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WHAT TV ISN'T TELLING US ABOUT THOSE SOVIET SPOKESMEN



Peter Turnley/Woodfin Camp

When interviewing Russian experts, our network journalists sometimes fail to mention their government ties

By John Weisman

On Nov. 17, 1985, NBC's *Meet the Press* broadcast a special expanded version of the Sunday talk show from Geneva, where U.S. President Ronald Reagan and Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev shortly would begin their summit meet-

ings. Moderator Marvin Kalb introduced one of his guests, Yulian Semyenov, as "one of the Soviet Union's most popular novelists, but for this summit, a member of the Soviet delegation and adviser to Gorbachev. Semyenov has often been compared to Norman Mailer."

Truth in packaging? Not quite.

Semyenov is, in fact, a popular Soviet

Above, l.-r.: Georgiy Arbatov, head of the Soviet Institute for the Study of the U.S.A. and Canada, and Vladimir Posner, a commentator for Radio Moscow.

novelist. But unlike Norman Mailer, a political maverick and literary *enfant terrible* who once tried to start a foundation to investigate the CIA, Semyenov is an integral part of the system under which he flourishes. He is a writer of thrillers whose villains often are Americans. In his 1979 book "Tass Is Authorized to State" (which was also made into a successful Soviet TV miniseries), a wise, avuncular, heroic KGB general foils a CIA plot to overthrow the government of a pro-Soviet African nation.

But Semyenov does more than write novels and occasionally advise the government. According to one confidential U.S. Government document, he served for some years as a ghostwriter for his father-in-law, S.K. Tsvigun, who, from 1967-1982, was first deputy chairman of the KGB, the vast Soviet agency that combines the secret police with intelligence-gathering and propaganda functions.

The next day, on ABC's *World News Tonight*, anchorman Peter Jennings introduced a commentary segment that pitted George Will, ABC News's conservative commentator, against Gennadiy Gerasimov, whom Jennings described as "editor-in-chief of the Moscow News."

Truth in packaging? Not really.

Gerasimov is, in fact, editor-in-chief of *Moscow News*, a Soviet government publication. What Jennings did not tell viewers was that Gerasimov, 55, has had a 30-year career that includes a two-year stint as an official of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Gerasimov also spent six years in the U.S. as a *Novosti* correspondent. And, according to Arkady Shevchenko, the highest-ranking Soviet diplomat ever to defect to the West, Gerasimov is, like a number of his colleagues who write for Soviet government publications, an agent of the KGB.

"The phrase 'Soviet journalist' is an oxymoron," insists George Will, who believes viewers should always be reminded they are hearing the Kremlin's line when Soviet correspondents appear. "There is no such thing as a Soviet journalist."

Truth in packaging. It is a constant problem on television news where, because of time constraints, carelessness and consistent oversimplifications, visual and verbal shorthand often is used to describe people, places and things. It is a shorthand of easy-to-understand labels and generalities that can—and often do—mislead viewers.

And almost nowhere is television's use of misleading shorthand more evident than when Soviet scientists, commentators and academics appear, which they have done recently in a virtual flood. Indeed, according to U.S. Information Agency director Charles Z. Wick, more than 100 Soviets have appeared as guests on U.S. news shows in the last year and a half. "In the past," says Dorrance Smith, executive producer of ABC's *This Week with David Brinkley*, "the Soviets paid very little attention to what the 'public consumption' was here. I think they now pay a great deal of attention to it."

ABC White House correspondent Sam Donaldson, who grills Soviet officials regularly on *This Week*, says: "Every time we interview them, there should be something said to make plain they work for the Soviet government. What we are getting from Moscow, through these guests, is the approved view, and our viewers should be made aware of that."

Sometimes, viewers are made aware. In a February 1985 broadcast, David Brinkley called Radio Moscow commentator Vladimir Posner "a journalist." Soon thereafter, however, commentator George Will (who had truth-in-packaging problems of his own when he helped prepare Ronald Reagan for a 1980 Presidential debate with then-President Jimmy Carter and spoke favorably on ABC about Reagan's performance without disclosing his own role) put Posner's position in context. "Mr. Posner," he said, "you're a journalist of a certain sort; that is, you're an employee of the government on which you report."

Posner, whose colloquial, idiomatic, American-accented English is the result of nine years spent growing up in New →

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York City during the 1940s, has probably appeared more often on U.S. television than any other Soviet. By Soviet standards, he is a journalist. But on U.S. television he becomes, in effect, a government spokesman whose responses to questions by U.S. reporters reflect the official Kremlin view just as surely as White House spokesman Larry Speakes represents the Administration's.

Indeed, ABC used Posner to respond to President Reagan's Feb. 26 address to the Nation. The Soviet's seven-minute, unchallenged interview attacking Mr. Reagan drew an angry response from the White House, and an apology from ABC News president Roone Arledge, who confessed in a letter to the President that Posner's appearance "was a deviation from good American common sense and the standards of fairness for which ABC News is known."

Some news broadcasts are better than others at truth in packaging. *This Week*, along with *Nightline* and the *CBS Morning News*, tends to identify its Soviet guests accurately. Some—such as NBC's *Today*—are not so precise.

Sometimes *Today's* viewers are woefully misled. Perhaps the most glaring recent example took place last Nov. 20. Anchor Bryant Gumbel interviewed a man named Samuil Zivs, whom he introduced simply as "a spokesman for the Soviet Anti-Zionist Committee."

