Tacitus Trap in Media Disorder: Media Policy during the Political Collapse of the Soviet Union

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Abstract

In contemporary risk societies, trust increasingly relies on institutional assurances, and once broken, is difficult to restore—giving rise to the "Tacitus Trap," where government actions are met with suspicion regardless of intent. While public opinion can trigger this, flawed media institutions often create a fertile ground for its emergence. This paper explores the Soviet Union's collapse through the lens of media policy failures. Stalin's rigid ideological control created an opaque, stagnant information environment, laying the groundwork for distrust. Gorbachev's glasnost reforms, by contrast, loosened media oversight too rapidly, resulting in uncontrolled and distorted public discourse. Frequent ideological shifts further destabilized governance. As public anxiety grew amid conflicting narratives and policy inconsistency, trust in the government eroded, ultimately leading to the Soviet Union's dissolution under the conditions of a full-fledged Tacitus Trap.

Keywords: Risk Society, the Disintegration of the Soviet Union, Gorbachev, Stalin, Tacitus Trap

Introduction

Anthony Giddens (1994) observes that contemporary society is not only defined by risk but also by a significant transformation in the mechanisms of trust—shifting from interpersonal relationships to reliance on abstract systems such as legal institutions, governments, and expert knowledge. In traditional societies, trust was sustained through close-knit social networks based on kinship, cultural norms, and face-to-face interactions. In contrast, modern societies, shaped by globalization and increasing social mobility, depend on institutional assurances to manage uncertainty.

Georg Simmel highlighted trust as a foundational force of social cohesion, warning that without it, society risks disintegration (Zhu, 2009). Similarly, Paul Starr emphasizes that in risk societies, public confidence in governance—rather than empirical assessments of risk—is crucial. Once trust is lost, restoring it becomes exceedingly difficult. This erosion of trust underpins what political theorists describe as the "Tacitus Trap," in which government actions, whether honest or deceptive, are met with universal skepticism (Li & Liu, 2014).

Recent scholarship has linked the Tacitus Trap to failures in media communication. For example, Li Chunlei and Liu Bingying's analysis of the 2012 Shifang incident argues that misleading media coverage intensified public anxiety and distrust. Likewise, Yang Yan's study of the Wenzhou train collision highlights the vulnerability of governmental credibility in the digital age, where misinformation spreads rapidly.

However, these studies often neglect a critical factor: the role of media policy in shaping public discourse. In state-controlled media systems, such as that of the former Soviet Union, media governance decisions can either manage public opinion constructively or exacerbate social instability. The Soviet Union's collapse, under a tightly controlled yet ultimately dysfunctional media regime, provides a compelling case study. This paper argues that mismanagement of media policies—ranging from Stalin's suppressive censorship to Gorbachev's unregulated openness—eroded public trust, triggered the Tacitus Trap, and contributed to the political disintegration of the Soviet state.

Media Policies During the Political Collapse of the Soviet Union
Since the 1990s, scholars have examined the collapse of the Soviet Union through the lens of media management policy. Wen Youren (1994) argued that Gorbachev's embrace of unrestricted media openness and the withdrawal of Communist Party oversight enabled the proliferation of distorted, anti-socialist narratives. These narratives fueled ethnic separatism, glorified violence, and weakened military morale, ultimately eroding civil-military relations and public confidence. Citing a TASS commentator, Wen concluded that Soviet media under Gorbachev played a direct role in both the Party's downfall and the state's disintegration. Scholars such as Tang Xiuzhe, Wang Zhenyi, and Zhao Qiang echoed this view, identifying excessive ideological liberalization and uncontrolled discourse as key catalysts for collapse. Zhang Juxi further analyzed Gorbachev's 1989 Law on the Press and Other Mass Media, arguing that policies promoting glasnost and pluralism critically undermined ideological stability.

More recent studies have expanded beyond Gorbachev, identifying deeper structural issues rooted in earlier leadership. Pan Xianghui (2011) challenged the notion that glasnost alone caused collapse, pointing instead to the rigid ideological conformity and press censorship institutionalized during Stalin's rule. The near-total lack of journalistic autonomy, constant purging of dissent, and a tightly centralized propaganda system—exemplified by state-run newspapers like Pravda and Izvestia—created long-term dysfunction and information stagnation that weakened the system from within.

