

“All the News That’s Fit to Print”?

ONE OF THE OBSERVATIONS which has become almost commonplace in the reports of foreigners who have traveled in the Soviet Union is that after 42 years of massive propaganda indoctrination large numbers of Soviet citizens still appear to have remained immune to its effects. The Soviet press has confirmed this on innumerable occasions by railing at public apathy and complaining of the failure of domestic propaganda to reach wider segments of the population.

In a determined effort to make Soviet propaganda and agitation more effective, the Khrushchev regime has sought, almost from the start, to break away from the hidebound patterns of presentation established by a quarter-century of Stalinism. This has been particularly true in the field of the press, which has been encouraged to experiment with the techniques of popular journalism.

Khrushchev personally initiated the change in December 1953 when, as the new First Secretary of the Communist Party, he addressed a conference of the country’s leading newspaper editors and urged the need for livelier journalism. His 35 year-old son-in-law, Alexei Adzhubei, first as editor of the Young Communist League newspaper *Komsomolskaia Pravda*, and since last May as editor of the government organ *Izvestia*, has led the new trend toward a sprightlier press.

The trend was slow to gain momentum in the face of deeply ingrained inhibitions and controls which for a long time continued to impose strict conformity, even while the journalists were being encouraged to try fresh modes of expression. For several years the trend toward popular journalism was confined to a handful of newspapers, and even there it suffered a setback with the return to closer regimentation after the Hungarian uprising of October 1956. The signal for renewed conformity was given by Khrushchev’s reprimands to writers who had ventured to present critical views of Soviet society. “The press cannot be placed in unreliable hands,” he told the writers in 1957—and his warning did not go unheeded.

Within the past year, however, the tendency toward popular journalism has spread rapidly. It has taken the form of breezy make-up, briefer writing, greater attention to news, a rare indulgence in apolitical stories (such as the reports of the sighting of the abominable snowman in the Pamirs), the use of headlines and photos designed to catch the eye, and concern with topics of everyday living. Some newspapers have reduced the amount of

space given to the less important official communiques.

A factor which undoubtedly spurred these recent changes in Soviet journalistic style was the fear repeatedly voiced by ideologists of the regime that Soviet minds might be influenced by greater contact with the foreign world under the policies of peaceful coexistence and freer cultural interchange. “There must be no ideological disarmament” has become a familiar slogan. But the problem is how to hold the Soviet reader’s interest in competition with the attraction of foreign ideas.

The changes in the press have been confined almost entirely to form and manner of presentation. Nevertheless, there is the danger that the granting of a measure of freedom in regard to style may, as in literature, encourage “deviations” in content. A strictly regimented press is easier to control than newspapers encouraged to find individualistic ways of expression. Probably for this reason, old-line editors and propaganda officials, still entrenched in positions of power, have shown distrust of the new trend in journalism and have voiced occasional criticisms and warnings against “sensationalism.”

Effective popular journalism presents an additional problem: It requires skill of a high order. Most of the older Soviet journalists and all the officials controlling the press have come directly from the ranks of the party, and their training in the journalism departments of party schools placed less emphasis on the development of working skills than on party indoctrination and ideology. Even the new crop of young journalists—graduates of the university schools of journalism established in the past decade—suffers from inadequate professional preparation as a consequence of overemphasis on ideological courses in the curricula of these institutions.

IT WAS AGAINST THIS background that the First Congress of Soviet Journalists took place in Moscow November 12-14, 1959. The congress formally brought into being the new Union of Soviet Journalists, the establishment of which after four years of organizational work endows Soviet newspapermen with professional status. The Union (distinct from the cultural workers’ trade union, to which newspapermen belong) is comparable to the other professional associations of writers, musicians and other high-prestige groups among the Soviet intelligentsia. It includes representatives of radio and television.

The congress divided its emphasis between craftsmanship—described by *Izvestia* as “the word probably heard most often from the congress platform”—and reassurances of the Soviet journalist’s complete subservience to the regime. But there was no question as to which theme predominated. It was succinctly summed up in *Pravda*’s comment, “We see the journalist as primarily a political worker.”

