THE CANADIAN ORIGINS OF GLASNOST

Introduction

Glasnost and perestroika are distinctly Russian terms, but there is a Canadian connection to both of them. In the 1980s the Russian ambassador to Canada, Alexandre Yakovlev, developed the idea of opening his nation to change and enlightenment. This man could see the writing on the wall for the Soviet Union. He believed that if change from within did not occur, then catastrophic change from without would be inevitable. He wanted to find a way to save his people and provide prosperity and happiness to a nation that for too long had done without either.

During his tenure as ambassador to Canada he became a student of our nation. He watched the ways in which Canadians operated, in agriculture, in the media, and in government. He developed his own conclusions about what he might emulate and what he could improve upon.

In Russia, he had a person of like mind in Mikhail Gorbachev. Gorbachev was at that time a member of the Politbureau (cabinet) of the Communist Party Central Committee, a powerful man destined for greatness. Yakovlev invited his friend to visit Canada to observe agricultural procedures. While here, Gorbachev and Yakovlev explored the ideas that had evolved in their minds. They agreed that the Soviet Union needed help and they were determined to provide it.

The rest is history. Gorbachev was elected General Secretary of the Communist Party Central Committee in 1985 and, with his newly returned friend from Canada at his side, inspired the changes they felt were necessary to revitalize their nation. The concepts of glasnost and perestroika intrigued the world. The Soviet Union, historically a closed society run by a tight committee of party faithful, had ruled the nation with an iron fist for three quarters of a century. Now glasnost (openness) and perestroika (restructuring) became the buzzwords of a new regime. An experiment in cultural change was unleashed.

Glasnost applied primarily to the media in the Soviet Union. The media had long been an extension of the party politic and had little to do with accuracy and truth (despite the leading publication named Pravda [Truth]). Glasnost led to a lessening of restrictions and an attempt to improve the information flow to the people of the nation. In fact it went far beyond that. Over time, in incremental stages, the press pushed the limits of glasnost until the barriers were effectively gone. Freedom of the press, if not formally established, became a de facto reality.

Perestroika, an attempt to restructure the economic and political systems of the Soviet Union, likewise went beyond the expectations of its originators. The economy was thrust into massive change from tight control to a free market. However, with no experience in free-market thinking, productivity declined, and in the initial stages the economy faltered.

By 1991, Gorbachev was gone as leader of the Soviet Union. In fact, the Soviet Union was gone as well. In its place the new Russian Federation led by Boris Yeltsin tried to pick up the pieces of the aftermath of perestroika. The economy gradually turned to privatization and a free market. Crime...
and corruption increased, and the military declined, even while a war was being waged in Chechnya. The ruble collapsed, and inflation ran rampant. In time, even the President was being investigated for corruption. Yeltsin resigned at the turn of the century.

Vladimir Putin, Russia’s new President, quickly began to work to create a stronger economy. War in Chechnya resurfaced, and Putin responded strongly, driving the rebels from their capital. President Putin had his work cut out for him. The Russian people had tasted freedom and, while the taste was sometimes bad, freedom had an addictive quality that Putin could not ignore. There was no turning back. Russia continues to move ahead with a new attitude. The Second Russian Revolution, with its Canadian origins, is firmly established.

Reflecting
1. In general, what elements of Canadian life do you think would be useful for other nations to consider adopting? Why?

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3. What types of perestroika (restructuring) is Canada itself undergoing today?

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THE CANADIAN ORIGINS OF GLASNOST

Video Review

1. In the opening shot of Red Square, what signs of Western civilization are present?
2. How many Russians perished in wars and oppression in the last century?
3. Why, in 1945, did Yakovlev first begin to doubt Communism?
4. In 1957 where did Yakovlev attend university?
5. Why was Yakovlev sent to be ambassador to Canada?
6. In 1983 who was Canada’s Minister of Agriculture?
7. Why was the wheat field near Windsor, Ontario, considered “historic”?
8. What happened in Moscow in August 1991, and what was the result of this event for the Soviet Union and Mikhail Gorbachev?
9. Why does Yakovlev not like the Russian national anthem?
10. What does “don’t let the past become Russia’s future” mean?

