<u>Cold War Broadcasting (Review)</u>

by Johanna Granville

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"If the house across the street is ablaze and Radio Free Europe doesn't confirm it, then it surely must be a hoax." Such was a common anecdote circulating in Romania during the Cold War years, according to Nestor Ratesh, former director of RFE's Romanian Service (p. 207). Ratesh, along with other radio veterans and scholars, presented their research at a conference at Stanford University's Hoover Institution in October 2004. *Cold War Broadcasting: Impact on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe*, edited by former RFE/RL officials A. Ross Johnson and R. Eugene Parta, is the published result. The volume consists of three essays detailing the goals and history of Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, and Radio Liberty; four essays about jamming procedures and audiences in Bloc countries; six essays about Western radios' impact on Eastern Europe; and three essays about the radios' impact within the former Soviet Union. The appendix contains fifty-one archival documents about official regime perceptions of, and countermeasures against, Western broadcasting: seventeen from Russia, thirteen from Poland, eleven from Bulgaria, four from the Czech Republic, four from Hungary, and one each from Romania and former

East Germany, respectively. Founded in 1942, the goal of Voice of America (VOA) was primarily to reflect the United States to the world, whereas Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty, established in 1949 and 1953 respectively, aimed to "keep alive the hope for freedom," serving as surrogate radios for the citizens within Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, whose own media was heavily censored. As Gene Sosin, a former program director at Radio Liberty, wrote, quoting VOA director Henry Loomis, VOA and RFE/RL were like "the blades of a scissors, each working together to produce an effective cutting edge" (p. 21). By the 1980s, however, the roles were often reversed, with VOA providing detailed in-country reportage, especially during crises, and RFE/RL covering international news as well. As Alan Heil, a former VOA deputy director, and other contributors point out, VOA was less jammed than RFE/RL, and rarely jammed at all in English (p. 26). To give listeners incentive to juggle with the dials, RFE/RL offered more "forbidden fruit" – reading chapters from banned books such as Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*, whereas VOA broadcasters refused to read chapters from Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*, which they viewed as "indulging in polemics aimed at changing the internal structure of the Soviet Union." (p. 36).

The contributors proudly enumerate the radios' successes. Despite harsh anti-communist rhetoric in the beginning, mainly due to McCarthy's charges of being soft on communism, the radios later formulated guidelines for more objective, professional reporting. As George Woodard explains, the Americans learned to circumvent Soviet jammers with techniques such as "simulcasting," i.e. broadcasting on several frequencies simultaneously (p. 59). According to Amir Weiner, VOA "beat the Soviets to the punch" in some regions by airing its Russian-language evening news broadcasts half-an-hour before

the Soviet "Latest News" (p. 310). Western radios widely publicized issues like the Soviet break with Tito's Yugoslavia, Stalin's death, the replacement of Mátyás Rákosi by Imre Nagy, the Polish defector Światło's revelations, and Khrushchev's reconciliation with Tito. As Weiner reveals, Western Ukrainians wondered why the Secret Speech had not been published in 1956 in their own newspapers. They were also surprised to hear from the radios that Khrushchev had not resigned due to old age, but instead was ousted (pp. 301, 311). They first learned of Khrushchev's visit to the U.S., the "shoe incident" at the UN, and the construction of the Berlin Wall from Radio Liberty and the Voice of America. Citizens' letters to the Central Committee, the State radio committee, and to propagandists also "revealed a population informed by Western broadcasts" (p. 309). By 1953, according to Paul Henze, RFE "became a key contributor to the U.S. government's intelligence" database on Eastern Europe, without even resorting to clandestine methods (p. 10). To enhance credibility, VOA and RFE/RL broadcast Nobel laureate Linus Pauling's denunciations of U.S. nuclear testing in 1962, as well as negative aspects of the Vietnam War, Watergate, and Nixon's resignation, which convinced Soviet dissidents like Lyudmila Alexeyeva that the United States was truly a free country (pp. 21, 35, 48). Western broadcasts often served as Soviet and East European citizens' sole source of unbiased news during such crises as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, martial law to counter the Polish Solidarity movement, the downing of the Korean airliner in 1983, the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, the East European revolutions of 1989, and the August 1991 putsch attempt.