M. A. Suslov, Presidium member and Central Committee Secretary long identified with Stalinist controls in ideological fields, struck the keynote of the congress in a message of greetings from the party Central Committee stressing “intolerance of ideological waverings and revisionism” and “an uncompromising attitude toward bourgeois ideology.” These phrases not only were incorporated in the formal statutes of the Union, but were repeated in almost all the congress speeches, in the press comment on the proceedings, and—coupled with a profuse pledge of the journalists’ loyalty—in a message of reply from the congress to the Central Committee.

THE PARTY’S control of the press was fully reflected in the composition of both the new Union and the congress. Pavel A. Satyukov, editor of the party organ *Pravda*, delivered the main report to the congress and was chosen chairman of the board of the Union. He announced that, of 60,000 Soviet journalists, 23,000 (described as “professionally the most active”) had been enrolled in the Union. Of these, 77 percent are party members. No less than 96 percent of the 751 congress delegates were party members. “In effect, our congress is a congress of party journalists,” declared M. D. Ovsyannikova, chairman of the credentials committee. “The tasks of the Union,” said Satyukov, “are determined by the decisions and directives of our party.”

In a speech at a Kremlin reception for the delegates, Premier Khrushchev indicated the role of Soviet journalists by describing them as the party’s “right-hand assistants” (*podruchniki*—a word suggestive of “handmaidens”) “because they are always at hand.” He went on to complain of the boring nature of many Soviet newspapers.

Neither Khrushchev nor any of the congress speakers, of course, related monotony and dullness in Soviet journalism to the regime’s requirement of ideological conformity. But even so, the dilemma of a press now expected to be sparkling and original without deviating from approved ideological formulas underlay many of the statements made during the congress. Speaking of dull headlines, Adzhubei remarked: “Of course, the easiest thing is to leave them just the way certain organizations hand them to us.” In an article on the congress, writer Sergei Mikhalkov asked: “Why shouldn’t we write for the public demand? Why should our newspapers be indigestible? Why have some newspapermen double-checked and ironed

out articles until they turn into a string of truly rigid formulations?” Mikhalkov discreetly did not answer the questions he raised, but contented himself with the comment that the situation is beginning to change.

The same dilemma was also implicit in a comment by Boris Polevoi, a special correspondent of *Pravda*, who wrote: “An orchestra cannot perform a musical work if the only instruments heard are, say, the violins and the drums. It is the same with a newspaper.” Even L. F. Ilyichev, head of the Union Republics division of Agitprop (the party’s Agitation and Propaganda Department, which controls the press), asked: “Why has our press not yet printed thoughtful, good studies of the cultural development of the workers at this or that factory, their state of mind, the growth of labor productivity or the problems of mutual relations within the collective of workers? Why do bourgeois sociologists and philosophers concern themselves with these questions, while our experienced journalists avoid them? Probably because we have not given [our journalists] the taste for these questions. But the time is coming when it will be necessary to take them up.”

Polevoi, Mikhalkov and other advocates of brighter journalism particularly emphasized the need for more

The Winged Burden

KHRUSHCHEV: *Dear Comrade journalists! We call writers the party’s helpers. Please do not take offense if I say that you journalists are not faithful helpers but literally right-hand assistants to our party, active fighters for its great cause.* (Stormy applause.) *Why assistants? Because you are really always at hand to assist the party. As soon as any decision has been explained and carried out, we turn to you; and you, as the most faithful driving belt, take the party’s decision and carry it into the very midst of our people.* (Prolonged applause.)

The strength of our party lies in its inseparable bonds with the masses. The strength of our press, the source of its great influence, lies in the substance of what it carries to the masses. This substance is the Leninist policy of our party, the Leninist ideas on the building of socialism and communism. It is easy to carry such a burden; it does not weigh anything. (Stormy applause.)

V. A. KARPINSKY: *We carry this burden with enthusiasm.*

N. S. KHRUSHCHEV: *Yes, we all carry this burden with enthusiasm. This burden is not too heavy; one does not feel such a burden; it gives us wings, it calls us and leads us forward.* (Stormy applause.)

