

2009

Radio as a Tool of the State: Radio Moscow and the Early Cold War

Mark D. Winek
American University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.bucknell.edu/chr>

Recommended Citation

Winek, Mark D. (2009) "Radio as a Tool of the State: Radio Moscow and the Early Cold War ," *Comparative Humanities Review*: Vol. 3, Article 9.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.bucknell.edu/chr/vol3/iss1/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Bucknell Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Comparative Humanities Review by an authorized administrator of Bucknell Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dcadmin@bucknell.edu.

Radio as a Tool of the State: Radio Moscow and the Early Cold War

*Mark D. Winek
American University*

Scanning the airwaves, all that could be found was static. And then, one minute before the hour, through the disturbance came the notes of “Moscow Nights”. Perhaps elsewhere the Cold War was frigid and stale, but here, over high frequency radio, the Cold War was hot. Radio Moscow played a leading role in that hot war over the airwaves – just as much as the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, and Radio Liberty. Yet, very little has surfaced in the West regarding the role of Radio Moscow in the Cold War. My paper works to analyze this significant player in the battle between the United States and the Soviet Union. I explore the organization and programming of Radio Moscow and its connection to the Soviet Government. In addition, I seek to analyze its reception in the United States and, most importantly, how it was used as a vehicle of Soviet foreign policy around the world.

Early Broadcasting in Russia (to 1941)

From a very early time, the leadership of the revolutionary Bolshevik party in Russia recognized the importance of mass

communication, a point only strengthened after the October Revolution of 1917. Soon after the creation of the Soviet Government in Moscow, the Department of Agitation and Propaganda was set up to coordinate and control all the media outlets in the nation.¹ While the new government recognized the importance of newspapers and magazines, they jumped on the new technology that could spread their word most effectively to a population spread out over 6.6 million square miles.

Radio would soon have the capacity to spread information about health, sanitation, and agriculture, as well as the message of the central government across the vastness of Soviet territory.² With Lenin's message of world revolution, radio could spread the movement into Europe and Africa. Within two years of the establishment of a Moscow radio laboratory in 1922, ten stations were in operation in the Soviet Union. While stations were allowed to be established by organizations and collectives, radio broadcasting effectively remained in the hands of the Soviet government.³ As the new state evolved, the Soviet leadership recognized the need for international broadcasting. The creation of Radio Moscow filled this need. Established in 1929 with French, English, and German language services, programming expanded with Swedish, Turkish, Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, Hungarian, Czech, and Russian services by 1932.⁴ Like domestic programming, Radio Moscow expounded the successes of the 1917 Revolution and the recent accomplishments of the Soviet Government.

Great Patriotic War (1941-1945)

By the end of the 1930s, the Soviet Union faced new challenges on its borders, particularly to the west. Adolf Hitler's territorial expansion into Austria, Czechoslovakia and even farther east was making the Soviet leadership nervous. The Molotov-

¹ Philo C. Wasburn, *Broadcasting Propaganda: International Radio Broadcasting and the Construction of Political Reality* (Westport: Praeger, 1992), 1.

² *Ibid.*, 2.

³ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

Ribbentrop Pact kept the Germans at bay until the Nazi invasion of June 22, 1941.

As German forces invaded Soviet territory as a part of Operation Barbarossa, they entered a country that had experienced great gains in the radio field. Over 100 broadcast stations were found across the country.⁵ However, the June invasion caught the Soviet government by surprise, giving the state's broadcast apparatus little time to join the war footing. Still, Radio Moscow managed to establish broadcasting to German-occupied territories in their own languages early in the war.⁶ The increased broadcasting over distances and construction of new, powerful stations would serve Radio Moscow well over the war and post-war years.