Other scholars have examined the instability caused by abrupt ideological shifts across leadership transitions. While Stalin's strict control defined early Soviet media policy, Khrushchev's de-Stalinization campaign briefly liberalized media practices, encouraging open discourse and coverage of formerly taboo issues. However, this was reversed by Brezhnev, who reinstated censorship and reasserted ideological orthodoxy. Gorbachev's later glasnost policies again relaxed controls, but in an environment unprepared for such openness. These cycles of repression and liberalization undermined public trust in both media and government. Many scholars argue that it was this inconsistent ideological management—rather than any single leader's policies—that eroded the credibility of Soviet institutions. The resulting

distrust in state narratives and governance mechanisms accelerated the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Media Policy Failures and the Emergence of the Tacitus Trap
The above-reviewed literature highlights the adverse consequences associated with the various media management policies adopted by Soviet leaders. Scholars have argued that overly relaxed, excessively stringent, or frequently shifting media regulations significantly contributed to ideological confusion and ultimately the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, both Gorbachev's "glasnost" reforms and Stalin's centralized cultural control exhibited substantial management deficiencies. Yang Yan (2012) identifies four primary factors responsible for the emergence of the Tacitus Trap: inconsistent and unstable public policy formulation causing public confusion; inadequate governmental transparency failing to dispel public doubts; public policies that contradict the interests of the populace; and low competence of government personnel undermining lawful governance. These elements were evident in the Soviet media policies, laying the groundwork for the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union.

The Stalin Era
Under Stalin's administration, media policies were extremely strict, severely curtailing press freedom, restricting public access to truthful information, and leading to societal stagnation and rigidity. Stalin famously stated in 1925, "Formal democracy is empty; the interests of the Party are everything," further emphasizing, "We oppose publishing debate pages…We must not indulge in debate. We are the governing party of the state; never forget this fact. Even minor internal disagreements among the leadership may cause adverse impacts domestically and certainly abroad" (Hu, 2014, p.37). Stalin's media control targeted anything perceived as contrary or hostile to proletarian ideology, idealistic in nature, written by "counter-revolutionaries," or advocating bourgeois values. Even children's literature praising traditional lifestyles faced strict censorship. Such measures deprived citizens of free expression, leading to societal inertia and significantly impeding national development. For instance, until the late 1940s and early 1950s, Soviet authorities labeled biological genetics, relativity theory, quantum mechanics, and cybernetics as "bourgeois idealism," stifling their development. Synthetic organic chemistry was similarly dismissed as "anti-scientific" or "pseudo-scientific" (Ma, 2004).

These biased narratives severely limited public perception, encouraging a distorted belief among citizens that the Soviet Union had become the pinnacle of global achievement. André Gide noted ironically, "Several years ago, we could still learn something from Germany and America. But now, there is nothing left for us to learn from foreigners" (Gide, 2004, p.29).

In addition to suppressing press freedom, Stalin's highly centralized cultural control systematically deprived citizens of accurate information about national affairs. Soviet media rarely reported on domestic disasters or tragedies. Instead, state media consistently depicted an artificially prosperous and stable society devoid of aviation crashes, railway accidents, shipwrecks, mine explosions, or natural disasters (Zhang, 1996, p.220). A notorious example was Pravda's fabricated report, approved by Stalin, depicting the coal miner Alexey Stakhanov extracting 130 tons of coal during a single shift. This myth propelled Stakhanov into a national

idol. In reality, the entire productivity of his three coworkers was falsely attributed solely to Stakhanov, orchestrated by mine officials to generate sensational propaganda.

Although Stalin's media policy was notably rigorous, the strictness was confined exclusively to ideological purity, disallowing dissenting views or critique. Fabricated reports glorifying Stalin's regime regularly appeared in Soviet media, while critical and objective voices or information considered to possess capitalist attributes faced harsh suppression. Roy Medvedev was expelled from the Party and exiled for openly criticizing Soviet governance, asserting, "Many aspects of the Soviet system relied not only on violence but also deception and falsification... It tolerated no dissent, brutally rejected any external criticism, and relied on repression to maintain political sterility, leaving society without immunity to any ideological challenges" (Medvedev, 1980, p.279). Such repression blocked mass media from providing accurate information to the public, creating an environment permeated by deception, dogmatism, and inflated pride. The severe information censorship and ideological rigidity fostered by Stalin laid fertile ground for the Tacitus Trap.