Answer the questions as you view the video.
THE CANADIAN ORIGINS OF GLASNOST

Timeline: Russia: The Last Hundred Years

In the course of one century Russia has gone from rule by an all-powerful czar, to rule by the Communist Party, to the beginnings of democracy. At times it has been a rough ride, and the people of Russia have weathered storm after storm: rebellion, invasion, war, natural disaster, political upheaval, economic failure, and nuclear meltdown. Through it all they have managed to persevere. Now, after such a difficult history, the Russian people have the opportunity to prosper and to control their destiny. Following is a thumbnail sketch of highlights from this challenging journey.

1904 Trans-Siberian Railway completed
1904-5 Russo-Japanese War
1905 “Bloody Sunday,” the Russian Revolution of 1905
1914 First World War begins. Russia loses the Battle of Tannenburg.
1918 March: Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, Russia exits First World War (8 million casualties)
1918 July: Czar Nicholas and family are assassinated.
1918-1921 Russian Civil War
1920-1921 Soviet-Polish War
1922 Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) is declared.
1924 Lenin dies.
1927 Josef Stalin begins his leadership of the Soviet Union.
1934 Stalin begins purges (imprisonment and murder) of Soviet military.
1939 Soviet Union invades Poland and Finland.
1941 Germany invades Soviet Union.
1941-1945 Soviet Union pushes Germany back to Berlin, Second World War ends.
1949 Soviet Union tests first atomic bomb.
1953 Stalin dies, Nikita Khrushchev becomes First Secretary.
1959 Russian satellite Sputnik is launched.
1961 Yuri Gagarin is the first man in space.
1962 Cuban Missile Crisis (Russia and U.S. almost stumble into nuclear war)
1964 Khrushchev is replaced by Leonid Brezhnev.
1979 Gorbachev enters Politburo. Soviet Union invades Afghanistan.
1982 Brezhnev dies, is replaced by Yuri Andropov.
1983 Gorbachev leads Soviet delegation to Canada, meets with Prime Minister Trudeau.
1984 Andropov dies, is replaced by Konstantin Chernenko.
1985 Chernenko dies, is replaced by Mikhail Gorbachev. Gorbachev initiates restrictions on production and sale of alcohol. Perestroika begins.
1986 Nuclear power facility at Chernobyl explodes, sending radioactive material into the atmosphere.
1987 Gorbachev engages in talks with U.S. President Ronald Reagan to reduce nuclear arms. Laws restructuring banking, business are enacted.

Did you know . . .
Czar sometimes written as tsar, owes its origins to the Roman title caesar, based on the power and exploits of the great Roman leader, Julius Caesar?
1988 Easter services are televised in USSR for first time. Laws on state enterprise, co-operatives, working for profit are enacted. Armenian earthquake, 150,000 killed or injured.

1989 Price controls, work productivity incentives established. Individual farmers permitted to lease land. Gorbachev elected President. Coal miners strike to protest poor wages, medical care, housing. Nationalist sentiments increase in many of the Soviet Republics. Berlin Wall torn down. This signals the end of the Cold War.

1990 Gorbachev receives Nobel Peace Prize for efforts to end the Cold War. Gorbachev is re-elected President. First McDonald’s opens in Moscow.


1992 Yeltsin elected President. Economic reforms cause economic disaster in Russia. Rampant inflation devalues Russian currency.


1994 Russia invades rebellious Republic of Chechnya. Ruble (Russian currency) becomes virtually worthless.

1995 Russian troops reach Grozny (Chechen capital), thousands killed or left homeless. Yeltsin suffers two heart attacks.


1997 New criminal code is established. Russia develops an accommodation with NATO.

1998 Financial Crisis, market crashes, ruble is devalued. Yuri Primakov is appointed Prime Minister by Yeltsin.

1999 Primakov fired, Sergei Stepashin becomes Prime Minister. Stepashin fired, Vladimir Putin becomes Prime Minister. Russian troops return to Chechnya.


2001 Terrorist car bomb linked to Chechen rebels. Putin supports U.S. in “War Against Terrorism.”

2002 Russia and U.S. sign nuclear reduction treaty. Chechen rebels capture Moscow theatre, 140 die in rescue attempt.
To Consider

1. The history of Russia over the last 100 years has been one of extreme hardship and political upheaval. In a paragraph, compare this with the history of Canada over the same period. Identify similarities and differences and conclude with a statement about life in Russia today compared with life in Canada today.