Though reaching occupied territories as well as the expanses of Soviet territory with the government's message was important, the Soviet leadership recognized the importance of counteracting German radio. The war of the airwaves was characterized by premature declarations of victory, reports of atrocities on the opposing side, and accounts of conditions on the enemy's home front. Early in the war, the Germans took the upper hand over the feeble attempts by Radio Moscow to counteract their claims. However, by 1942, Moscow had managed to gain listener trust. As James von Geldern notes, the factors included, "relative reliability, the willingness to trust listeners to reach their own conclusions, and improved fortunes of war".⁷

Indeed, the Soviets had gained the upper hand. Though the Great Patriotic War left nearly 14% of the Soviet population as casualties, it also left the propaganda apparatus of the Soviet state in a revitalized condition. Wartime broadcasting boosted Radio Moscow's staff to thirteen native broadcasters capable of producing programming in most European languages.⁸ The station included a strong German language department, particularly useful in the coming decades of post-war occupation of Germany.

⁵ James Von Geldern, "Radio Moscow: the Voice From the Center," *Culture and Entertainment in Wartime Russia*, ed. Richard Stites (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995), 45.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 58.

Finally, technology had been upgraded, providing Radio Moscow with facilities to reach most of the Eurasian continent. By 1945, Radio Moscow was broadcasting in 29 different languages.⁹

Expansion of International Broadcasting during the Early Cold War (1945-1965)

While Victory in Europe and later Victory in Japan ended the shooting war in 1945, another battle was just beginning. The wartime relationship between the Soviet Union and the western allies had always been plagued by some mutual mistrust. This mistrust soon escalated as the occupation of conquered territories progressed.

To meet the escalation of tensions between the Soviet Union and the west, Radio Moscow continued to increase its broadcast capabilities and target populations. The first addition to Radio Moscow's language services was Korean in 1946, followed closely by Uighur and Mongolian. The Korean service became particularly important with the occupation of the northern half of the Korean Peninsula by the Red Army and the beginning of the Korean Conflict in 1951. Language services to the Indian Subcontinent and South Asia were also added in the late 1940s and early 1950s.¹⁰

Radio Moscow also expanded many of its preexisting language services to serve new requirements. At the end of the 1940s, the Arabic service moved from broadcasting 7.5 hours per week to 42 hours per week, one of Radio Moscow's largest. Persian language broadcasting increased to 31.5 hours per week in 1950, and Turkish to 31¼ per week. European language broadcasts also expanded, however, they tended to favor Western Europe. Weekly broadcasts in English expanded to 38 hours, French to 28 hours, and German to 55 hours per week. Italian and Finnish language services also experienced modest increases. Surprisingly, weekly broadcasts to Yugoslavia were cut nearly by half, while broadcasts to Czechoslovakia were completely cut.

⁹ "Radio Moscow in the War Years," *Voice of Russia*, 2004. 16 Nov. 2006 <http://www.vor.ru/English/75/program_5.html>.

¹⁰ Bernard Bumpus and Barbara Skelt, "Seventy Years of International Broadcasting," *Communication and Society* 14 (Paris: UNESCO, 1983): 49.

Similarly, the end of the 1940s brought a cut of 10 hours from the Mandarin Chinese service to 14 hours per week.¹¹

In response to Radio Moscow and other Soviet broadcasters, the United States also stepped up broadcasting to Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. By 1956, the Voice of America was broadcasting more than 300 hours per week to the Soviet Union. Radio Liberation (changed in 1963 to Radio Liberty) was established in 1951 by the United States to broadcast to the Soviet Union in Russian and other Soviet languages. It began with a 20-minute Russian program repeated for 12 hours a day. By 1957, it had increased to speaking 17 Soviet languages from 11 transmitters. At the same time, Radio Free Europe began speaking to Eastern Europe. By 1954, it was broadcasting 124³/₄ hours a week to Poland alone.¹²

These increases in broadcasting hours by both sides began the Cold War radio battles. As global crises evolved and other nations joined or left spheres of influence, language services and their weekly outputs changed to reflect the situation. The developing African independence movements in the late 1950s and 1960s changed Radio Moscow's meager African services, adding Portuguese and 11 African languages, including Somali, Zulu, and Malagasy. English and French language output for the African continent was also increased by the end of the decade.¹³

Purpose of International Political Broadcasting and Radio Moscow

In today's capitalist market, large and small businesses recognize the need for a public image and dissemination of information about their services. Many use word of mouth, billboards, and radio and television spots to inform potential customers. Likewise, since the beginning of the modern system of international politics, nation-states have recognized a similar need to create a good public image around the world. The United Kingdom uses the British Broadcasting Company (BBC), not only to serve the needs of the domestic population, but also to disseminate a British viewpoint over radio, television, and the

¹¹ Ibid., 48.

