

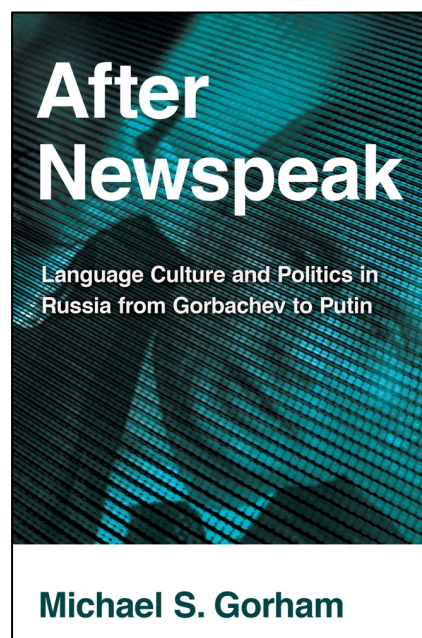


## Reviews

**After Newspeak: Language Culture and Politics in Russia from Gorbachev to Putin**, by Michael S. Gorham. Cornell University Press, 2014, pp 256, Paperback, GBP £15.58, ISBN: 978-0-8014-5262-8. Language: English

Michael Gorham's second book, *After Newspeak: Language Culture and Politics in Russia from Gorbachev to Putin*, explores the 'politics of language and the language of politics' (p. 191) in Russia (and beyond) since the great glasnost debates of the 1980s. This cultural history of the Russian language, while not necessarily a follow-up to his first monograph *Speaking in Soviet Tongues: Language Culture and the Politics of Voice in Early Soviet Russia* (2003), is certainly an appropriate and timely complement to his earlier work on the linguistic politics of Soviet Russia. While no one would argue the 'revolutionary' nature of language under the early Bolsheviks, Gorham, an Associate Professor of Russian at the University of Florida, makes a persuasive case that linguistic practices and 'speech culture' (p. 26) in the late Gorbachev era were equally iconoclastic, setting up the soon-to-be-independent Russian Federation for a politico-linguistic conflict in pitting 'purists' and 'patriots' against 'innovators' and 'reformers'. While the battle for control (or lack thereof) of the Russian idiom has not yet been definitively determined, Gorham's treatise provides the reader with a useful guidebook to understanding the issues, players and ideologies of this long-running clash of tongues.

As Gorham sets out in the preface, *After Newspeak* aims to excavate the myriad linkages between language, culture and politics in contemporary Russia. Not surprisingly, the book opens with an analysis of how Russians view language, with the author making compelling arguments that—like the French (and in contrast to Anglophones)—Russian attitudes toward language are not simply practical but also deeply philosophical and ideological. Throughout the text, Gorham consistently refers to pervasive societal fears about linguistic lawlessness and foreign contamination of the sacred Russian tongue, neatly linking such angst to larger issues of national identity in the post-Soviet era. He projects this discussion through the con-



ceptual lens of ‘language culture’ (p. 5), arguing that the history of the Russian language and the Russian state are deeply intertwined, and that one cannot understand one without the other. While Gorham contends that language ideologies are relatively ‘stable and deeply rooted’ (p. 16), instrumental orientations toward language are prone to change during times of social and political upheaval, thus making a cogent argument for analyzing the Russian language since 1985.

The text is divided into six chapters, each covering a particular period of political change in Russia. The opening chapter lays the groundwork by examining the peculiar speech culture of the Soviet regime, which was characterized by the ‘horribly clichéd and wooden language’ of the apparatchiks (p. 43). The second chapter explores the emergence of a new culture of linguistic freedom under *glasnost*, focusing on debates between the (often tight-lipped) forces of conservatism and the (ever loquacious) reformers. Gorham highlights Mikhail Gorbachev’s own disdain for the ‘deadening babble’ of Soviet newspeak (p. 49), while pointing out that those who broke the mold were often labeled demagogues by their critics. As we learn in Chapter Two, ‘Glasnost Unleashed’, the loosening of controls in the late Soviet period wrought a period of genuine free speech under Boris Yeltsin, but also a perceived ‘degradation’ of Russian. Chapter Three, entitled ‘Economics of Profanity’, neatly links the linguistic chaos to the economic maelstrom of privatization of the Russian economy. Gorham demonstrates how the new socio-economic-political milieu allowed the press to embrace its role as the Fourth Estate, just as the elements of *mat* (obscene language), *blatnaia muzyka* (criminal argot) and foreign loan words (e.g., *menedzher*, *imidzh* and *killer*) seeped into everyday speech, triggering increased fears about the pollution of the language. The subsequent chapter, ‘In Defense of the National Tongue’, investigates the backlash directed at the linguistic lawlessness of the 1990s, and the attempt to preserve the ‘essence’ of the Russian tongue (p. 110), focusing on the mavens of rhetorical purism, a civic revolt against ‘alien’ language intrusions, state policing of language and the emergence of a lucrative industry around speaking ‘proper Russian’.