"Lacking until now," the editors write, "are studies of the impact of Western Cold War broadcasting, on both societies and Communist regimes that draw on archival material from the other side of the former Iron Curtain" (p. xi). As István Rév explains, the main

method by which Western researchers could learn in the 1960s and 1970s about the radios' impact on target audiences was by reading letters from listeners and by interviewing travelers from the Bloc countries: recent immigrants, unsuspecting tourists, volunteer helpers, and undercover agents (p. 240). This skewed the earlier studies toward urban, educated, middle-aged males who were most likely Communist party members (pp. 68-9). The difficulty for Soviet sociologists, on the other hand - as Elena Bashkirova notes – was in obtaining honest answers from Soviet citizens who responded to their surveys, since listening to foreign radios was illegal and viewed as an anti-Soviet activity (p. 104). Generally, the research findings of both Western and Soviet analysts concur, namely that younger, better educated people tended to listen the most often, that more people listened in the 1960s and 1970s than in the 1950s, that they listened to obtain objective news and for enjoyment, and that VOA was more often listened to because it was less jammed (pp. 109-110).

Data constraints remain, however. We lack in-depth public opinion polls of Bloc country citizens over intervals, beginning in the 1950s, to show how listening to Western radios actually *changed* their world views. As Weiner observes, Soviet archival documents are usually police reports complaining about isolated "troublemakers"; they were not public opinion surveys (p. 299). Communist authorities, moreover, probably lacked incentive to conduct such studies about their citizens' listening habits. Such polls would give more attention to the abhorred "foreign voices," which they hoped would simply go away. As Ratesh reveals, the Ceaușescu regime never conducted such surveys; it simply set out to bomb the RFE/RL headquarters in Munich (1981), and murder key RFE anchors, hoping to intimidate future ones (p. 214). Three consecutive directors of RFE's Romanian

Service mysteriously died of cancer in less than seven years (e.g. Noel Bernard in 1981, Vlad Georgescu in 1988, and Emil Georgescu in 1985), and Ratesh himself received a death threat (pp. 218, 220, 225-6). It is also impossible to speculate that the radios' messages always "imparted hope" to *all* listeners, given the absence of candid, comprehensive public opinion surveys. Some of RFE/RL's imaginative programs praised living standards in the West and explained the latest medicines available there for diseases still considered incurable within the Soviet bloc. The average listener, with no prospects for emigrating to the West, and with no advanced knowledge that the communist empire would collapse in 1989-1991, could understandably become *depressed*, not hopeful, by listening to such broadcasts. A triumphalist tone pervades some of the essays in this volume, to the effect: the West won the Cold War, and Western radios played a key role in the Soviet empire's collapse. Of course, other factors contributed to the collapse (e.g. Gorbachev's decision not to use force to retain East European satellites, the communist empire's internal weaknesses, the European nuclear freeze movement, and human rights movements within the Soviet bloc). Political conditions color academic reports. The tone of studies about the impact of the Western radios might be more sober if the communist empire were still intact. Documents from Austrian archives reveal, for example, that some citizens in the 1950s and early 1960s were irritated by RFE's broadcasts, fearful that the Soviets, who were accusing Austria of violating its oath of neutrality, might reoccupy eastern Austria.

Nevertheless, *Cold War Broadcasting* is a vital research tool, and will no doubt pave the way for further archive-based studies about the Western radios' impact on the populations behind the Iron Curtain. It should be read in conjunction with books by Richard H. Cummings (*Cold War Radio*, 2009); R. Eugene Parta (*Discovering the Hidden Listener*,

2007); Arch Puddington *(Broadcasting Freedom*, 2000); Gene Sosin *(Sparks of Liberty*, 1999); and Michael Nelson *(War of the Black Heavens*, 1997).

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