State Department Soviet experts agree that introducing Zivs in such a manner is about the same as introducing a black South African as a spokesman for "Black South Africans for Apartheid." In fact, Zivs—like virtually the entire leadership of the Soviet Anti-Zionist Committee—is a Jew. He is a moderately high-ranking party official and one of the lawyers who prosecuted recently released Jewish dissident Anatoly Shcharansky at his 1978 trial. The Soviet Anti-Zionist Committee, of which he is deputy chairman, also has published a large number of documents alleging ties between Zionism and fascism and Nazism.

Would it have been helpful to identify

Zivs as a Jew who prosecutes other Soviet Jews, since he spent his time on *Today* telling American viewers that Jews have no problems in the Soviet Union?

"In that instance," says Gumbel, "probably so—but that's hindsight."

American officials see things differently. "The interviewers just aren't prepared," says one. "The Soviets know this; they know how to play us."

One of the aspects of putting Soviet officials on U.S. television with which U.S. viewers may not be familiar is the way Soviet spokesmen are selected. It is easy for the producers of *Nightline*, *Meet the Press*, *Face the Nation* or *This Week* to call American sources on every side of an issue and line them up as guests. With the Soviets, says *This Week's* Dorrance Smith, things aren't so simple. First, the show's coordinating producer calls ABC's Moscow bureau and describes what *This Week* is looking for. Next, says Smith, the bureau calls its contacts, "then they call us back and tell us either no one is speak-

ing on that topic at that time, or that these are the people who are available to speak." In other words, the Soviets control all network access to Soviet news sources.

There is another, more subtle element as well: the possibility that, if challenged too strongly, the Soviets will shut off the flow of guests. Television talk shows have time to fill. They need guests with opposing points of view to engender conflict, controversy—and ratings. The Soviets, who control access to their commentators, scientists, academics and government officials, understand television's need for a constant stream of guests. And they have not been above threats in the past: last winter, for example, ABC's Moscow bureau chief, Walter Rodgers, was told by the Soviet Foreign Ministry that if the network proceeded with plans for a miniseries depicting a Soviet occupation of the U.S., ABC News operations in the USSR might be jeopardized. (ABC will produce the miniseries.)

As former Carter Administration official Hodding Carter III puts it: "Television is not altogether journalism. And the interest

in getting people to appear is often served by the least amount of embarrassment to the guest—embarrassment meaning those things that might carry a negative load up front. . . . And I'm afraid there is some implicit punch-pulling—unstated—that goes on."

It is not through lack of resources that the network news operations often fail to observe truth in packaging when they put Soviet spokesmen on the air, because biographies of virtually every Soviet official, scientist and commentator who has appeared on American television are available to anyone who asks, either from the U.S. Department of State, or other

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—George Will
ABC News commentator

Government and private sources.

ABC's George Will attributes such lapses to the fact that "journalism, at all times, but especially television journalism, is done on the fly, and there's often just not enough time."

One State Department official who has spent time in Moscow adds that the Soviets use words differently from Americans. On U.S. television, spokesmen like Gerasimov and Posner are called "journalists." To American audiences the word connotes an adversarial, freewheeling, often skeptical attitude toward government policy. "American journalists," says the official, "don't want to appear as if they are defending the U.S.'s position because, in fact, they don't speak for the Administration. It isn't that way with the Soviets."

Other Soviet experts also provide official points of view. During the summit, a number of academics and scientists ap-

peared on U.S. television. Many, such as Yevgeniy Vstikov, deputy chairman of the Soviet Academy of Science, and Roald

Sagdeyev, director of the Soviet Institute of Space Research, are reputable scientists. But, adds George Will, "they are trading upon their reputations as scientists to serve the Soviet state in fundamentally political ways."

It irks some U.S. officials, for example, that when Georgiy Arbatov, head of the Soviet Institute for the Study of the U.S.A. and Canada, appears on American television (which he does with some regularity these days), his organization is made to sound like a purely academic think tank, when in fact its leaders include KGB and GRU (military intelligence) officials. It is true that Arbatov is a high-ranking and influential Soviet official. But American audiences perceive him, the officials feel, more as an academic than a political animal whose close ties to Yuri Andropov and Mikhail Gorbachev gave him much of his power and influence.

One confidential Department of State bulletin, describing the role of Soviet academics, says their main function "would seem to be less one of advising the leadership than of providing the trappings of scholarly argumentation for Soviet policy perspectives and actions. Their role as advocates is especially important in dealing with foreign audiences. . . . Given their credentials, they can and do attract attention in Western media and among special-interest groups: scientists, physicians, businessmen and journalists. It was primarily for this purpose that they were sent to Geneva. Not as on-the-spot experts, but as public-relations flacks for Gorbachev." Adds a mid-level State Department official who deals regularly with Soviet affairs: "The networks have the responsibility to point out that the Sagdeyevs and Vstikovs are no less official spokesmen than the Posners or Arbatovs."

The problems of truth in packaging are not unique to Soviet spokesmen. As NBC's Gumbel admits: "I think there's a rule of thumb that, overall, American audiences aren't told enough about most of the people they see on TV—be they Soviet or American. . . . We wind up taking an awful lot for granted—maybe too much." (E)