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Nightline

ABC Network

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Soviet Spokesmen

TED KOPPEL: Once upon a time, you could recognize them instantly by their ill-fitting clothes and their surly disposition, but these days there's a new breed of Soviet spokesmen.

Good evening, I'm Ted Koppel, and this is Nightline.

You've seen them here, you've seen them there, these days you see them everywhere. How effective are these new charm merchants from Moscow? That's our focus tonight.

I received a telex yesterday from our bureau in Moscow passing on in full the text of a letter to me from Georgi Arbatov, one of the Soviet Union's leading experts on the United States and an advisor to Mikhail Gorbachev. I rather expect the same letter went out to a number of other people in the U.S. media.

It takes note of the fact that Americans have often criticized human rights violations in the Soviet Union, expressing their concern about the fate of specific individuals. The rest of the letter deals with the

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case of Doctor Charles Hyder, an American scientist who is on a hunger strike here in Washington to saved the world from nuclear war. It is wrong, Mr. Arbatov concludes in his letter, to sit back and wait for this noble man to die.

No argument. Doctor Hyder is obviously a committed and courageous man, but Georgi Arbatov has neatly equated Doctor Hyder's case, which is hardly an example of a human rights violation, with thousands of genuine human rights violations in the Soviet Union and he's done it in a personal telex to an American anchorman.

That's what's new, not the message, but the packaging. And it's the new brand of Soviet packaging we're going to examine tonight.

Here's Nightline correspondent, James Walker.

JAMES WALKER: Okay, you say, it's another one of those Soviet spokesmen. Never could remember their names, but they're generally overweight, a little grouchy, and speak English with a thick accent that goes on, and on, and on.

Well, America, look again. Meet the latest model Soviet spokesman.

FRANK GREER (Political consultant) : He literally looks like an American candidate for office, almost.

WALKER: Frank Greer ought to know. He, John Deardourff, and David Sawyer are three of the leading consultants to American politicians. They know what sells on TV, so we asked them to review the performances of seven Russians whom the Soviet government had made available to appear on American television during the past eight years.

Like Radio Moscow commentator Joe Adamov. In this 1983 appearance, Adamov displayed the old Soviet delivery style, called the "Bear hug." You seize the subject and hold it.

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JOE ADAMOV: And that is why the Cuban troops were invited into that country. Any regime that is not to the United States liking, either it tries to send in troops from outside like in Angola or Afghanistan, or direct aggression as we see in Grenada today. The same thing happened in Chile.

GREER: He's articulate. I mean he speaks very much as an American would, but he's so combative that I think it would turn off the American public.

JOHN DEARDOURFF (Political consultant): Well, from a stylistic standpoint, both he and Arbatov look like what I think the American stereotype of the mean, ugly Russian might be.

WALKER: Of course, not all Russians are long-winded. Listen to Gennadi Gerasimov, Chief Spokesman for the Soviet Foreign Ministry.

KOPPEL: The Sakharov/Daniloff affair, just a minor bump in the road or does it have any importance of it's own now that it's over?

GENNADI GERASIMOV: Now that it's over, I think it will be forgotten pretty soon.

DAVID SAWYER (Political consultant): He certainly learned the short answer technique.

GREER: He has a slightly, I think, defensive attitude. I don't think he's very persuasive in making his point. I mean, I think he's clearly a public spokesman. He doesn't look like he's enjoying being on television.

WALKER: But this man does. He's Vladimir Pozner. He's one of a kind, comfortable speaking our language and very disarming, like when he tried to justify the Soviet downing of South Korean Airline Flight 007 in 1983.

VLADIMIR POZNER: Why didn't the pilot of the South Korean plane contact or answer the Soviet signals and tell them point blank what they were?

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WALKER: And Pozner can really turn on the charm, making the most of his first-hand knowledge of America.

PHIL DONAHUE: You grew up in this city?

POZNER: I did.

DONAHUE: You went to Stuyvesant High School?

POZNER: I did.

GREER: He is really warm and engaging.

DONAHUE: You did not sing America the Beautiful in the school choir, I assume?

POZNER: Had a lousy voice.

DONAHUE: How do we look to you?

POZNER: Let me tell you this, when I walked out in the streets it was a very emotional thing for me. I've dreamed about it many times, because regardless of being a Soviet citizen, I love New York.