2. By examining the timeline, identify the point where you believe that Russia began to take on the trappings of democracy. What role do you think *glasnost* and *perestroika* played in this transition?

3. Based on your general knowledge and your review of this simple timeline, write a brief statement outlining your predictions for the future of Russia over the next decade.
The Gorbachev Revolution

In 1985 Mikhail Gorbachev assumed the role of First Secretary of the Communist Party and became the leader of the Soviet Union. He immediately introduced two terms that would have a profound effect on the Soviet Union and come to be used throughout the world. These terms were *glasnost* and *perestroika*.

The first indicated a change in approach for the people of the Soviet Union. *Glasnost*, or “openness” initiated a trend toward freedom of expression that was unheard of in Communist-controlled countries. It allowed for the media to act more independently. Initially this meant that the press was able to report on more, but not all, issues and events. There were still restrictions, but over time these diminished to the point where open criticisms of Gorbachev himself could be found in the pages of the news.

*Perestroika*, or economic, political, and social restructuring, was Mikhail Gorbachev’s idea to slowly change the Soviet Union, within the concepts of socialism, to meet the challenges of a modern world. He was trying to move his country out of the past and into the future. In this he was to be more successful than he initially realized.

*Perestroika* ushered in numerous reforms in the political arena, in the military, in social structure, and in monetary structure. It would open the door for a variety of positive and negative changes. Those that were positive included restrictions on alcohol consumption, a reduction of nuclear weapons, and the beginnings of democracy. Negative effects included the substantial increase in criminal activity, the collapse of the monetary system, the significant reduction of defence capabilities and several instances of political unrest.

In the final analysis, *perestroika* led to the collapse of the Soviet Union and eventually the defeat of Gorbachev himself at the polls. When asked to reflect on his time as leader of the Soviet Union, Gorbachev responded with the following comments (all quotes are from *Conversations with Gorbachev*, Columbia University Press, 2002, translated by G. Shriver).

1. “I saw political reform as a way of solving two problems at once. First, to provide citizens with real control over the processes under way, to strengthen their rights and freedoms, and second, to solve the problem of official cadres through democratic reforms, changing the role of the party and reviving the Soviets.”

2. “I passed through various stages in my own experience: exploring, developing a new conception, formulating a policy corresponding to that conception, and putting these plans into effect—then there were the reforms themselves, new discoveries, and conclusions during the course of *perestroika*. This experience leads me to the conclusion that people can make use of freedom by taking the road of reform, of gradual evolutionary development. On the other hand, a choice in favour of revolutionary extremism leads to chaos, destruction, and often to a new lack of freedom.”

3. “The movement to a new world order does not mean a levelling or smoothing
over of differences or the imposition of a single model for everyone. Every people must have a real right of free choice, with its history, its culture, its mentality, and its potential taken into account. From this it follows that development must include diversity in the paths of development. Freedom of choice must not be restricted for anyone. . . .”

4. “A sense of interconnectedness and unity of the whole world has caught hold with everyone; everyone is forced to recognize that no matter what happens anywhere in the world, we ourselves are affected. I think this provides the basic prerequisites for forward movement in the direction of new kinds of social relations and a new stage of civilization. But there are many different variations that such a movement could take. . . it was an understanding of the possible disaster of nuclear war that served as an incentive for me to arrive at a new thinking of *perestroika.*”

Activity
Consider the quotes above and answer the following questions.

1. Do you think Mikhail Gorbachev could have predicted the result of his move toward freedom and reform in the Soviet Union? Explain your answer.

2. In his second quote, Gorbachev reflects on his own experience of *perestroika* as it evolved. He concludes that a gradual evolution is preferable to extremism. Was he able to keep the evolution of reforms gradual? What has happened to Russia since he left office? Explain.

3. The people of Russia lived under very restrictive regimes throughout the 20th century. Freedoms have been few and far between. Consider quotes one and three. How do you think the Russian people will handle freedom after such a long period of oppression?