¹² Ibid., 48.

¹³ Ibid., 58.

Internet to non-British nationals. Newscasts may cover a story in China, unrelated to the British Isles. However, commentary and analysis can come from a British perspective, subtly bringing the audience into the British approach.

Though highly-skewed to the Western ear, Radio Moscow sought to establish the same relationship with the listener during the Cold War. By explaining the Soviet perspective of an issue, the audience could be drawn into Moscow's outlook. While they might not have agreed with the opinion, they would now at least understand Moscow's position as it related to their own. Thus, the Soviet system became less intangible and ever so much more rational.

The creation of borders and barriers to trade among nations prohibits the flow of personal contact and information. A traveler or good must be approved to exit and enter a country through a visa or trade regime. However, radio waves, with the exception of jamming and atmospheric phenomena, cannot be stopped at the border. Thus, the medium of radio provides nations with the ability to speak to peoples of another state without interaction with the second government. While a government may not be able to publish an inflammatory document in another country without diplomatic problems, it may be able to broadcast the information to the other country without reservation. Radio can bring international relations from the international summit to the level of the individual citizen.

Organization and Control of Radio Moscow

Radio broadcasting originating from the Soviet Union operated on a multilevel system. At the bottom stood local broadcasters, followed by stations in the various oblasts and krais. At the top stood the central broadcasting system, under which Radio Moscow fell.

In 1961, control over of broadcasting in the Soviet Union was held by the State Committee of Radio and Television Broadcasting.¹⁴ The Committee itself was a direct part of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, which became Sovmin after 1946. According to S.V. Kaftanov, Chairman of the State

¹⁴ S.V. Kaftanov, *Radio and Television in the USSR* (Washington: U.S. Joint Publications Research Service, 1961), 31.

Committee for Radio and Television Broadcasting, reported in 1961 that the Committee's tasks included: illuminating "domestic and foreign policies of the Communist Party and of the Soviet government," "introduction of the radio listeners and television viewers to the best works of literature, music and to the theatrical art of the peoples of the USSR," and "exposing the anti-national essence of bourgeois ideology, morality and reactionary propaganda".¹⁵ By keeping the Committee chairman directly responsible to the Council of Ministers, the state was able to maintain control over all news, educational, cultural, and entertainment programming broadcast over the state apparatus, including Radio Moscow.

Programming Content: An Hour With Radio Moscow

While a history of the broadcasting service is important, a dissection of a one-hour broadcast also yields great insight into Radio Moscow's role in Soviet policy. Typically, a few minutes before the hour, an interval signal, usually the popular tune *Moscow Nights*, would be broadcast to indicate the beginning of programming. On the hour, the Kremlin chimes would be heard, followed by a full news summary. The news summary would usually take into account domestic events beginning with the Communist Party, followed by stories from satellite nations, and condemnations of events in the capitalist world. Following the news, a feature would be presented, often a musical program or commentary on current events. Topics often included the life of the Soviet worker, United States arms policy, or the success of farm programs in the Soviet republics. Musical programs regularly highlighted Russian and Soviet composers and artists.¹⁶ Multiple feature programs were offered throughout the hour, but none compared with *Moscow Mailbag*. For 40 years, until his death in 2005, the English-language program was hosted by Joe Adamov and featured listener questions ranging from the KGB to the artist of a traditional Russian song. The broadcast would be concluded with a recap of various program notes and then the cycle would begin again with *Moscow Nights*.

¹⁵ Ibid., 31-32.

¹⁶ Martin Ebon, *The Soviet Propaganda Machine* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1987), 277.