SAWYER: Now, what can you say, it's perfect. He's very engaging, emotionally you identify with him. He's a very real person and he comes across that way, without any of the official --

DEARDOURFF: No, it's a very human environment talking to Donahue --

GREER: And I also think that part of it is he's so familiar with the language that you almost forget you're listening to a Russian spokesman.

SAWYER: In one sense, he's certainly the most dangerous, because you feel as if you're talking to your next door neighbor and you forget for a moment that he's a Soviet propagandist.

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WALKER: And, this is the new breed of Soviet spokesmen. Dimitri Titov could almost change his name to Clark Kent and Vitaly Churkin is equally presentable.

VITALY CHURKIN: It is the sincere hope of the government of Afghanistan, and our hope too, that nobody is going to be killed from now on in Afghanistan.

DEARDOURFF: He has the perfect anchorman's haircut.

SAWYER: Exactly, both those last two really represent a new generation. They're calm, they're relaxed, they're credible, they're open, they're completely comfortable. They have accents, but it in no way interferes with being able to listen to what they're saying, you know, with a fairly open mind.

DEARDOURFF: We're getting away from these older, balding, white haired men wearing suits that look like they were made out of, you know, blankets left over from the Crimean War. I mean, they are now understanding that if they are going to use American television, they have to use it the way successful Americans use television.

WALKER: So, gone are the blankets, replaced by a Brooks Brothers appearance combined with a low key, friendlier style. And just where might the Soviets have gotten the idea to modernize their TV image? Ironically, say our media experts, maybe from the great communicator himself, from Ronald Reagan.

Ted.

KOPPEL: For the most part, the changes are still principally in style rather than substance, but as James Walker will tell us in a moment, there's been some change in substance too.

(Commercials)

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Correspondent James Walker now continues his analysis of Soviet spokesmen, style and substance.

WALKER: April 26th, 1986, one of the world's worst nuclear accidents takes place in Chernobyl, but the Soviets say nothing. Several days later, with worried European officials talking about spreading radiation, Soviet spokesmen are made available for TV appearances.

Their message reflects the traditional Soviet defensive attitude toward such crisis, namely stonewall.

EUGENE POZDNYAKOV: We were accused of not, you know, informing the governments of the proper countries. It happened on Saturday, and the governments of proper countries are usually on holidays on weekends.

KOPPEL: Oh, come on. Come on.

POZDNYAKOV: On Monday they received --

KOPPEL: No, no, no, no, no. Now, Mr. Pozknyakov --

WALKER: Two weeks later, the Chief Soviet Spokesman, Gennadi Gerasimov, seemed to regret the lack of candor about Chernobyl.

GERASIMOV: You can criticize us for a little bit of a delay, we wanted to come out with this possible news.

WALKER: In fact, many Soviet watchers think the Russians these days are practicing Western style damage control.

KOPPEL: What has been charged for quite some time, that you have been using public relations stunts in a sense here, to distract attention --

GERASIMOV: It's your art, it's not our art, PR.

KOPPEL: I beg your pardon?

GERASIMOV: It is your art, PR, public relations.

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KOPPEL: Well, you seem to be learning very quickly.

GERASIMOV: Madison Avenue is in New York, not in Moscow.

WALKER: A Madison Avenue product?

DAVID POWELL (Soviet media specialist): Well, I wouldn't be surprised.

WALKER: David Powell is a Soviet media specialist, who thinks the Russians have embraced Madison Avenue in style, but not in substance.

POWELL: The messages, I think, are really very similar to those that they have been for decades, but the packaging, the approach that they employ, the physical appearance of the commentators, is now much more nearly like what Americans are accustomed to, and what Americans can more readily identify with.

WALKER: And many Soviet spokesmen are becoming much cagier at answering thorny questions. Consider Alexander Podakin's tactic, when asked in 1984 about Soviet dissident Andre Sakharov's whereabouts.

ALEXANDER PODAKIN: The West knows perfectly well where is Mr. Sakharov, and again, if we are going to discuss something, there are major problems -- well, let us discuss some of the problems that exist right in the United States. There could be discussions of the people who are, on mass scale, deprived of their rights to work.

POWELL: In the very recent past, it has been a very gentle effort to move the subject matter of the discussion from an awkward one, from the Soviet point of view, to one much more congenial to Soviet needs, that is this issue of bag ladies or unemployment or drug abuse or whatever in the United States.

WALKER: The Soviets have a growing stable of spokesmen available for TV interviews for American audiences. Although they use different men with different titles,

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journalist, diplomate, scientist, academician, American analysts say they all spout the Party line.

