency of resource allocation and cargo transportation, and to promote more extensive incorporation of computer technology.¹⁵ Admiral A. Sorokin, the First deputy chief of the Main political administration, also recognizes the role of public debate in facilitating the decision-making process, namely, making the military bureaucracy more responsive to suggestions from the lower ranks.¹⁶ He has emphasized the need to keep the soldier informed about command decision making; a prerequisite for developing lower-rank initiative in peace and wartime.

The level of *glasnost* enjoyed today by a professional soldier in the Soviet Army depends on rank and party membership. The Chief of the political administration of the Ural military district has warned military personnel that unrestricted criticism of commanders and their decisions will not be tolerated, but party members among soldiers and junior officers can use authorized party channels to criticize their superiors.¹⁷ The new policy has produced tension, however, in units where low-ranking personnel petition senior authorities to investigate misconduct of their commanders. Military personnel reportedly suffer reprisals for publicizing grievances or voicing criticisms. For in-

¹¹ J. and M. Kipp — The grand duke Konstantin Nikolaevich: the making of a tsarist reformer, 1827-53. *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 34(1986)3-18.

¹² To think and work in new ways. *Krasnaya Zvezda* (1986)(22 March); Stains on the uniform. *Pravda* (1987)(21 March).

¹³ M. Popkov — Party democracy and partly discipline. *Kommunist Vooruzhennykh Sil* (1986)(16)18-26.

¹⁴ L. Batekhin — The time for new approaches. *Kommunist Vooruzhennykh Sil* (1986)(21)17-24.

¹⁵ *Tyl i Snabzhenie* (1986)(11)17-21.

¹⁶ A. Sorokin — A human element to the center of party work. *Kommunist Vooruzhennykh Sil* (1986)(22)9-18.

¹⁷ O. Zinchenko — Criticism and self-criticism. *Kommunist Vooruzhennykh Sil* (1986)(18)52-59.

stance, a navy captain stationed at the Leningrad Naval base was reprimanded for informing senior military authorities that his commander employed enlisted men in his illegally run private souvenir workshop on post, as well as in menial jobs in his home.¹⁸ Because of this fear of reprisal, the majority of enlisted men and NCOs do not engage in critical discussions. Military writers report that during public meetings military men are reluctant to criticize the army's political departments or their representatives.¹⁹ As general Lushev admitted: 'since criticism is not respected in all military units, criticism from below is expressed in the form of timid suggestions, with caution'.²⁰ This suggests that the Soviet armed forces have a long way to go before a degree of openness is attained that will translate into personal motivation and initiative in combat.

Glasnost in the military press

The Soviet military press, which is clearly more open today than it has been since the 1920s (at least on some subjects), challenges the stereotyped image of the Soviet soldier as a Communist Superman. It discusses the plethora of social problems which the Soviet army shares with many other modern militaries: alcoholism and drug abuse, nationality conflicts, draft-dodging, violence between first- and second-year draftees, AWOLs, corruption among senior officers, and illegal arms trading in units stationed in central Asia.

Some truthful reports about the war in Afghanistan and candid discussions by unofficial veterans organizations concerning their demands for more benefits and public recognition have found their way into the military press. The media have acknowledged reluctance among conscripts to risk their lives in combat, and disclosed methods used by parents to keep their children from being drafted.²¹ Military *glasnost* has, however, not allowed an open policy debate to develop over the costs and benefits of the Soviet invasion.

¹⁸ A deficiency of glasnost. *Krasnaya Zvezda* (1987)(17 March).

¹⁹ *Krasnaya Zvezda* (1988)(14 Jan).

²⁰ P. Lushev — High responsibility of the cadres. *Kommunist Vooruzhennykh Sil* (1987)(5)17.

²¹ Man's job. *Pravda* (1987)(18 May).

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Another aspect of *glasnost* in the military press has been the new candor in assessing Soviet military performance during World War II. Though criticism of selected aspects of Soviet operations (e.g. organization of the logistic and medical services during the initial period of war) appeared in the military press during the late 1970s to early 1980s, recent discussions have scrutinized Soviet military failures during all phases of the war. For instance, a Soviet military historical journal has provided an in-depth analysis of Soviet failures during offensive operations in 1944. Since the Soviets view military history as a model for refining their operating concepts for future war, their military theory is likely to benefit from this manifestation of *glasnost*. At the same time, the military press has continued to suppress specific information about the country's military and technological capabilities, force development, strategies, and operational planning for future war. The quality of statistical reporting in this area has not improved: the figures related to the defense budget, allocations for defense programs, and arms sales to Third World countries remain secret.