After this point in the book, Gorham increasingly focuses on Vladimir Putin, and the singular role he played in shaping perceptions of spoken Russian since coming to office at the turn of the millennium. It is to the president’s role as ‘defender’ of the national tongue that Gorham dedicates his fifth (and strongest) chapter. This is quite paradoxical given Putin’s ‘colorful and at times crass turns of phrase’ (p.131), most notably his use of the slang ‘*mo-chit’ v sortire*’ (waste them in the toilet) in a diatribe against Chechen insurgents in 1999. However, Gorham demonstrates in Chapter Five, ‘Taking the Offensive’, that despite such excursions into the profane, Putin won accolades from the public for ‘expressing himself strongly’ (p. 136). While Gorham is critical of Putin’s overall public speaking style (describing it as mundane and technocratic), he frames Putin’s ability to engage his interlocutor as ‘masterful’ (p. 138). Mixing the rhetorical with the political, this chapter also details important changes in the situation of Russian as a vehicle for national power. Gorham details how, in the hands of the Kremlin’s ‘political technologists’, Russian became a powerful binding agent for national identity after Yeltsin. Just as Putin sought to reign in the press, oligarchs, criminals and terrorists, he pursued a language policy agenda aimed at stamping out linguistic lawlessness (*iazykovoï bespredel*), all the while promoting Russian beyond the

country's borders. The last full chapter turns to the internet or Runet, which—as Gorham argues—has proven to be a less-friendly platform for language purists. Gorham provides a stark comparison between in the 'made-for-TV' public relations events favored by Putin (discussed in detail in Chapter Five) and the chaotic free-for-all of the Russian web, where alternative voices make themselves heard despite repeated attempts at legislating away dissent, government-subsidized bloggers who 'fake' consensus online and the dropping a purported 'cyber-curtain' (p. 188) over Russian cyberspace. Perhaps this is why Putin so dislikes the internet (despite his claims that it is simply a cesspool of pornography).

Cogently organized and smartly written, *After Newspeak* makes frequent and effective use of a wealth of primary sources, including passages from Soviet-era televised debates, press reports, popular series on the Russian language, blogs and Twitter feeds. Gorham's use of folklore, literary references and linguistic analysis girds the narrative, proving surprisingly effective for a text which is—on the surface—about contemporary political culture. Gorham's employment of theory is similarly effective, particularly his application of the ideas of media-centric thinkers like Baudrillard and McLuhan; however, he never delves too deeply into the abstract, thus ensuring that his voice remains clarion throughout the text. Overall, the book makes a convincing argument that political upheaval necessarily changes the role that language plays in society, an assertion that is equally true whether one speaks of the Bolshevik Revolution or the transition from Soviet authoritarianism to 'managed democracy' in contemporary Russia. *After Newspeak* serves as a testament to the central role that language—perhaps the most important single manifestation of 'culture'—plays in the construction, maintenance and transformation of identity in the modern world. Delivering on the subtitle's promise 'Language Culture and Politics in Russia from Gorbachev to Putin', Gorham proves that 'language is politics', and that this is especially true in the Russian realm: Putin's very public support of the *Russky Mir* (Russian World) program (detailed in Chapter Four) being an important case in point. Similarly exemplary are his efforts to protect Russophones in the near abroad (a policy which has produced deadly geopolitical outcomes in Crimea and eastern Ukraine since early 2014).

The book does suffer from some minor weaknesses. Gorham's extended analysis of the importance of the 'anti-word' *politkorrektnost* at the beginning of the text may turn off the casual reader. Personally, I did not buy the argument that the fortunes of this particular word were emblematic of wider debates on language ideology and felt it distracted from the real story of Russian language politics. Surprising given the author's standing in the field, the chapter on the internet was also a bit discombobulating. While Gorham's previous work on the Russian language in virtual spaces is both authoritative and frequently cited, '“Cyber-Curtain” or Glasnost 2.0?' departed from the style of previous chapters, providing a hackneyed blow-by-blow of state action and civic response wherein the larger issues at stake seemed to fall by the wayside. Certainly, this can be excused as the situation is highly protean, and attempting to understand the totality of the internet's impact on the Russian language and culture at this point in time is like trying boil the sea. However, a more nuanced approach—particularly when it comes to what the internet actually *means* and *does* to the Russian language—would have served the reader better.

My main critique of the book is the absence of a discussion about the Kremlin's use of laws against 'extremism' to cow and even imprison its critics. These regulations differ markedly from legislation in European democracies like France and Germany, wherein written and/or spoken incitement of ethnic/sectarian violence (as well as other speech acts, such as Holocaust denial) are prohibited by law. However, in the Russian Federation, anti-extremism laws are a cudgel of those in power, and often used to target critics of the government, civil society advocates, missionaries and other activists, while rarely being applied to the genuinely extremist speech acts articulated by radical nationalists who support Putin. This new state of affairs eerily represents a latter-day form of Orwellian newspeak (an additional rationale for including such an exposition), and is no longer confined to Russia. Given the Kremlin's role as a paragon of managed democracy across post-Soviet Eurasia, this dubious tactic for weakening opposition voices has spread to Uzbekistan, Belarus and elsewhere, putting reporters and activists in the line of fire. A succinct analysis of such language-centric laws and their unpredictable enforcement would surely have benefited the reader.

Despite these criticisms, *After Newspeak* represents a major contribution to the discipline of language culture, not just in the field of Slavic Studies, but across multiple arenas of academic enquiry. Gorham's analysis of Russian speech culture as mechanism of politics will undoubtedly influence ongoing debates about the role of language in determining political culture in transitional societies, particularly his analysis of the economics surrounding Russian language culture in the early 2000s when 'talking about the nation promoted the nationalization of talk' (p. 105). *After Newspeak* is required reading for anyone researching language change, the power of language and/or linguistic politics in Russia, Eastern Europe and Central Asia. The book will also appeal to those seeking to better understand the unique qualities of the Russian language, particularly its relationship with the state and national identity over time. More generally, *After Newspeak* offers conceptual analyses and insights that will be welcomed by scholars and advanced undergraduates interested in cultural history, media studies and political communication.

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