Introduction

This is a book about the momentous transformation in Russia's political and public culture that took place after the fall of the Soviet Union. I take political culture to be what people know, understand, believe, and feel about politics – how it is conducted, by whom, to what ends, and with what consequences for people's individual and collective lives. Political culture thus has an epistemic and an ethical dimension. It has an institutional dimension as well: politics is practiced more visibly in particular locales and contexts and by people in particular occupations.

The sudden dissolution of the Soviet Union – and the vertiginous political transformation that ensued – offered social scientists a rare opportunity to closely observe social and political change in the making. A key concern among post-Soviet reformers and lay and academic observers was whether the intended rebuilding of political institutions away from authoritarianism would be accompanied by a corresponding shift toward liberal political beliefs among citizens. The worry was that the change in beliefs might lag behind, because beliefs are presumably harder to transform than institutional practices (or so we are told).

This book speaks to this set of concerns. However, instead of treating culture as a desired aftereffect of institutional change, I see it as a constitutive component of that change. Political regimes and people's knowledge about the world – the common and collective world people inhabit together – are closely intertwined (Glaeser 2011). Political regimes do not exist without particular epistemologies and ethics built into them; regimes and knowledge about politics stand together and change together.

This book, then, is about the ethical and epistemic dimensions of post-Soviet political change. Put differently, it is a study of political change as a cultural process. Methodologically, it was imperative for a study like this to proceed at two levels of analysis – going back and forth between the institutional level and the level of meanings. Given these goals, several political institutions slated for a democratic

1

transition in Russia could have served as good research locales for
a study such as this. If we understand democratic politics to be about
the righting of wrongs and the pursuit of justice (Ranciere 2004), then
I believe that the legislative branch, the courts, and the press would all
have made particularly fitting research sites.

I chose to focus on the press because access to journalists and news-
rooms was far easier to secure for a single ethnographer without political
connections than gaining unmitigated entry to courtrooms and legisla-
tive chambers. Another reason in favor of studying the press was the fact
that I shared the educational background of many Russian journalists.
Lastly, and crucially, journalism remains one of the quintessential *poli-
tical* professions in modernity, alongside diplomacy and law, as Max
Weber remarked a century ago. Political advocacy – taking a stance,
fighting for a cause, and bearing responsibility for it – is "the politician's
element" (Weber 1946: 95). "To an outstanding degree, politics today is
in fact conducted in public by means of the spoken or written word,"
and "the journalist is nowadays the most important representative of the
demagogic species" (Weber 1946: 96). Studying journalism's transfor-
mation after the fall of the Soviet Union, then, offered a particularly
good vantage point for studying how people's knowledge and sentiment
about politics might have transformed in that process as well.

Studying Russia's political culture *as a process* means giving up on
a predetermined set of stereotypes about how Russians *are* or what they
wanted from the transition. Studying political culture through the van-
tage point of journalism in particular means going against the grain of
the dominant narrative about the curtailment of press freedom in Russia
over the past twenty years. More generally, it means challenging the
conceptual binary between journalism and propaganda where the two
are seen as mutually exclusive.[1] The dominant narrative goes like this:
press freedom was granted to the (then) Soviet press by Mikhail

---

[1] Several admirable attempts have recently been made to unsettle that binary –
whether by exposing its Cold War roots (Nerone 1995, 2013; Sparks 2000;
Szpunar 2012) or by attempting to theoretically decouple journalism from
democracy (Josephi 2013; Zelizer 2013; Gronvall 2015), but doing so remains
difficult. This is so because it goes against the grain of centuries of liberal political
thought, where journalism is conceptually tied to freedom of the press as
a historical coconspirator and constitutive element of liberal democracy. And
liberal democracy, in turn, remains the primary source of modern political
legitimacy. Recent suggestions to think beyond democracy as the privileged site
of political legitimacy in the contemporary West (Crouch 2004) inevitably push

Gorbachev and carried forward by Russia's first president, Boris Yeltsin. Powerful media moguls and oligarchs who emerged in the 1990s began to put various kinds of pressure on media outlets, which began to derail press freedom's movement from its tracks. With the arrival of President Putin in 2000, press freedom was further and unequivocally curtailed as private media began to be harassed, censorship was reintroduced, and independent journalists began to be threatened and even murdered.[2]

