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Russia in the Microphone Age: A History of Soviet Radio, 1919-1970

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Author: Stephen Lovell
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Early in his study of radio in the USSR, Stephen Lovell quotes Rick Altman: ‘new technologies are always born nameless’ (p. 2). New technologies, that is to say, do not arrive with a self-evident purpose, and are understood initially relative to what already exists. In the case of radio, relevant prior technologies were the telegraph, the telephone and – if it can be called a technology – the public lecture. Distinctive roles for technologies emerge gradually, and through an interplay of competing perceptions. Social processes shape the emerging view of a technology, and hence technologies have legitimate national and cultural histories. Such histories contrast with the artefact-focused teleologies beloved of popular commentators.

Lovell suggests in his introduction that he is using radio broadcasting as a lens for viewing Soviet history; and the book’s main title gives primacy to Russia rather than to radio. Certainly Lovell usefully illuminates aspects of Soviet intellectual life, such as its myopically high regard for literary culture and blindness to the creative possibilities of radio. Nevertheless the book’s subtitle unambiguously declares Lovell’s purpose: *A History of Soviet Radio, 1919–1970*.

The start of institutional broadcasting in the USSR shortly after the First World War coincided approximately with the development of broadcasting in many other European countries, for example Britain. Earlier, radio had served as a point-to-point medium (like the telephone) which inconveniently reached multiple listeners. In this period it was largely the province of the military, commercial shipping and amateur radio enthusiasts.

The early history of broadcasting (as opposed to narrowcasting), from around 1920 up to the outbreak of the Second World War, presents distinct historiographical problems because of the medium’s ephemerality. Historians of cinema, which rose roughly in parallel with radio, have access to the cinematic product itself and can fruitfully explore its relationship with its society, seeking illumination of one through the other. With broadcasting an equivalent kind of history is scarcely possible, at least during broadcasting’s first couple of decades. Until the post-Second World War period, very little broadcast output was recorded, and the little that was recorded was atypical. The historian has to work with contextual factors, such as the nature of the broadcasting organisations, the relationship of broadcasters to government and to other media, press reports, memoirs of participants, and surviving institutional documents. Historians of British broadcasting

are particularly fortunate as BBC archive documents are a rich resource. The historian of Soviet broadcasting, by contrast, must work the leanest of ores. Very little institutional documentation survives, at least for the pre-Second World War period. If only for tackling such a daunting task, and accomplishing it so readably and engrossingly, Lovell would deserve commendation.

Institutional Soviet broadcasting was fashioned (or maybe rough hewn) in the new order following the 1917 Revolutions. Broadcasting was seen to have a role in aligning a largely illiterate and truculent peasantry with Bolshevik political ambitions. This ideological role for broadcasting was slow to emerge, such was the initial Bolshevik lack of interest in the new medium. The USSR's first broadcasting agency (*Radioperedacha*) was actually a limited company whose stakeholders were other institutions peripherally interested in broadcasting; the parallel with the first incarnation of the BBC as a limited company is striking. In eventually adopting broadcasting to 'reset the mental horizons of its population' (p. 37), the Soviet authorities faced particular problems. One was the poverty of much of the population, for whom ownership of a domestic radio set was an unjustifiable extravagance. Radio listening became a collective activity in village squares, community halls and factories. Broadcasts were often disseminated via wired connections rather than wirelessly, even in rural areas. Broadcasting in the USSR was by no means synonymous with wireless transmission, and wired distribution continued into the post-Second World War period. From the state's point of view, wired dissemination had incidental benefits, notably the control it gave over what could be listened to. For much of the period covered by Lovell, wired receivers delivered only a single station, and thus foreign stations and dissenting voices were excluded. In towns and cities, personal radio ownership was more common, and became a marker of status – and a reason for the jamming of foreign broadcasts.

Unsurprisingly, domestic programmes in the USSR were laden with propaganda, though not always of an overtly political kind. Some of it, particularly in the early years, was directed towards eradicating peasant customs, condemning public disorder, and discouraging accordion-playing. Evidently mass indoctrination had a benign aspect. A particular difficulty for the authorities was maintaining ideological control of broadcasts that could originate from many locations across a vast country. Broadcasts were policed, with variable success, for errors ranging from mispronunciation and poor grammar to heterodox political opinions. When tape recording came along, broadcasters in other countries adopted it because it offered convenience and flexibility. In the USSR broadcasters seized it because it enabled excision of spontaneous and unrehearsed comments. It was much employed. Lovell identifies a perennial dilemma for Soviet broadcasters: 'radio was meant to be a charismatic force for mobilization but it was strictly controlled and the penalties for even minor errors were severe' (p. 163).

Broadcasters were constrained by punctilious diktats from central authorities. Thus although the early period of broadcasting had seen a certain amount of cautious experimentation, the mood changed around 1933 when the new medium was declared to be innately subordinate to literary media such as the stage and print, and henceforth productions of classics were to be reverential. The modest amount of innovation that had preceded the edict was stifled. The most striking aspect of this episode was not the cultural conservatism it displayed, but the underlying conviction that broadcasting could only be a conduit for works conceived in other media. It had no inherent scope of its own for creativity and innovation. In Britain, by contrast, the 1930s saw radio coming into its own as a medium, and the establishment of conventions that have survived to the present. This infantilisation of Soviet broadcasters during what could have been its creative maturation discouraged original minds from entering the medium, and broadcasting suffered from low status and a lack of professionalism.