4. Some observers consider that Gorbachev was one of the greatest leaders of the 20th century. Do you agree or disagree? Why?
THE CANADIAN ORIGINS OF GLASNOST
Russia: Problems and Possibilities

The Problems
The reforms initiated in the atmosphere of perestroika have not yet resulted in the completely successful evolution of Russia. There are areas of decline and problems that have arisen through the constant economic crises of the last decade and the struggle to find balance in the “New” Russia.

The promise of Russia’s first McDonald’s restaurant has slipped into a quagmire of limited foreign investment and a resurgence of the “Russian Mob.” The military continues to weaken, while war still rages in Chechnya. All is not well in this new Russia.

President Putin has inherited an economy stuck in recession, bereft of adequate capital investment and often under the sway of criminals. Since the early 1990s the level of foreign investment has declined by hundreds of millions of dollars. The economy stagnated because of a number of factors: outdated equipment, a Soviet-style bureaucracy, the growth of criminal activity, and a lack of real capital investment. Productivity declined even after the beginnings of privatization. Incentives were few, and the ruble continued to decline in value at an alarming rate. Even in stronger parts of the economy, like oil production, there has been a decrease in productivity without a corresponding reduction in employees. All the while Russia continued building its national debt.

The Russian Mob has flourished under the limited restrictions of post-perestroika Russia. They control huge segments of the economy by controlling factories, real estate, co-ops, private enterprises, and hard currency. The militia, charged with rooting out crime, is filled with corrupt officers on the take. Dozens of murders occur each day, many of them contract killings. These mobs, patterned after the Italian Mafiosi, are stronger, meaner, and richer than their predecessors. President Putin has inherited a difficult challenge in his efforts to curb the power of the Mob.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the army was posted throughout the many newly independent Soviet Republics. Remaining in Russia were only eight of the previous 16 military districts. Russia itself lost valuable first-line troops such as 13 field armies and corps, four tank armies, two missile armies, three armies of anti-missile defence, various other units, and stock-piles of weapons and ammunition. Surface and sub-surface vessels have declined to at least half their former number. Investment in upgrading has been limited, leading to a decline in the effectiveness of Russia’s forces. Putin’s experience in Chechnya has led to Russian control of the area, with front-line troops, to hold them in check. The resulting terrorist activities in Russia have been less controllable, and the army needs to re-evaluate its role and capabilities.

The hostage-taking incident in a Moscow theatre showed the inexperience of the militia. Putin has demonstrated his desire to restructure the military and utilize them appropriately. It remains to be seen whether he can find the resources to carry out his wishes. By 2002 the army had declined in quality to the point where Putin
considered changing the whole complexion of the force. Now, every male between 18 and 27 years must serve two years in the military. This has led to an army of young, relatively untrained men, numbering over one million. Putin wants to develop a voluntary, professional force, smaller in number, but stronger in quality and training. This plan continues to be met with resistance from within.

The Possibilities

Vladimir Putin, the newest president of the RF, has chosen to act on the ideas of perestroika. A former member of the KGB, Putin rose quickly, beginning in local government. He started as an assistant to the mayor of St. Petersburg. In the 2000 election he won the presidency by a 52 per cent margin.

Putin has worked to place Russia back on the international stage.

He participated in the June 2002 Kananaskis Summit, where then-U.S. President Clinton stated that he was “surely capable of creating a strong and prosperous Russia.” He also gained Summit support for the hostages at that time being held in Moscow.

Another act that places Russia in the mainstream of Western society is its unprecedented involvement with NATO. In May 2002 “Russia and NATO signed an agreement setting up a joint council for making decisions on counterterrorism, non-proliferation of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons, peacekeeping, and other issues.”

As NATO continues to incorporate Eastern European nations into the alliance, its relevance as a defensive organization becomes less necessary. Putin’s acceptance of this accommodation has led to greater stability and a lesser chance of conflict.

Economic growth, which has been in decline for the past decade, is now just beginning to evolve. Putin is trying to diversify the economy away from a dependence on oil. There is growing evidence of a market economy. Small business is encouraged, and free enterprise is now seen in everyday life. Foreign investment is happening. The most visible example of this was the establishment of the Moscow McDonald’s.

