

Michael S. Gorham, **After Newspeak: Language Culture and Politics in Russia from Gorbachev to Putin**, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014, 256 pp., \$77.95 (hardcover), \$24.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by  
Anna Popkova  
Western Michigan University, USA

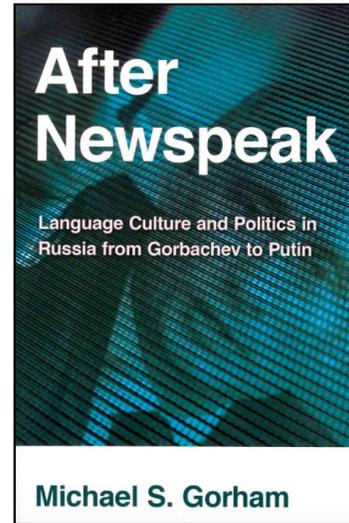
Michael Gorham's ***After Newspeak: Language Culture and Politics in Russia from Gorbachev to Putin*** is an insightful and thought-provoking cultural history of the Russian language and its close connection to Russian politics in the period from Gorbachev's *perestroika* to the early years of Putin's third presidential term.

Gorham sets the conceptual context for the book early in the introduction by explaining that his work is based on two key assumptions. The first is that "language not only reflects but itself shapes perception, identity, reality; that how we name things and call people helps define not only their image and status in society, but our own as well" (p. 3). The second is that "language, culture, and politics are closely intertwined and mutually dependent on one another for meaning" (p. 3). Recognizing that the premise of the interdependence of language, culture, identity, authority, and power has become "something of a truism in contemporary scholarship" (p. 3), Gorham nevertheless brings in perspectives from such fields as cultural studies, sociolinguistics, cultural anthropology, and media studies, thus immediately highlighting the interdisciplinary nature of his work and a wide range of academic audiences who would find the book valuable.

Gorham's clarity about the underlying conceptual premises of his book is matched by his clear articulation of the tasks he sets out to accomplish. In the introduction, he states:

The goals of this book are twofold: first, to offer, through a series of keyword analyses and case studies, a socially and politically contextualized history of contemporary Russian language culture, and, second, to examine the late- and post-Soviet political culture through the lens of language in order to offer an account of the major discursive trends and dominants. (p. 5)

Gorham then explicates the theoretical framework, which is one of the book's most valuable aspects, as it provides a useful conceptual structure for analyzing the complex relationship between language and politics. Such a theoretical approach makes the book relevant not only to those who are interested in Russian history, politics and language, but to anyone searching for good ways of conceptualizing the links among language, politics, power, authority, and history, especially in periods of radical social and political change.



Gorham's analysis focuses on the interplay among three forces: language ideologies, language economies, and communication technologies. Language ideologies are rooted in Russian folklore, literature, language history, and religious perspectives. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, language ideologies are tied to an ongoing power struggle between two perceptions and uses of language. The first views language as a tool (or a weapon) that can be used by speakers differently in different situations. The second assumes an essentialist view of language, tying it to certain essential features of "Russianness" and associating it with "the sacred canon of divine texts" (p. 13), thus situating it above the everyday discourse. As Gorham notes, "the tension between these two languages is built into the history of Russia . . . and manifests itself throughout history—particularly during periods of radical change" (p. 13). Indeed, each chapter that follows shows how the power dynamic between instrumental and essentialist views of language manifested in different critical moments of Russia's late- and post-Soviet history. To better understand this dynamic, Gorham introduces the concept of language economies. He argues that different ways of speaking and writing have different value at different times, and this value depends on the fluctuations in various market forces. Finally, changes in language culture and politics significantly depend on communication technologies, which disseminate various linguistic and political discourses and thus contribute to their legitimization or marginalization. In each subsequent chapter, Gorham shows how the changing dynamic between language ideologies, language economies, and communication technologies contributed to the transformation of Russian language and Russian politics in late- and post-Soviet time.

