

Pravda Hits 100, Still Urging Workers to Unite

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Pravda editor-in-chief Boris Komotsky working in his office, decorated with a picture of Lenin reading Pravda. **Sergei Karpukhin**

One hundred years after its first edition appeared, the once-mighty Pravda newspaper has gone back to its origins as a struggling opposition newspaper but is still defiantly urging the workers of the world to unite.

The paper that for decades was the mouthpiece of the ruling Soviet Communist Party, churning out propaganda that made a mockery of its title, meaning "Truth," suffered a humiliating fall from grace as the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991.

Banned by President Boris Yeltsin in 1991, Pravda was later revived, then sold to a Greek family, engulfed by financial problems and finally taken over in 1997 by the Russian Communist Party's Central Committee.

Times are hard. But its editor says battling hostile authorities, the threat of closure and financial problems is how Pravda spent its early years after first appearing in St.

Petersburg on May 5, 1912, until the 1917 Revolution.

"In many respects our role and purpose has gone back to what it was before 1917," Boris Komotsky said in his office in Moscow's Ulitsa Pravdy, a huge photograph of Soviet state founder Vladimir Lenin reading Pravda on the wall behind him.

"We are the opposition's main organ, fighting for power, for policy changes. We've gone through so many problems. Now each of the workers here is a hero. At times they've had to work without getting a paycheck."

The paper will celebrate its anniversary with a reception in central Moscow but otherwise says it allows itself no luxuries.

In many ways, Pravda seems stuck in the past. A large bust of Lenin greets anyone entering the newspaper's offices. Busts of Karl Marx and Soviet dictator Josef Stalin rest on a cabinet behind the editor's desk. Marxist literature lines the walls.

The newspaper does not look very different from in Soviet times, with the three Soviet medals it received still featuring prominently on the masthead under the slogan: "Proletariat of all countries, unite!"

The paper is smaller — now just four pages — and Komotsky said there are just 23 journalists, including three in Moldova, Ukraine and Belarus. The print run is 100,000, compared with millions in its heyday.

But the layout and content are familiar to anyone who read the paper in Soviet days, with articles extolling the virtues of the worker and railing against capitalism.

"We are the only newspaper in Russia today that has not changed its form and content," said Komotsky, a senior member of the Communist Party. "We are true to our name."

Critics say that was never really the case at Pravda. News was never a priority, and jokes about its lack of objectivity and dullness abounded.

In a play on the meaning of its title and that of the daily Izvestia, which means "news," Soviet citizens used to quip: "There's no truth in Pravda and no news in Izvestia."

Deprived of its role as the ruling party's mouthpiece, Pravda's relevance is not clear to everyone.

"It was probably the dullest paper in the Soviet Union. I haven't read it for ages, and I think it has no role to play now," said Konstantin von Eggert, a commentator for Kommersant FM radio. "It's the kind of brand you can't resuscitate. If you look at things now, even being called 'Truth' is a bit rich. It makes anyone in the post-modern era mistrust it from the very start."

Even at its peak, Pravda was more widely read than it was loved. Russians say even the Communist Party members who subscribed to it did so mainly out of a sense of obligation.

"We were supposed to read Pravda, but I rarely did," said Konstantin Petrov, a 57-year-old businessman, adding that he had always preferred the magazine Ogonyok.

Architect Alexander Fyodorov said: "I still read Pravda. Everyone should. There's still a place for it. Mind you, my favorite was always another newspaper, Sovietskaya Rossia."

Pravda was, however, required reading for Moscow-based foreign correspondents and diplomats, who pored over it for news about what was really going on behind the scenes.

Articles rarely led on the real news, especially if it reflected badly on the Soviet Union. Journalists learned to skim through long and turgid articles to find the paragraph starting "Odnako" (however), which could suddenly reveal a newsworthy gem.

The order in which Communist Party officials were listed at official events showed who was in favor. Even veiled criticism in Pravda meant an official was out of favor.

News would sometimes appear from the provinces, otherwise unobtainable for foreigners at a time when travel was limited outside the capital. Readers' letters sometimes gave a sense of what Soviet people were really thinking.

In a secretive country where news was hard to come by for Soviet citizens, and often censored, Pravda would occasionally announce major developments such as the death of leaders.

One joke told how every morning a man would come up to a newspaper stand, buy Pravda, look at the front page and then toss it angrily into the bin. The newspaper seller, intrigued, eventually asked why he did this.

"I'm only interested in the front page. I'm looking out for an obituary," the man says.

When the newspaper seller points out that obituaries only appeared on the back page, the man says: "I assure you, the obituary I'm looking for will be on the front page."

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