While acknowledging the significance of these stark and tragic developments, I wish to point out that this particular narrative has many unexamined and often contradictory assumptions built into it. The shift from government propaganda to a free press, for instance, is imagined – conceptually – as a clean, 180-degree turn. Journalism in the authoritarian period is imagined as having been either a vehicle of indoctrination or an outlet for resistance, with little room in between or outside that binary. Soviet media audiences are imagined to have been fully indoctrinated or, alternatively, to have been yearning for freedom and capable of seeing through propaganda's mystifications. Soviet journalists, in their turn, are variously imagined as cynical careerists, spineless yes-men, or closeted dissidents. With the lifting of censorship by Mikhail Gorbachev, Soviet journalists are understood to have tapped into their freedom-loving nature, quickly transforming themselves into fearless watchdogs shining the light of publicity on the abuses of power. In Yeltsin's Russia, independent journalists fought for equality and justice, educating citizens on matters of public concern and providing an open forum for multiple political voices. Where they failed to do that, they were marred by their backward cultural "legacies" or by pressure from oligarchs and media moguls. With the reemergence of censorship under Putin, the freedom switch is understood to have been turned back off, and things more or less went back to where they were before the fall of the Soviet Union.

I find these assumptions and the entire metaphor of press freedom's progressive movement derailed from its tracks not very helpful because they force us to see Russia's media-political transformation as driven primarily by powerful actors (presidents, oligarchs, media moguls)

against a strong conviction that democracy is one thing that Western liberals cannot afford to give up (Brown 2010).

[2] Russia's Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations (CJES) and Glasnost Defense Foundation (GDF) documented over 200 murders and countless beatings and intimidations of journalists in Russia between 1991 and 2006.

while overlooking the sociocultural dimensions of that transformation. Those broader social and cultural dynamics and their unintended consequences can tell us much more about what has been going on in Russian media and politics over the past three decades.

Instead of perpetuating these common assumptions yet again, this book offers a new vocabulary for discussing journalism and its political and cultural significance in nondemocratic and postauthoritarian settings. It is an ethics-based vocabulary, where ethics is a continuously evolving set of practices and criteria of judgment rather than a set of normative rules. I use the trope of truth-seeking and truth-telling as the central category of my analysis. The relationship between journalism and truth-telling is at least as old as between journalism and press freedom but is not identical with it. This is because the vocabulary of truth-telling is broader than the vocabulary of political liberalism, to which the concept of press freedom belongs.

Again, the classic narrative about journalism and truth in the Soviet Union is well known. It is captured by an old Soviet dissident joke: "There is no *izvestia* in *Pravda*, and there is no *pravda* in *Izvestia*," where *Izvestia* and *Pravda* are the names of Soviet newspapers and *izvestia* means "news" and *pravda* means "truth." Cold War communication scholar Wilbur Schramm (1956) offers a classic elaboration of this view in his influential essay, "The Soviet Communist Theory of the Press."[3] The difference between the Soviets' and "our own" approach to truth, says Schramm, is that the Soviets believe that there is only one truth out there – that of Marxism-Leninism. "The teachings of Marx are immovable because they are true," Schramm quotes Lenin as saying. The job of the Soviet mass communicator, then, was to interpret daily events from the standpoint of class struggle, to penetrate behind appearances, to abstract away from specifics, in order to uncover the underlying Marxist reality behind events. Truth is thus *revealed* to Soviet audiences through the mass media, whereas in the liberal tradition, Schramm (1956) says, truth is always *contested* through rigorous argument, confrontation of evidence, and exchange of ideas. At its most fundamental, Schramm (1956: 145) sums up, "the differences between the Soviet tradition and ours are the differences between Marx and Mill . . . on the one side, man as a mass, malleable, unimportant in himself, in need of Promethean leadership; on the other side, man as

---

[3] On the institutional overlap between the emerging fields of mass communication and Soviet studies during the Cold War, compare Simpson (1994) and Engerman (2009).

intelligent, discriminating, perfectly able to purchase by himself in a 'free market place of ideas.'"