NICHOLAS DANILOFF: The thing you have to keep in mind is that there is one employer, and that is the Soviet government basically, so when they speak, they speak against the background of the fact that there is one employer. So they're not going to be wildly critical of their employer.

WALKER: And they get their marching orders from the man standing to the left of Soviet Party boss, Mikhail Gorbachev. His name is Alexander Yakovlev, Chief of Propaganda, member of the Politburo, and a former ambassador to Canada. Incidentally, he studied at Columbia University for one year.

And, when it comes to U.S. directed propaganda, Anatoly Dobrynin weighs in. Dobrynin was Soviet Ambassador to the United States for 25 years.

POWELL: Both of these men, Yakovlev and Dobrynin, understand that Americans don't want to see friction, they don't want to see conflict. They'd like to see at least the appearance of compromise, they'd like to see the "arms control process" or a "peace process."

WALKER: And it's a lesson not lost on the spokesmen who want to sound reasonable, magnanimous.

CHURKIN: You are right that the Vienna talks were not very successful. Maybe it is because the framework was not broad enough for them. So now we are offering to broaden that framework, including the entire territory of Europe up to the Urals in the East of Europe.

WALKER: Talking about our differences, it's a new style, a new openness, but the changes in style are far more dramatic than the changes in substance. The Soviets have realiz d that in the U.S. the court of public opinion is supreme.

I'm James Walker for Nightline, in Washington.

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KOPPEL: When we come back, we'll talk with a man whose own education and background in the Soviet Union allow him to focus clearly on those differences in style and substance, Soviet emigre, Dimitri Simes.

(Commercials)

KOPPEL: Joining us live in our Washington Bureau is Dimitri Simes, who immigrated to the United States in 1973. Educated in the Soviet Union, Mr. Simes is now a Senior Associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and Director of their program on U.S./Soviet relations.

I was just thinking, it was back in 1973, Dimitri, that I used to go to lunch with a Soviet diplomat here. It was at the time of the Watergate crisis, and he genuinely did not believe it was possible that Richard Nixon might be forced out of office, because he didn't understand how much influence the American Congress had, and he certainly didn't realize how much influence the American public and the American media had. They've smartened up a lot in the last 14 years a lot, haven't they? How and why?

DIMITRI SIMES: Ted, they have smartened up, but let's also not overstate it. There was recently an article in Izvestia, where they suggested that the military/industrial complex in the United States was unhappy with Ronald Reagan who made too many concessions in Reykjavik, so they organized this little scandal over the Iran/contra affair. They are learning, but they have a long way to go.

But, most importantly, there is a new generation of scholars, journalists, and officials in the Soviet Union who are comfortable with the West and more importantly, who are comfortable with themselves, who were not raised during the Stalin period, who do not believe that saying something wrong on American TV would bring them to Siberia.

It is a combination of change in Soviet style and in

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real change inside the Soviet Union that makes the difference.

KOPPEL: What about all these people that we bring on our programs here in the United States, is there a central place where they are trained? In other words, is there a conscious effort made by the Soviet government when it dispatches people to this country to make sure that they are comfortable on American television?

SIMES: Initially, Ted, that was not a criteria at all. What the Soviets really cared about was somebody who would deliver the Party line. A person of the embassy who would dispatch a staff member to appear on American TV would not think about this person's effectiveness with the American audience. He would worry much more about the Central Committee Secretary who would say, "How did you allow this guy to appear on the Nightline, and to say something different from the Party line?".

You could notice, Ted, that Dobrynin for instance, to the best of my knowledge, never appeared on American TV, because he cared too much about his reputation, about his dignity, and he simply would not be embarrassed like some of the guests on your show in the past.

KOPPEL: But indeed, it was under Ambassador Dobrynin's -- or during his tenure, that this group of people, and I understand that he and Vladimir Pozner, for example, he's a great admirer of Vladimir Pozner, he believes that Pozner did very, very well. And I have been told that Dobrynin used to cable back to Moscow and say, "Keep this guy coming", because he's very effective on American television.

SIMES: Well, that is something they began doing in the late 70's and the early 80's, but frankly, at that time Pozner was almost a sacrificial lamb. He was a very junior official of the Soviet radio, and his only job was to broadcast to the United States.

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There were obviously exceptions, but I still would argue that the main criteria was to put somebody on TV who would not put his superiors in trouble, who would sound right, not to people in the United States, but to his political bosses in Moscow.