Chapter 1 sets important context for the rest of the book by discussing two seemingly contradictory legacies of the Soviet-era language culture. The first celebrated the classic 19th-century Russian literature as a primary model for proper writing and speech. The second adopted the rhetoric of Marxism-Leninism as the standard language of political practice. While the two could not be more different in linguistic style, Gorham demonstrates that both were norm-oriented and relied on the notion of centralized authority setting and regulating language standards. This idea is critical for understanding the nature of political change in Soviet Russia of the 1980s associated with the term *glasnost*, a topic Gorham turns to in chapter 2. After discussing the history and the meaning of *glasnost*, Gorham proceeds to show how the ambiguity of the term—*glasnost* can mean both "state-sanctioned access to information and outright 'freedom of speech'" (p. 54)—defined critical political debates during Gorbachev's perestroika. Gorham shows how this worked in practice through a comparative analysis of the minutes from two significant events: the 19th All-Union Party Conference in 1988 and the first Congress of People's Deputies in 1989. Gorham's insightful and incredibly engaging analysis of the linguistic battles that unfolded between "the deed-oriented *glasnost* of the apparatchiks" (p. 59) and "the word-oriented *glasnost* of the democrats" (p. 63) shows how language, as well as the fact that the Congress of People's Deputies was broadcast nationwide, allowed the democrats to turn the political situation in their favor.

Chapter 3 discusses the first challenge to the victory of *glasnost*, which, ironically, came from the very freedom *glasnost* and perestroika unleashed. Freedom of speech transformed into what Gorham calls "linguistic lawlessness." Slang, vulgarity, obscenity, and criminal argot along with a number of loanwords became common and normal for the speech styles of the 1990s, with a new market-driven media environment contributing to this trend. At the same time, Gorham argues that these linguistic trends "simply reflected social and economic conditions that had themselves become vulgar, brutal and criminal"

(p. 82). Chapter 4 examines various forms of linguistic purism that developed as a reaction to the state of linguistic lawlessness. While the attempts to preserve and protect the Russian language—and, as the purists contended, the Russian national identity itself—started in the narrow circles of specialists, the trend aligned with the market forces of the 2000s and transformed into a profitable industry of books, radio shows, and Internet sites that monitored, negotiated, and inevitably defined the parameters of proper speech culture. Chapter 5 continues to engage with the question of language normalization, but turns to the figure of Vladimir Putin as someone whose rhetoric played a significant role in defining the contours of linguistic authority and national identity in Russia. Through a detailed and illuminating analysis of Putin's interviews, press conferences, and annual multimedia show "Conversations with the President of the Russian Federation," Gorham demonstrates how Putin skillfully combined the rhetorical competence of a model Soviet technocrat with occasional vulgarisms that resonated with the general population and bolstered Putin's popularity. The chapter also discusses Putin's drive to "extend the nation's symbolic borders beyond the geographic" (p. 156) by promoting Russian language and culture beyond Russian borders—a topic that has only grown in relevance since the start of the civil war in Ukraine.

While chapter 5 emphasizes the connection between the success of Putin's rhetoric and Putin's complete control of Russian television, Chapter 6 discusses the link between the proliferation of new media technologies and the growth of political opposition to Putin in 2011–2012. In addition to examining a wide range of examples of Russia's "digital protest culture"—from Internet memes to social media campaigns, to blogs and websites that functioned as spaces for political dissent—Gorham also discusses various Internet-based forms of "pro-Kremlin pushback" (p. 180). He concludes the book by suggesting that it remains to be seen which forces—opposition or pro-Kremlin—will end up dominating the digital space in Russia, yet "either scenario . . . ensures that the language of politics and the politics of language in Russia will remain objects of sharp symbolic contestation for the foreseeable future" (p. 191).

Indeed, the events following the publication of Gorham's book, from the war in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea to the shooting down of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 and Russia's involvement in the Syrian conflict, underscore the importance of investigating the link between language and politics. Narratives of truth, power, authority, and national identity play a significant role in defining the meanings of these events for Russians and in shaping policies and actions related to these events. Although engaging with the period before 2014, Gorham's book and his arguments are only growing in significance in the context of Russia's current political development. Meticulously researched, wonderfully written, and full of vivid examples and compelling vignettes, *After Newspeak: Language Culture and Politics in Russia from Gorbachev to Putin* is essential reading for anyone studying Russian politics, language, media, and national identity.