News Broadcasting

In the early years of the Cold War, as it had before, Radio Moscow stuck to a news format. Gayle Durham Hollander described some of the important topics in news broadcasts:

In 1960, *Partiinaya Zhizn* indicated the following major change in procedure: “The central radio stations in Moscow must first of all ensure timely broadcasts of important political information, effective commentary on domestic and foreign events, the organization of various artistic programs...Because radio should give the population the important news before the newspapers do, TASS has been instructed to transmit news immediately to central and local stations.”¹⁷

The “major change in procedure” she describes comes not from the content of the radio programming, but rather the shift in responsibility for major stories from the newspapers to radio stations. Concerning newscasts, Kaftanov described the materials to be found in news bulletins around 1960:

Materials pertaining to the Seven Year Plan for the Development of the National Economy of the USSR occupy a place of importance in all presentations of “The Latest News”, about the progress of work towards the fulfillment of that plan, materials about how the Soviet people are executing the decisions of the Party and the government, information on themes dealing with political, party, Komsomol, and trade union life.¹⁸

News programs generally stuck to the events within the Communist Party first, then those stories that exemplified Soviet

¹⁷ Gayle Durham Hollander, "Recent Developments in Soviet Radio and Television News Reporting," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 31 (1967): 360.

¹⁸ Kaftanov, *Radio and Television in the USSR*, 41.

activities around the world, other socialist movements, and events in the Warsaw Pact nations.

Though well past the early Cold War years of the 1950s and 1960s, the newscast of July 1, 1985 provides evidence as to how the Soviet Union portrayed itself over its global mouthpiece. Headlines lead with information about the full session of the Central Committee, followed by details of the meeting of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet. Next, a story about the condemnation of the U.S. 'Star Wars' defense plan, a project particularly detested by Moscow, by an international group of physicians. Subsequent stories touched upon another mass meeting in Greece condemning American deployment of missiles to Europe and continuing problems following the Union Carbide disaster in Bhopal, India.

The major global story of the day concerned the release of 39 American hostages from TWA Flight 847. However, the only remote reference to the story was in Radio Moscow's description of U.S. negotiations with the French concerning terrorism, which it described as an attempt at, "military action against a number of sovereign nations and national liberation movements".¹⁹ Likewise, it played down the removal of Grigori Romanov from the Politburo of the CPSU Central Committee, regarded by many to be Mikhail Gorbachev's major rival. Instead, it stated that he was, "retiring on pension on account of his health".²⁰ In this way, news briefings were strictly controlled to follow the official government line.

In addition to hourly newscasts, Radio Moscow presented news magazines and special interest commentaries based on current and historical news stories. In the 1985 broadcast, the hourly newscast was followed by *'The Way We See It' A Look at the Soviet Union and the World*, today devoted to contrasting U.S. missile deployment with Soviet policy.²¹ Later commentaries dealt with survivors of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima visiting Moscow and thanking the government, "for their tremendous efforts to ease world tensions" and the denunciation of the United States' negative attitude toward arms negotiations by a British labor union.

¹⁹ Ebon, *The Soviet Propaganda Machine*, 273-274.

²⁰ Ibid., 278.

²¹ Ibid., 275.

Jamming

In addition to the attention that the Soviet government gave to its own international broadcasting, another indication of the medium's importance came in the government's active jamming campaign. In international broadcasting, the act of jamming refers to one station or power deliberately broadcasting on a frequency already in use by another station for the purposes of preventing the signal from being received. While Radio Moscow's signals were rarely jammed by other nations, the Soviet Union actively jammed the broadcasts of Western stations such as the BBC and the Voice of America. The purpose of this was to prevent Soviet citizens from being able to tune in the Western broadcasters, fearing "Western cultural infiltration".²² Indeed, they may have had cause to worry: the Voice of America estimated 8 million Soviet citizens listened into Western broadcasts.

In response to increased broadcasts directed to the Soviet Union, a campaign of jamming the Voice of America and the BBC from an estimated 150 transmitters within Soviet territory in 1949. While this scale of jamming was effective, it was most certainly not without cost. U.S. Government estimates in 1950 indicated that the Soviet Union was spending \$17.5 million a year on jamming, or an amount equal to the Voice of America's total budget. Indeed, a U.S. diplomat speculated that the Soviets, "devoted four times the capital equipment in transmitters and monitoring stations and ten times the manpower to block Western broadcasts" following the Voice of America's increased efforts to circumvent jamming.²³

Had the Soviet Union not recognized the role that international broadcasting could play in changing domestic public opinion (or conversely, the role it could play in changing Western public opinion), they would not have invested much needed capital in jamming activities from the end of World War II right up until 1989. The United States also recognized this importance and used it as a way of tying up Soviet resources in jamming and international broadcasting.