KOPPEL: All right. Where, when, and why did it change, Dimitri?

SIMES: Ted, this began changing during the late Brezhnev period, because of Dobrynin, because of some other officials in Moscow, and frankly, because they began learning that American TV could be very useful. And they also learned something that they never expected, namely that people like you could be fair to them, that they could have an impact, that being honest, that being effective, that being charming, would make a difference.

Then came Mikhail Gorbachev and a group of people around him, much more experienced in American and Western affairs in general, and people essentially who emphasize effectiveness and people who are very self-confident, people who believe that they can compete with American officials and equals, that they have a good case and that they can deliver it very effectively.

KOPPEL: Now, you phrased it very generously when you said they look at people like me and say, "Aha, they can be fair." Is that a kind way of saying, you know, go on American television because they're all a bunch of patsies anyway, they'll let you say whatever you want.

SIMES: Well, I think that they started with an assumption, Ted, that whatever they would say, nobody would believe them, that lying through their teeth or trying to be truthful as much as they could would not make any difference whatsoever.

They learned that it would make a difference, that there was a premium on trying to be truthful. And there's no question that they are government employees

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and as all diplomats, you know diplomats are honorable people who have to lie on behalf of their government, and Mr. Pozner lies on behalf of his government all the time. But they are not trying to lie just for the sake of it as they were doing very often in the past.

KOPPEL: All right. I'll tell you what, I want to take a break, but before we take a break let me pose a question to you and then you'll give me the answer after we come back.

There are clear, stylistic changes, but in reality has anything of substance changed? I want you to respond to that when we return.

We will continue our conversation with Dimitri Simes in just a moment.

(Commercials)

KOPPEL: Continuing our conversation now with Dimitri Simes here in Washington.

Dimitri, the package has clearly changed, how about the message inside? Any changes at all?

SIMES: Well, Ted, the message has changed also. The message has changed because there is a new leader in the Soviet Union who said the status quo was no longer acceptable. His slogan is reform rather than continuity, and consequently Soviet spokesmen are perfectly prepared, sometimes they are even delighted, to discuss and to criticize Soviet mistakes of the past.

But, what did not change is what was said before on this program, these people are Soviet government employees. They reflect the position of their government and you certainly wouldn't expect them to criticize policies of their new leader, Mikhail Gorbachev.

Glasnost, Soviet style today, is glasnost to support Gorbachev, not to undermine his initiatives.

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KOPPEL: Glasnost is the new Soviet policy of openness, right?

SIMES: It is openness to indulge the General Secretary, effectively. As Gorbachev said at the last Party plenum, "We've talked enough about the reform, now we have to implement it." And he made very clear that those who oppose reform would be crushed. That is his version of glasnost.

KOPPEL: You have -- in a sense, you straddle two cultures, the Soviet culture and the American culture. Do you feel uncomfortable seeing these men -- and we've deliberately been calling them spokesmen because there are no women among them -- do you feel uncomfortable seeing these men on American television?

SIMES: Ted, I have a mixed response. First of all, I am glad that the Soviet Union is becoming a more civilized and sophisticated society, and it is entirely constructive if they can address American audiences using American language, symbols and terminology which we can identify with.

But, very often, I think, we forget that we are dealing with Soviet government employees promoting Soviet foreign policy objectives and only to the extent that you can identify with these objectives, you can identify with these people. They still work for the adversary, and they still say exactly what they are instructed to say even if they do it with great charm.

KOPPEL: Is there any usefulness though, is what I'm asking, to having them on and letting them say it as long as we identify them for what they are, which is spokesmen of that government?

SIMES: Ted, there is no question in my mind that the American people are better off and richer by knowing what the Soviet position is as long as they can understand it correctly. But they are entitled to know that Vladimir Pozner, for instance, is a former American citizen who defected to the Soviet Union and

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he is a man, as you said today, who over the years supported the Party line.

Let's remember that those charming spokesmen today, very often are exactly the same people who claimed that Andre Sakharov was a criminal, that the Soviets were invited to liberate Afghanistan and et cetera, and et cetera, and et cetera.

KOPPEL: Dimitri, I'm sorry I have to cut you off. We are really out of time, but I thank you very much. It was generous of you to come in tonight.

SIMES: It was a pleasure.

KOPPEL: Thank you.

That's our report for tonight. I'm Ted Koppel, in Washington. For all of us here at ABC news, good night.

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