—From Khrushchev’s speech at a Kremlin reception for Soviet journalists on Nov. 14, 1959: *Pravda*, Nov. 18, 1959.

news from abroad. "Interest in foreign news is so great that you can no longer feed the reader Tass sea-biscuits," commented Polevoi (obviously referring to the dull nature of the Tass agency's dispatches from overseas, on which most Soviet newspapers rely as their only source of foreign news).

While going along with the pressure for greater leeway of expression, members of the Old Guard warned against the dangers which might result. Newspaper satirists, noted Satyukov, "hold a very sharp weapon in their hands, and they are obliged to use it very carefully in order, as Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev put it colorfully, not to turn their fire on their own forces." In a long speech which foreshadowed the January 1960 decree intensifying party propaganda, Ilyichev implied that the newspapers' new preoccupation with topics of everyday living and morality—which provide some of the most interesting material in the more popular papers—had resulted in neglect of propaganda writings on Marxist-Leninist theory, and he demanded that the authority of the newspapers' Marxist-Leninist propaganda departments be restored. Despite his admission that writing on theory had been dull and lifeless, the only formula Ilyichev had to offer to solve the conflict between dullness and the need for holding the attention of the public was the same as set forth in the propaganda decree two months later: make the propaganda livelier. Neither his speech at the congress nor the decree explained how this was to be done within the confines of a narrow set of uniform ideas. Newspapermen and propagandists alike were advised to take a lesson from Khrushchev's vigorous style, but the fact that Khrushchev can indulge in bold turns of speech without fear of penalty for "deviationism" was not pointed out.

IN ALL THIS, what of the reader? Shortly before the congress a Central Committee investigation of newspaper circulation disclosed that the reader has become increasingly selective and critical as the choice offered him has expanded. The newsprint allocations to Soviet papers

are determined arbitrarily on the basis of the party's judgment of the needs of each paper and its political importance. In the past, when the demand for newspapers greatly exceeded the supply because of paper shortages, there was no need to worry about returns from the newsstands. In recent years, however, the situation has changed greatly: while the shortage of newsprint, and hence of newspapers, has been alleviated, the newspapers have raised their prices slightly in line with the general commercial principle of profit-making. The consequence has been that readers have become more fastidious in their selection of reading matter. The Central Committee survey brought to light the fact that the value of unsold papers in 1958 came to 1,500,000 rubles. Readers are no longer buying dailies which appear eight hours late—as did the Kiev *Pravda Ukrainy* on 15 days in the first quarter of 1959—and they are turning down the duller and more monotonous papers. This was the cloud on the horizon, no bigger than a man's hand, which cast a shadow over the journalists' congress. Despite rapid growth, the Soviet press ranks far below that of many other countries, including the Scandinavian countries, Iceland, Britain, France, and the United States, in number of copies sold per capita. It can no longer count on shortage of supply to guarantee continued growth. For the first time, the newspapers (rather than the distributors) have been made to bear the cost of unsold copies. In short, the Soviet press, even though a monopoly, confronts a test of popular interest. To meet the test, Soviet journalism is taking on new vigor of tone and style—and along with this, the ticklish problems of confining the changes to externals.

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IN FORTHCOMING ISSUES

The Peasants, the Party and the System, *by Arcadius Kaban*
Soviet Nationality Policy in Perspective, *by Alex Inkeles*
Communist Antisemitism, *by Erich Goldhagen*
Strains in the Sino-Soviet Alliance, *by Donald S. Zagoria*
"Right Opportunism" in China, *by Roderick MacFarquhar*
What Happened to "Communist Fronts"? *by Robert Bass*

Also reviews by: Lord Michael Lindsay, E. Stuart Kirby,
Stephen Spender, Cyril Black, Myron Weiner, Gene D.
Overstreet, Paul Willen, Michel Collinet, William C.
Gaussmann.

NOTE: *The symposium presented in the last (January-February) issue under the title, "Toward a 'Communist Welfare State'?" has evoked a lively response from our readers. A number of letters have already been received—some critical, some complimentary, and some offering further information bearing on the topic of the symposium. We hope that more of our readers will be prompted to send comments. All correspondence relating to the symposium, together with a reply by Mr. Nove to criticisms of his lead article, will appear in the next issue of this journal.*

—The Editors