²² Walter L. Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture, and the Cold War, 1945-1961* (New York: St. Martin's P, 1997), 33.

²³ *Ibid.*, 36.

Reception in the United States

It is important to remember that broadcasting is a two-way exchange: the broadcaster transmits and the listener must listen to the signal. With this in mind, what was the reception of Radio Moscow in one of its major targets, the United States? Don D. Smith investigated the impact of Radio Moscow's broadcasts in the late 1960s. In his article "Some Effects of Radio Moscow's North American Broadcasts", Smith revealed that there was a "sizable audience".²⁴

Operating on the theory that Radio Moscow's programming was anti-American and did not meet general standards of effective communication, Smith still found that Americans who regularly listened to the programs were, none the less, influenced by what they heard. In a previous survey of general shortwave radio listening habits, he discovered that 9% of the national sample had listened to foreign radio broadcasts within the last year, with 6% of the sample having specifically listened to political or news programming.²⁵ When those indicating a high interest in international affairs were surveyed, the most mentioned station was Radio Moscow.²⁶ Though they recognized that the information was biased and propaganda-based, they also noted that such broadcasts were, "useful in (1) making them more aware of what other countries are thinking about the United States, (2) giving them additional information about world affairs, and (3) telling the other side of the story".²⁷ The majority of this audience was made up of male professionals and those with at least some college education.²⁸

In the case of Smith's Radio Moscow study, he found that, despite the listening population's biases about the content of broadcasts, their direction of opinion consistently changed to favor Moscow's line. Seventy percent of the experimental group had their views toward the Soviet Union and Moscow's policies

²⁴ Don D. Smith, "Some Effects of Radio Moscow's North American Broadcasts," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 34 (1970): 541.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 540.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 543.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 545.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 544.

change for the better, especially those who had held very negative views to begin.²⁹ One participant commented that the broadcasts made them see that the Soviet Union was not just some, “monster with atomic bombs in each hand; instead they’re human, as concerned with human affairs as we are”.³⁰

However, in one of his final conclusions, Smith remarked that the effectiveness of Radio Moscow broadcasts could not completely be attributed to the presentation of information.

The broadcasts seem to have had an effect, not because of any particular skill in communication, but because conditions in our own [American] society had led the audience to hold unrealistic negative images which, upon actual exposure, were clearly refuted for many of the listeners.³¹

The crux of Smith’s point is that many of the respondents were affected by the difference in opinions between Radio Moscow and the American domestic media. As one reply put it, “When they [Radio Moscow] say something that is different from what you read in American newspapers you begin comparing, and sometimes what they say makes more sense”.³² Many of those who reported an unexpected change for the better in their opinion of the Soviet Union based on Radio Moscow broadcasts also reported that American media played a role in this change. Their attention to shortwave broadcasts from the Soviet bloc exposed them to other sources, which, on occasion, they found to be credible or even more reasonable than what the American media was saying.

In terms of strictly technical reception in the United States, it is impossible to say how strong signals were received during the 1950s and 1960s. Quality of shortwave signals is subject to a host of variables, including transmitting power, atmospheric conditions (including weather), local terrain, and interference from other

²⁹ Ibid., 546.

³⁰ Ibid., 549.

³¹ Ibid., 550.