Freedom of the press is now practised in Russia, even though conservative elements recently introduced a bill to significantly curtail these newly found freedoms. President Putin vetoed the bill, reaffirming the rights of the media.

Russia has begun to see the benefits of perestroika and glasnost. There are still many hurdles to cross, but there is room for optimism.

Activity

Complete the exercises on this and the following page as part of your personal evaluation and analysis of the role of perestroika and glasnost in the current history of Russia.

1. After reviewing your readings and notes on modern Russia, carefully fill out the chart on the next page, comparing the positive and negative results of perestroika and glasnost.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Positive Results</th>
<th>Negative Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Perestroika</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Glasnost</strong></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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2. Once your chart is complete, write a brief position paper on the theme “Has Russia become a better place for its people as a result of *perestroika* and *glasnost*?” Explain.

Notes for Position Paper:

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THE CANADIAN ORIGINS OF GLASNOST

Russia: The Canadian Connection

As stated in the video, Alexandre Yakovlev, a trusted confidant of Mikhail Gorbachev, was Ambassador to Canada for about 10 years. In that time he was able to observe Canadian society and take the time to develop his ideas about how to reform his nation, the Soviet Union. From a statement given by Yakovlev in 1996, he confirms the event described in the video.

“I arranged for him (Gorbachev) to come and visit Canada. . . . I wanted very much for the man who was responsible for agriculture in Russia to visit Canada.

“It was a very useful visit for Gorbachev. What struck me is the kind of detailed interest and care Gorbachev took in the farmer economy, and that really struck me very positively and very much.

“At first we kind of sniffed around each other and our conversations didn’t touch on serious issues. And then, verily, history plays tricks on one; we had a lot of time together as guests of the Minister of Agriculture of Canada. So we took a long walk on that minister’s farm and, as it often happens, both of us were suddenly just kind of flooded and let go. I somehow, for some reason, threw caution to the wind, and started telling him what I considered to be the stupidities in the area of foreign affairs, especially those SS-20 missiles that were being stationed in Europe and a lot of other things. And he did the same thing. We were completely frank. He frankly talked about the problems in the internal situation in Russia. He was saying that under these conditions, the conditions of dictatorship and absence of freedom, the country would simply perish. So it was at that time, during our three-hour conversation, almost as if our heads were knocked together, that we poured it all out and during that three-hour conversation we actually came to agreement on all our main points.”

Regarding glasnost, he stated the following.

“I could not agree with the proposition that I used what I saw in Canada as a model for life in Russia. I was, for example, convinced that our press should be much freer than the press in Canada or the United States. I already encountered the practice of articles on demand, articles for which some shady deals had been made. I already saw that practice in Canada. When I was trying to promulgate glasnost at home, I frankly have to tell you that I tried to do things in such a way as to avoid those errors or ways that I encountered in this country. At first we were successful—Moscow News, Izvestiia, Ogonek Magazine. They were the path-breakers to freedom of the press and they acted very idealistically.”
Activities

1. Evaluate these two quotes and describe your views on how much impact Canada might have had on the thought processes of Alexandre Yakovlev. Consider both positive and negative impacts.

2. Do you agree with Yakovlev’s opinion of the Canadian media? Explain.
THE CANADIAN ORIGINS OF GLASNOST

Video Timeline Web Challenge

Use the Internet and outside sources to create a pictorial timeline illustrating the history of Russia since 1985. Make sure to identify the succession of leaders, any wars (internal or external) that were happening, views of the crime and corruption and the state of the economy over the period, pointing out the highlights. Where possible, make this timeline in the form of a PowerPoint presentation. Be prepared to share your work with your peers.

Possible Web sites to use in this activity:

This site shows a timeline of modern Russia:
www.departments.bucknell.edu/russian/chrono3.html

This site illustrates Russian current events:
www.mapreport.com/countries/russia.html

This site is a Yeltsin biography:
www.infoplease.com/spot/yeltsintimeline1.html

This site contains information and pictures of Putin:
www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Parliament/5160/Putin/

This site gives an overview of Russian history:
http://russia.jamestown.org/papers/papers-paper-graham.htm

This site has an overview of Gorbachev:
www.mikhailgorbachev.org/

Notes