Leaving Schramm's self-congratulatory rhetoric aside for the moment, let me point out how he is in fact drawing on an approach to knowledge and truth that has long been prevalent in Western epistemology. This is the view that knowledge – whether in science or in politics – is properly formed only when truth claims are subjected to doubt, skepticism, and rigorous questioning from all sides. As influential as this approach has been historically, it is not the only way to understand knowledge formation. There is a lesser-known tradition in Western epistemology that views knowledge production as dependent as much on *trust* as on skepticism and doubt. Knowledge in this tradition is understood to be a social institution and a collective good, and cognitive and moral orders here are seen as closely intertwined. In *A Social History of Truth*, historian of science Steven Shapin (1994) reminds us, for instance, that for most of our history, the credibility of someone's truth and knowledge claims was assessed through face-to-face interactions. "Premodern society looked truth in the face. Veracity was understood to be underwritten by virtue ... Truth flowed along the same personal channels as civil conversation" (Shapin 1994: 410). The same was the case, Shapin demonstrates, in early-modern Europe, where modern scientific practices first took hold. Only those who were known as virtuous persons could successfully participate in the creation of scientific truths; knowledge production was a collective effort, and practitioners relied on one another's honesty, integrity, civility, and a sense of proportion to succeed. Today, elaborate systems of institutional expertise, with checks and balances and rigorous internal monitoring, are said to guarantee scientific truthfulness instead of "the personal qualities of scientists" (Shapin 1994: 413). Yet, Shapin points out, when it comes down to it, any particular subfield of science today is still made up of interdependent actors who are pushing the limits of knowledge together. And like their early-modern predecessors, they make judgments about one another's personal integrity that are simultaneously judgments about the scientific merits of one another's work.

Shapin's approach to truth as a social product underscores how skepticism and doubt live on the margins of trust. Our ability to doubt someone's words or actions depends on our "ability to trust *almost everything else* about the scene in which [we] do skepticism" (Shapin 1994: 417, original emphasis). Doubting is still a social and communicative engagement; it is an attempt to calibrate "one dubiously

trustworthy source by others assumed to be trustworthy" (Shapin 1994: 21). When trust is fully severed, a community of discourse and knowledge falls apart: it is not only that people cannot agree with one another; rather, the *possibility of disagreement* itself is withdrawn (Shapin 1994: 36, original emphasis).[4]

That trust is the solution to the problem of moral order, Shapin sums up, is not news: it intuitively makes sense and has been commented on countless times. But the argument that knowledge depends on trust *is* counterintuitive because we tend to think that knowledge (cognitive order) and belief (moral order) are antithetical: "modern epistemology has systematically argued that legitimate knowledge is defined precisely by its rejection of trust" (Shapin 1994: 16).

So, if even the hardest of scientific facts are formed through ethical practices such as the granting or withdrawal of trust, then the "softer" varieties of political knowledge – such as the knowledge about what constitutes justice and fairness, what it means to be a citizen, to have a voice, to have rights, to mount grievances, to fight for a cause, to be represented – *must* also depend on the moral judgments people make about those in their midst who "do" politics. Government officials, party activists, people's deputies, judges, political advocates, and of course journalists have always been recognized as people who engage in politics. These groups of people existed, acted, and were judged for their actions both before and after the fall of the Soviet Union. Other groups of actors – election consultants, private media owners, campaign strategists, and other varieties of political operatives – joined them after 1991.

To play the devil's advocate, we may ask: Do politicians, activists, journalists, and other public figures even *care* whether and how they are judged by their mass publics? Some of them probably do not, and others certainly do. Does it matter? It most certainly does. As media scholar Daniel Hallin (1994) observed with respect to journalists (and as most ideological workers understand very well), there are actually limits beyond which even the most instrumental or strategic use of communication cannot be pushed. "Every process of communication involves a social relationship, in fact, a network of relationships, among active human subjects," Hallin (1994: 32) writes. "The maintenance of

---

[4] Jumping ahead of the story, this is precisely what happened to a substantial portion of public discourse in Russia throughout the 2000s.

these relationships imposes demands on institutions like the media . . . [in that they] have to attend to their own legitimacy. [The media] must maintain the integrity of their relationship with their audience and also the integrity of their own self-image and of the social relationships that make up the profession of journalism. Maintaining these relationships requires a certain minimum of honesty." If the media fail to attend to their own integrity in this way, Hallin (1994: 33) sums up, they face the risk that they "may become ineffective ideological institutions."