The Gorbachev Era
Leaders such as Khrushchev and later Gorbachev recognized the social shortcomings inherent in Stalinist media policies and sought reforms. Gorbachev's implementation of "glasnost," or openness, was particularly thorough and enduring. Initially intended to relax ideological controls over the media and restore press freedom, "glasnost" aimed to increase governmental transparency, allowing public oversight of state policies and encouraging citizens to openly express societal concerns.

In the early stages, the policy had positive impacts: hidden societal problems and internal corruption within the government became publicly scrutinized. However, as the policy progressed, media outlets were increasingly manipulated, resulting in an influx of misinformation and incendiary narratives. Zhang Juxi (2013) argues, "The implementation of glasnost excessively focused on how to expand openness, but failed to adequately prepare for and respond to the consequent issues arising from unrestricted dissemination, and lacked sufficient regulatory frameworks" (Zhang, 2013).

Although Gorbachev intended that liberalized media would foster transparency and accountability, he underestimated the negative consequences of deregulation, particularly the proliferation of false information. The 1989 Soviet Law on the Press explicitly prohibited misuse of press freedom, forbidding media from leaking state secrets, inciting violent regime change, promoting warfare, racial or religious extremism, distributing obscene content, or encouraging criminal activities. Apart from these specified restrictions, all other content was effectively permissible.

Consequently, Soviet media increasingly propagated distorted portrayals of history and defamation of socialism. Soviet leaders from Lenin and Stalin to contemporary officials were frequently depicted in sensationalist terms as "revolutionary villains," "tyrants," or "executioners." Western ideals of democracy, freedom, and human rights were uncritically praised, and sensationalist pseudoscience gained popularity. Notably, Moskovskaya Pravda introduced an astrology column, where its contributor was lauded as an "expert in commanding angels, demons, and humans through magical arts."

This chaotic environment led even the New York Times to observe that Soviet newspapers were regularly filled with sensational and provocative claims, ranging from UFO mysteries to blasphemous critiques of Bolsheviks, even suggesting Lenin had been a terrorist (Zhang, 2013). These inaccuracies further deepened societal confusion and eroded public confidence and national pride.

Between January and July 1989, over 500 labor groups held strikes, shifting their demands from economic grievances to broader social, cultural, and political reforms by spring 1990. Despite this growing unrest, policymakers paid insufficient attention to public dissatisfaction. Gorbachev took no decisive action against the increasingly detrimental effects of his media openness policy, allowing it to spiral uncontrollably. Unlike Stalin, who sought to maintain stability through stringent ideological oversight, Gorbachev abruptly relinquished control, exposing Soviet society to unchecked ideological competition. The government provided no meaningful guidance or safeguards amid the ensuing ideological turbulence. As public confusion and anxiety intensified amid shifting governmental policies and conflicting narratives, widespread distrust and dissatisfaction toward the government emerged, ultimately triggering the Tacitus Trap and accelerating the path toward the Soviet Union's collapse.

Conclusion

The public opinion chaos caused by the mismanagement of mass media communication is merely the surface phenomenon in the generation of the "Tacitus Trap." Given that media management ultimately falls under state purview, the government's media management policy is, in fact, the fundamental cause leading to its emergence.

This paper expands the application boundary of the "Tacitus Trap" theory by introducing this political communication concept and examining it within the dual context of risk society and media policy. While traditional studies often explore the formation of the "Tacitus Trap" from the single perspective of public opinion or government action, this study systematically reveals the decisive institutional role played by media policy. Through a comparative analysis of the starkly contrasting media policies during the periods of Stalin and Gorbachev, this paper proposes that the "extremization of media policy" is the key mechanism leading to the collapse of government credibility, thereby significantly enriching the theoretical explanation concerning the formation of state trust crises.

Furthermore, this research is grounded in the real-world context of the Soviet dissolution, which is used to deeply analyze the dual risks of media policy in both a totalitarian system and a transitional society. As the most influential socialist state of the 20th century, the Soviet Union's media management system holds certain historical similarities and institutional relevance to contemporary China. The findings of this study not only reveal the inherent drawbacks of two extreme media policy models—excessive control and excessive openness— but also offer a crucial historical mirror for modern states navigating the challenges of informatization and globalization, particularly on how to judiciously balance "openness and control," and "freedom and order." Against the current backdrop of dramatic global shifts in information dissemination and a complex, diversified public opinion ecology, the conclusions of this paper have direct warning and reference significance for preventing systemic trust crises and optimizing the national communication governance system.

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