³² Don D. Smith, "America's Short-Wave Audience: Twenty-Five Years Later," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 33 (1969): 545.

stations on nearby frequencies. There are indications that Radio Moscow's North American Service was consistently available throughout the Continental United States, as reported by various newspapers, university researchers, and regular listeners.³³

While Radio Moscow's in-house surveys have not yet surfaced, the audience research of the major American broadcasters has. The period studied by Smith was just the beginning of larger-scale audience research by the Voice of America and Radio Liberty. Methodology, and a system by which to interview travelers from the Soviet Union, was only seriously worked out by 1970. Until then, Soviet travelers in the West were interviewed on an *ad hoc* basis, only allowing basic inferences about listening habits.³⁴ However, in the period between 1972 and 1990, the Soviet Area Audience and Opinion Research (SAAOR) unit of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty was able to interview upwards of 50,000 Soviet travelers in the West and more than 25,000 legal immigrants.³⁵

The first audience quantification using the system was between 1970 and 1972, in which SAAOR estimated that the Voice of America reached 23% and Radio Liberty 11% of the Soviet adult population weekly. By 1980, the VOA was estimated to reach 15% and Radio Liberty, 8%.³⁶ These numbers remained consistent throughout the 1980s and 1990s for the VOA. However, Radio Liberty experienced a climb from 7% in 1980 to 10% in 1985. This was followed by a sharp increase in listeners in 1989 to around 17% of the adult Soviet population.³⁷ This is due to the cessation of Soviet jamming of the station that had been constant for decades. Overall, RFE/RL research of listening habits found that audiences were dominated by urban males between ages 30 and 50, concentrated around Moscow, Leningrad, the Baltics, and Trans-Caucases.

³³ Edna C. Sorber, "An Analysis of the Persuasion Used in Radio Moscow's North American Service" diss. Univ. of Wisconsin, 1959, 139.

³⁴ R. Eugene Parta, *Discovering the Hidden Listener: an Empirical Assessment of Radio Liberty and Western Broadcasting to the USSR During the Cold War* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2007), 2.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

While these estimates have been disputed by some, the statistics still show that there was a far greater audience to Western radio stations such as the Voice of America and Radio Liberty in the Soviet Union than there was for Soviet broadcasts in the United States. Between 1970 and 1970, SAAOR found that the VOA was reaching around 23% of the Soviet adult population. However, Smith found that only 9% of the U.S. population listened to international radio overall, and not one specific station.

Conclusions

What conclusions can be drawn about Radio Moscow's use in the early Cold War? Perhaps the most important thing about Radio Moscow's international services was the value placed on them by the Soviet Government. Even without a budgetary measure of value, it is apparent that Radio Moscow was a vital part of the Soviet broadcasting apparatus from the mid-1930s. By 1932, Soviet radio was broadcasting abroad in 11 languages, rising to 29 by the close of the War. Officials in the Kremlin saw that shortwave broadcasts were a way to spread Soviet opinion and views on international affairs and to counteract the influence of the capitalist system.

The link between the Soviet Government and Radio Moscow is indisputable – the station was operated by the government under the State Committee on Radio and Television Broadcasting, within the central radio broadcasting system. News broadcasts, a staple of Radio Moscow's programming since the Great Patriotic War, were still subject to pre-broadcast censorship by the government and concentrated on party and government news.

Finally, though the audience for Radio Moscow's broadcasts was rather insignificant in the United States, the station did manage to reach some of its goals. Though listeners reported that they did not experience a change of heart regarding the Soviet Union, they did report that some of their overall opinions had changed. In the end, the overall listenership to Radio Moscow was relatively small, seeing as the total nationwide audience for all international political broadcasting in November of 1966 equaled 2% of Americans, or about 2 million people. While listeners reported one of their top favorites to be Radio Moscow, the

station's listener base would be significantly less than 2 million, and thus not drastically altering overall U.S. public opinion. This is in sharp contrast to the Soviet audience for Radio Liberty and the Voice of America. However, Radio Moscow's value outside of the United States is relatively unknown. Many throughout the world, particularly in the developing world, tuned in regularly to Moscow's broadcasts.

Despite a relatively small group of listeners in the United States and the role of censorship played in listeners' opinions, the role of Radio Moscow in the USSR's foreign policy apparatus cannot be underplayed. The attention paid to Radio Moscow by the central government and its rapid development through the 1930s and 1940s provides compelling evidence for its value to the state. The station's broadcasts provided invaluable insight into Soviet life for Western governments and the general public.