Paradoxically, this aspect of the Soviet media system and its satellites has received very little attention from scholars. Aside from important work by Ellen Mickiewicz (1981, 1988), who, from the early 1980s, was demonstrating through Soviet opinion polls that Soviet mass audiences trusted their media on some topics but wanted more honesty on others, few attempts have been made to systematically examine the mechanisms through which the credibility of Soviet-style media offerings was challenged and maintained.[5] This book offers such an examination. It is centrally concerned with those relations between journalists and their publics that Hallin (1994) talks about, and especially with journalists' efforts to maintain the integrity of those relations during and after Russia's encounter with press freedom in the 1990s.

This book argues that contrary to conventional narratives, Soviet-era journalists did share a truth- and justice-seeking[6] ethic for which they were recognized by their audiences. Soviet journalism carried on elements of social and intellectual critique from the nineteenth century, modeling itself on the writings of prominent justice-seekers who inspired the Russian Revolution such as Alexander Herzen and Vissarion Belinsky.[7] Bona fide journalism thus coexisted with official propaganda in the Soviet Union, at times standing more clearly apart and at other

---

[5] But see Boyer (2003); Meyen and Schwer (2007); Muller (2013); Wolfe (2006). Earlier examples of scholarship that paid some attention to the social and moral aspects of relations between Soviet mass communicators and their audiences include Dzirkals et al. (1982), Hopkins (1970), and Inkeles (1950).

[6] In Russian, *iskat' pravdu* – "to seek truth" – simultaneously means to seek justice as well. See the entry for *pravda* in Cassin (2014).

[7] Alexander Herzen (1812–1870) was one of Russia's most prominent political writers and philosophers of the nineteenth century. Influenced by Proudhon, Rousseau, and Hegel, he is credited with creating the political climate that led to the emancipation of the serfs in 1861. Vissarion Belinsky (1811–1848) was Russia's most preeminent literary critic and magazine editor of liberal persuasion, advocating for a socially conscious approach to literature.

times blending more easily together. The majority of Soviet journal-
ists, though, worked hard to maintain the trust of their audiences and
were recognized by readers for their efforts. After the fall of the Soviet
Union, those social and moral relations began to strain and were
eventually severed. Media privatization at a time of economic col-
lapse in the early 1990s led to the fragmentation of journalism as
a profession, alienating journalists from one another and from their
audiences, undercutting their moral authority, and bringing about
a public discourse in which journalism began to be framed as political
prostitution ("the second oldest profession") that had been absent in
the USSR.

The broader and more ambitious argument that this book makes is
that this spectacular institutional unraveling brought about a society-
wide erosion of the *value* of seeking truth and of speaking it to power.
Because journalism is linked to the most cherished of Enlightenment
ideals – the idea of freedom of speech and of speaking truth to power –
when journalism devolves, those values, I argue, devolve with it.
The ability (and the need) to seek truth and justice and to do so publicly
is fundamental to the maintenance of most social and political orders.
Citizens' ability to seek justice, and the society-wide appreciation of
those efforts, was just as central for the workings of socialism as it is
for the maintenance of liberalism. To suggest that post-Soviet society
lost its taste for truth- and justice-seeking is thus to suggest that the
collapse of the Soviet Union wreaked moral havoc in the lives of many
Russians. This profound moral disorientation is what much of this
book is about.

Last but not least, this book examines how this devolution in jour-
nalism has articulated with forms of state-sponsored cynicism that
President Putin has actively pursued during his tenure. Putin bolstered
his authority in part by trying to discredit Western ideals and practices,
particularly those of democracy promotion and civil society building.
My study shows why his efforts succeeded – because they had been
prepared by the crisis of journalism as an institution of truth-seeking
that had set in before Putin came to power. By the time Putin began to
consolidate his influence, manipulation of public opinion was simply
expected; indignation about it was absent; it was no longer news. This
untied Putin's hands and those of his allies to the point that by the end
of the 2000s, Russian officials and other power brokers (including
some journalists) began to get away not only with displays of cynicism

directed at liberal institutions but also with periodic open admissions of manipulation and deceit.