Compared to the relatively open current discussions of touchy political subjects in the civilian media, reporting of political issues in the military press has not changed markedly. The military press still reports only haphazardly on Gorbachev's economic reforms and foreign policy initiatives (though, it must be noted, political reportage is not the purpose of the military press). Mikhail Gorbachev's speech before the January 1987 CPSU Central committee plenum, which called for broad reforms and attacked opposition to his program, appeared in an abridged, highly sanitized version. In the military press, criticism of Stalin as a military commander and of his use of terror against the officer corps has been limited to an academic journal for senior officers. The civilian press, on the other hand, has been carrying on an unprecedented de-Stalinization campaign which blames Stalin's dictatorship for current Soviet economic and political failures. ▷

The military establishment finds the application of Gorbachev's *glasnost* policy in civilian society disquieting. The military press now regularly takes civilian journals to task for misconstruing Soviet World War II failures overstating the extent of morale and cohesion problems in today's army, and discrediting the military profession and military officers in the eyes of the public. The political leadership, infuriated by the military's incompetent handling of the Cessna incident, has set the tone for critical attacks on the military in the press. In June 1987 Mikhail Gorbachev accused his generals of a lack of professionalism and of having compromised Russia's international prestige as a military power.²² At that time, Boris Yeltsin, the former First Secretary of the Moscow party organization, scolded the command of the Moscow Military district for insubordination to the political leadership. Today the military, perhaps even more often than the party *apparatchiks* or the KGB operatives, draws fire in the civilian media. Naturally, the military establishment, which in the past had enjoyed unquestioned prestige in Soviet society, views *glasnost* as a detriment to its public image. As a military writer bitterly complained: 'Criticisms of the army more and more often spill into the press. Following one after another, these statements become a factor which creates around the army an unhealthy feeling of animosity'.²³ But the military establishment's attitude is probably ambivalent, since *glasnost*, as we have seen, does contribute to both the long- and short-range enhancement of military effectiveness.

The military recently blamed *glasnost* for the army's continuing discipline problems and for the growth of pacifism among this year's conscripts.²⁴ The Soviet military naturally also fears that Gorbachev's *glasnost* will soften traditionally stringent Soviet assumptions about the endemic conflict between the socialist and capitalist systems. General D. Volkogonov, Deputy chief of the Main political administration and a prominent military expert on

psychological warfare, continues to warn military personnel that the regime's traditional view of the West's military threat remains valid.

*There is no and will be no parity with our class enemy as far as the human factor is concerned. As always before, the marxists do not condemn war in general. This would amount to (...) pacifism. Our support will always be with those nations who conduct a just struggle for social and national liberation, against imperialist domination and aggression.*²⁵

This statement portrays genuine concern by the Soviet military about the ramifications of Gorbachev's *glasnost* policy for the fighting spirit of the army.

As we can see, the Soviet military has mixed feelings about *perestroika* and *glasnost*. On one hand, it hopes to benefit from Gorbachev's reforms by making the tightly controlled military system more responsive to Western technological and doctrinal challenges. On the other hand, these new policies bring into question the legitimacy of the military institution in Soviet society and create tensions between civilian and military elites. *Glasnost* jeopardizes the vested interests of many senior officers and generates apprehensions about the disruptive effects a more open society may have on the army's morale and political reliability.

On balance, Western defense planners should be aware that the ultimate goal of *perestroika* and *glasnost* for the Soviet high command is to create a less rigid military system, emphasizing flexible training patterns and autonomy, initiative, and improvisation for military personnel. In the long term, these changes, if successful, may make the Soviet soldier a more formidable opponent. Yet, because centralized control, rigidity, and inertia are entrenched in the Soviet military system and military thinking, it will be a long time before restructuring can really produce substantial change in the Soviet army. In the meantime, while Gorbachev remains in power, *glasnost* and *perestroika* will continue to drive wedges between military and civilian authorities, and between groups within the military.

²² *Pravda* (1987)(26 June).

²³ *Krasnaya Zvezda* (1987)(12 Dec).

²⁴ *Sotsialisticheskaya Industriya* (1987)(5 Dec).

²⁵ D. Volkogonov — The human factor. *Kommunist Vooruzhennykh Sil* (1987)(2)14-15.