Despite the idiosyncrasies of Soviet life, the problems faced by broadcasting professionals in the USSR were often similar to those faced by broadcasters elsewhere. How much time should be given to popular entertainment, and how much to elevated and intellectual content? What kinds of voices should be heard? Should linguistic decorum be enforced, or was demotic speech acceptable? How much material should be created centrally, and how much should be created locally? Also, the proper relationship of radio to other media was debated. For example, in the broadcasting of live events (concerts, plays, etc.), was radio a

benefactor or a beneficiary? An investigation of the radio audience in the early 1960s came to the same conclusions as BBC staff were apt to draw about British audiences, namely that the audience splits into three parts: the poorly educated and mostly manual workers, the middle (and middle brow), and the intelligentsia. The ubiquity of this 'rule of three' suggests it might tell us more about broadcasters than audiences. A survey finding from the 1960s found that radio was preferred to television by engineers and the intelligentsia – evidently distinct groups.

With Stalin's death came a welcome relaxation of the constraints on broadcasters, and a certain amount of innovation followed. Broadcasting became more professional, more popular services appeared, unscripted interviews became the norm, ownership of radio receivers increased, and broadcasters were less fearful of making mistakes. By 1968, however, television had overtaken radio in popularity.

I have given above the broadest of broad outlines of the story not only because the story is inherently interesting but because it shows some of the ways in which broadcasting in the USSR developed along different lines from those in Europe and the USA. Some of the differences might have been expected, such as the stultifying heavy-handedness of state control; others are more surprising, such as the perverse unwillingness to recognise that radio offered scope for new sorts of creative endeavour at a time when cinema, in particular, was breaking new ground.

Lovell advances no overt thesis in his book, yet one is implied concerning the way Soviet prescriptiveness ensured that broadcasting did not achieve the social and political effect it was intended to achieve. It did not insinuate itself into the population's lives and, in his memorable phrase, failed to realise 'the dream of a mediated national community' (p. 182). This failure contrasts sharply with the experience of Britain and several other European countries where broadcasting rapidly became an indispensable part of daily life and conversation. The picture of broadcasting in the USSR that emerges is of a medium forever occupying an uncertain position in both popular consciousness and state administration. Sure enough, during the Second World War Soviet broadcasting caught the popular mood and boosted morale, as in so many countries. Before and after the war, however, suspicions about state control of broadcasting, the lack of creative investment in the medium, broadcasters' nervousness about stepping out of line, a long tradition of treating radio as an auditory adjunct to print, and the poor quality of radio receivers appear to have poisoned the soil in which the medium might have flourished. Only as late as 1964 did an outstandingly successful Soviet radio service appear (Radio Maiak). It comes as a jolt therefore, in the context of the rise of Soviet television during the 1960s, to read:

> '... after forty years of [setting the tone and pace of public life in Russia], radio had to cede its role as real-time chronicle and as leading interlocutor of the Soviet people' (p. 213).

I do not say this is wrong, merely that the reader (or this reader, at any rate) does not gain the impression from earlier parts of the book that radio ever truly functioned as the 'leading interlocutor' of the Soviet people.

How might such an inconsistency of interpretations be resolved? Possibly a hint is to be found in an aside thirty pages earlier, which can easily pass unnoticed. It gives pause to anyone trying to understand what audiences in the past heard, as opposed to what they listened to:

> 'The reputation of Soviet radio as mind-numbing propaganda instrument is often belied by the recollections of people who lived through parts of the post-war Soviet era' (p. 181).

Tucked away in odd corners of the schedules, such as in children's programmes, were imaginative productions that transcended the usual offerings, such as the episode of 'The Club of the Famous Captains' set in a school library in which fictional characters, nocturnally liberated from their pages, convened to tell tales, converse and sing. Such broadcasts lodged themselves fondly in the memories of those who heard

them.

History must be selective, and what is omitted can help define the framework for what is included. Lovell does not explore the institutional structure of Soviet broadcasting, its location in Soviet bureaucracy, its internal organisation or its funding and management. These bread-and-butter details might add nothing significant, but in the British context, for example, a few such details are highly significant – that the BBC later became a monopoly public corporation, was funded by licence fees rather than taxation or advertising, and drew many of its first staff intake from the world of adult education. Another area not much covered is the extent to which countries and regions remote from Moscow managed their own broadcasting output; nor do we learn much about production staff, or programme creation.

Lovell gives tantalising hints of what comes after the period he has written about. The collapse of communism and the USSR was also the collapse of a model for broadcasting that had persisted for over seven decades. What is particularly striking is how quickly broadcasting services that had once seemed permanent fixtures vanished after state support disappeared. This provides a useful reminder that in many countries – and not only those with a history of state autocracy – broadcasting depends on state sanction for its continued existence more than almost any other form of publishing or dissemination does. Clearly a sequel to the present volume would be no less engrossing.

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[1] https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/148356