With this erosion of the value of truth-seeking, neither journalism nor press freedom make much sense. This crucial development paved the way for the emergence, and the society-wide acceptance, of rabid ultranationalist propaganda in Russia since 2014 (leading up to and following the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula from neighboring Ukraine) that would not have occurred without the tacit acquiescence of the majority of Russia's journalists who had only recently thought of themselves as representatives of an independent Fourth Estate.

Before moving on any further, any book claiming to say something new on the subject of truth-telling in Russia must first deal with an older, familiar claim that Soviet public life was full of falsehoods and lies and that those lies were perpetuated out of collective timidity or convenience, or both. The appeals by Alexander Solzhenitsyn (1974) and Vaclav Havel (1989) to their fellow citizens to "Live Not by Lies" and to "Live in Truth" are well-known examples of this position. So a discussion of truth-telling in Russia is necessarily linked to the discussion of the morality of the Soviet political project as a whole. It is to this discussion that we must first turn.

Truth in the USSR: An Ethical Turn

A moral condemnation of all things Soviet is a perspective with substantial intellectual pedigree, beginning with what was loosely known as the totalitarian school of Sovietology – a body of scholarship about the Soviet Union produced at the height of the Cold War. These works considered Soviet political rule fundamentally illegitimate and therefore immoral, based on coercion and indoctrination rather than consent (Conquest 1968; Friedrich and Brzezinski 1956; Kennan 1954; Schlesinger 1949).[8] The early works of the totalitarian school saw "the new Soviet man" to be a victim of propaganda and terror, atomized from

---

[8] Consider also Arendt (1951), Hayek (1944), Koestler (1941), and Orwell (1949). In addition to Sovietology, speculations about the degree of legitimacy of Soviet political order were a major current in other academic fields that similarly came of age at the height of the Cold War and were nurtured by it, including modernization and development studies, social psychology, comparative political science, and mass communication scholarship (Pletsch 1981; Simpson 1994; Engerman 2009).

fellow human beings, "dissolved in communist 'patterns of thought,' and unable to sustain a critical distance between himself and society" (Krylova 2000: 9). Historian Anna Krylova (2000: 8) argues that this image of the new Soviet man – easily suggestible, fearful, unable to relate to others, unwilling to think critically – was none other than "an immoral opposite of the liberal self," Western modernity's alter ego. Krylova (2000: 4) suggests that this kind of knowledge production took place in the particular, post–World War II environment when Western intellectuals felt "an uneasy sense of connectedness" to their totalitarian alter ego and were searching for "the roots of totalitarian deviation" so as to protect Western modernity from a potential internal enemy.[9]

In the 1940s, Western social scientists had to rely primarily on official Soviet documents for their knowledge about the Soviet Union. In the 1950s, new sources of data became available: interviews with émigrés who did not return to the Soviet Union after the end of World War II (the large-scale Harvard Émigré Interview Project) and the so-called Smolensk Archive – a large trove of archival documents from the Smolensk Oblast Committee of the Communist party that was captured intact by Nazi Germany in 1941, retained by West Germany, and subsequently made available to Western scholars.[10] Those new data helped to substantially refine the views of Cold War Sovietologists on "how Russia [was] ruled."[11] On the one hand, there was now clear evidence that many Soviet citizens genuinely endorsed state socialism as a legitimate form of government and that many recognized the gap between political ideals and attempts at their implementation. On the other hand, Cold War scholars discovered that the Soviet Union also had plenty of "non-believers" who had learned to manipulate the system to their personal advantage. The presence of these calculating, self-interested individuals supported Sovietologists' earlier suspicion that even in the midst of a social totality, there must have been "islands

---

[9] Krylova (2000: 8) points out the irony involved in some of the juxtapositions from that period. Some accounts (e.g., Erikson 1954) distinguish "the balanced, organic wholeness" of the liberal self from the "one-sided, mechanical totality" of the new Soviet man. The contrast thus drawn is between "'wholeness' as good and 'totality' as bad" (Krylova 2000: 8).

[10] Many of the classic texts of Cold War Sovietology were based on those two sources of data, including Inkeles (1950), Fainsod (1953), Bauer, Inkeles, and Kluckhohn (1956), Inkeles and Bauer (1959), and others.

[11] The title of Fainsod's (1953) classic text.