SOVIET JOURNALISTS:
CADRES OR PROFESSIONALS?*

The Soviet press traditionally has been viewed as "unfree" in the West because the Communist Party/state established, funded, directed, and censored its newspapers at the same time that it prohibited the publication of contrary views. One important aspect of the press's lack of freedom is identified as the absence of independent reporting, for without the reporter's autonomous search for facts and individual evaluation of these facts, newspapers were unable to function as the fourth estate. Thus, it is argued, the Soviet press substituted one-sided analysis for news, bias for objectivity, and propagandists for journalists.1 From this perspective, there was and could have been no significant change in the Soviet press from October 1917 until August 1991, at which point Russia's free press was resurrected. From this perspective, Soviet journalists were always just Party propagandists, and thus Party cadres, never professionals or even semi-professionals.

The few historians of the early Soviet period who discuss its press also tend to view Soviet journalists as something less than their Western counterparts. For example, Jeffrey Brooks argues that although in the 1920s there was some "room for social criticism," because the "primary task" of Soviet journalists was the "presentation of an official viewpoint," journalists did not constitute a fourth estate.2 Similarly, Peter Kenez argues that as early as 1919 it was clear that the Soviet "press would have no other task than to spread and

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advertise the policies and decisions of the Party” and that in Soviet Russia “there could be no such profession as journalism.”

While in many respects true, these assessments do not adequately explain the changing role of the press in early Soviet society and also do not account for the metamorphosis in the status and the activities of Soviet journalists. Lack of freedom and independent Western-style reporting were indeed primary attributes of the Soviet press, and propaganda was that system’s primary function, for the Soviet press was in fact an integral part of the communist system. Nevertheless, our accepted image of the Soviet press is too narrowly conceived because it minimizes the significance of developmental changes which, for example, clearly distinguish the press of the 1920s from that of the 1930s, and which have profound implications for evaluating the role and status of journalists in Soviet society.

During the New Economic Policy (NEP, 1921-28) the Soviet press was not the monolithic instrument of mobilization that it would become by the early 1930s and Soviet journalists were not full-fledged Party cadres. On the contrary, the NEP newspaper was a genuine newspaper, albeit a newspaper of a completely new kind. And while NEP journalists were not professionals in the traditional Western sense, neither were they the cadres they would become. Instead, NEP journalists were a hybrid, combining elements of both the cadres and the professionals.

This article discusses Soviet journalists and their changing role and status in Soviet society. It first analyzes the most salient differences between the press of the NEP and Stalinist periods and argues that NEP journalists are best understood as cadre/professionals. It then discusses the process by which journalists lost their professionalism and were transformed into full-fledged cadres. In conclusion, it outlines the kinds of activities that journalists-as-cadres pursued in the early 1930s. While the article does not explicitly take up the issue of the character and purpose of the early Soviet press, it should be apparent that any revision of our view of Soviet journalists has serious consequences for our understanding of the Soviet press.


4. It is important to distinguish between leaders of the press corps and journalists. Leaders of the press corps clearly were Party cadres—they moved from one area of responsibility to another and their leadership of the press (as editors-in-chief of large central dailies or heads of press-related agencies, such as the Press Department of the Central Committee) was most often one of several areas of responsibility or short lived. Journalists, on the other hand, even if they worked in an editorial capacity, were engaged in the day-to-day production of newspapers and this work was their primary vocation. It is this second category of individuals with which I am concerned.