

# Kremlin differs defining 'glasnost'

**A**T FIRST sight the arrest of an American journalist appears contrary to Mikhail Gorbachev's efforts over the past 18 months to improve the Soviet Union's image in the world and to cultivate the Western media.

The arrest of Mr Daniloff as a spy after a week in which Soviet scientists in Vienna had revealed more about the Chernobyl nuclear power accident than anybody had expected also demonstrates the contradictory elements in the Soviet attitude towards the outside world. This does not mean that the new openness is insincere but that some, if not all, in the Kremlin feel it necessary periodically to demonstrate their toughness.

In the year after Mr Gorbachev was elected, many diplomats in Moscow believed the new openness — *glasnost* in Russian — at home and abroad would diminish as the new leadership established itself. In fact, the reverse has happened and the handling of Chernobyl was the crucial test.

For a week after the world's worst nuclear accident on April 26, Moscow's behaviour was a caricature of the Soviet obsession with secrecy.

Roy Medvedev, the Soviet historian, has said that at a politburo meeting two days after the disaster, Mr Gorbachev himself argued that government should reveal what had happened but was overruled by his colleagues. Only as the extent of the disaster, and the impossibility of hushing it up, became evident was Mr Gorbachev able to get his views accepted. Extensive reports began to appear in the press and briefings were arranged for foreign journalists.

Since then Soviet newspaper editors seem to have become confident that openness is here to stay. Mr Gorbachev has already changed the rules of the Soviet political system by making direct appeals to Soviet public opinion in a way which had not happened since the 1920s. Without this change in Soviet politics it would be impossible for Mr Gorbachev to appeal to international public opinion as he has done since he took over the reins.

This is all very different from the early 1970s when Mr Brezhnev and Mr Gromyko preferred to handle detente through secret negotiations with President Nixon and Henry Kissinger. This 18th century style diplomacy was clearly vulnerable to shifts in Western public opinion which Moscow made little attempt to influence at any level.

It is this aspect of Soviet foreign policy which Mr Gorbachev and the men around him have changed. Three changes are notable:

- Mr Gorbachev looks good on television. He is the first Soviet leader to do so (Mr Brezhnev is not a hard act to follow) and this is largely responsible for the better Soviet public image in Western Europe and beyond.

*The arrest of Nicholas Daniloff did little to enhance Moscow's new image of openness since the rise of Mikhail Gorbachev. So just how deep does it penetrate? Patrick Cockburn, a correspondent in Moscow, has been finding out...*

- By taking the initiative in nuclear arms control in the way Mr Brezhnev never did, Mr Gorbachev has been able to present the Soviet Union as more accommodating and flexible than in the past.

- By holding press conferences, appointing official spokesmen and giving briefings, the Soviets have put themselves in a stronger position to present their case.

Too much can be made of the latter point. "Remember," a Soviet journalist warned me in May 1984 just before I came to Moscow, "no Soviet official ever lost his

**THE International Press Institute sent a strongly worded protest to Mikhail Gorbachev over the arrest of Nicholas Daniloff.**

**"Both the timing and the charge of spying are highly suspect and would appear to be an attempt to frame Mr Daniloff," said IPI's Director Peter Galliner.**

**"To arrest this respected journalist, already at the end of his assignment, on this very dubious charge, is outrageous. We urge you to order his release immediately and allow him to leave your country without further harassment or delay."**

job because he refused to talk to a foreign correspondent." This grim little piece of advice still holds largely true, but senior decision-makers now give briefings to the foreign press in a way which they never occurred before.

This is useful but much the most important source of information for a foreign correspondent in Moscow is the Soviet press. The fundamental changes which have taken place here are of far greater significance than the cultivation of public relations techniques by the Soviet foreign ministry.

"We spend all our time reading the newspapers," says a Moscovite woman in a tone of surprise and excitement. She points to an article in *Pravda* made up mainly of critical letters from Chernobyl refugees.

Such articles in a paper like *Pravda*, with its circulation of 10m, tarnish the gloss of official accounts of an orderly evacuation and resettlement of refugees. Even more surprising was the publication earlier in August of a series of articles in an Estonian newspaper which described how a group of Estonian military reservists clearing up at Chernobyl had gone on strike in June when their tour of duty was suddenly extended from two to six months.

Other recent articles in the Soviet press have included:

- A piece in *Moskovsky Komsomolets* describing how Smolensk Square, the small triangle of parkland in central Moscow immediately in front of the foreign ministry and close to the Belgrade Hotel, had become a centre for black marketeers and prostitutes. The main reason for this, explained the newspaper, was that Smolensk Square is at the intersection between two police districts both of which disclaim responsibility for it, leaving black marketeers "to feel absolutely safe".

- Many newspapers have carried articles on drugs in recent months, a topic previously never mentioned. Policemen are interviewed who discuss the difficulties of cutting off drug supplies when enormous amounts of wild hemp grow in the east of the country.

Many of these topics would not have been discussed in the press a year ago. Articles give fascinating little insights into Soviet life. For instance, about 30,000 people are diagnosed as having appendicitis in Moscow every year — yet some 10,000 find out after the operation that there was nothing wrong with their appendix.

Not only do newspapers tackle subjects previously off limits but there are increasing signs that broad political issues are being fought out in the press. These include a massive scheme to divert water from lakes and rivers in the north of the country into the Volga — a project which the Politburo cancelled in August, citing public opposition.

At the same time the Politburo abandoned a project, already underway, to build a vast monument in Moscow to commemorate the 1945 Soviet victory over Germany. To this end a huge park had been appropriated and the hill where Napoleon waited in vain in 1812 to receive the surrender of the flattened city. At the centre of the park, a 230 foot high statue was to have been erected, an object described by Andrei Voznesensky, a distinguished poet, as "one of the most cheerless and talentless monuments in the world." It is now being redesigned.

The Soviet press was always slightly more revealing than it was given credit for in the West. The fact that the Supreme Soviet and other nominally representative institutions have only rubber stamp authority has always meant that debate is displaced sideways into newspapers which have enormous circulations and power.

But the campaign for more openness under Gorbachev had done more than just limit secrecy. Access to knowledge has ceased to be an attribute of leadership and is increasingly seen as the right of a citizen. This in turn is changing the relationship between the state and Soviet society from the mould which was formed in the early 1930s.

*Patrick Cockburn  
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