
Reviewed by Jaclyn Stanke

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In *War of the Black Heavens*, Michael Nelson chronicles the ups and downs of Western broadcasting to the Soviet Bloc countries during the Cold War and its impact on the people who listened to it. The author, a former general manager of Reuters News Service, considers western broadcasting in general, though his real focus is on the four main broadcasters of the period: the British Broadcasting Service (BBC) and the three American-backed networks--Voice of America (VOA), Radio Free Europe (RFE) and Radio Liberty (RL). In particular, he looks at their use of “black” broadcasting—that is propaganda disguised as news and cultural programming (in contrast to “white” propaganda which is simply straight propaganda)—to wage the Cold War. According to Nelson, radio was not only an important weapon in the Cold War, but the most important weapon. Furthermore, he argues that Western broadcasting succeeded in sustaining the hope of freedom from communism one day for those behind the Iron Curtain and hence draws the conclusion that it was responsible for the eventual downfall of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

Arranged chronologically, the book begins with a brief discussion of international broadcasting’s early days at the start of the century. Ironically enough, it was the Soviet Union that pioneered its use to reach into the vast corners of its empire. European powers then picked up the practice to keep their own colonists and empires in touch with what was happening in the metropole. However, real development in nations’ broadcasting abroad took off in World War II, when radio provided both information to those in occupied territory and propaganda to German citizens.

Following the war, and especially after the onset of the Cold War, the American and British governments decided to continue and expand their international broadcasts. However, both faced domestic struggles over funding and whether or not they should be in the propaganda business (and how anti-communistic, if at all, the tone of their radio programs should be). These struggles plagued the radio broadcasts through-
out the Cold War, and the author charts the fortunes of the networks throughout. Nevertheless, both governments decided that radio was an important weapon of psychological warfare in the Cold War. The BBC began broadcasting in Russian to the Soviet Union in 1946, and the VOA followed in 1947 (with the expansion of additional languages, nations, and broadcast hours over time). Not long after, the Soviet Union began jamming. The jamming continued at varying levels throughout the Cold War (until 1988), and the author notes that the level of jamming served as a fairly accurate measure of the Cold War's temperature.

Nelson also looks at the role the radios played in major crises behind the Iron Curtain (the Berlin uprising in June 1953, Hungary in 1956, and Czechoslovakia in 1968), as well as the role they played in the 1980s with Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of glasnost’. Nelson ends with Boris Yeltsin's successful use of RFE to rally support and overcome the attempted putsch of Gorbachev in August 1991. Overall, the book tells a tale familiar to those who have done work on the BBC, RFE/RL, VOA, or psychological warfare and the early Cold War.[1] However, Nelson brings much of it together in this broad overview of western broadcasting while covering the entire Cold War era.

A strength of the book is Nelson's consistent attention to the reception of western broadcasts in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. He mines Russian, British, and American sources to measure how many people were actually tuning in. He also pays attention to when they were listening--on a regular basis or during crises (when listening increased, as well as the variety of networks listened to). Recent scholarship has emphasized the success of cultural programming,[2] but Nelson focuses on western news programs. For the most part he shows that people tuned in to learn about international affairs as well as news concerning their own county (with the Chernobyl disaster being one of the more significant events as Soviet citizens first learned of it from foreign news). He agrees with others that listeners had a preference for the BBC and VOA because they provided more straightforward news. However, his work does reveal regional variations of listener preference, with some countries even preferring the more vitriolic RFE. While Nelson is attentive to listenership throughout the Cold War (and hence the impact of western radio), his information is interspersed throughout, making it difficult to digest and difficult to judge change over time in listening habits and preference. In doing so, he simply assumes a straight continuum of success for western broadcasting. In this respect, it would have been more effective if he had devoted a single chapter to the subject, tracing listenership through the years, radio by radio, and country by country to gauge the success of the radios.

Nelson's chapter on other major western networks which broadcast to Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union is a notable contribution to the field. Here he looks at Vatican Radio, Radio France Internationale, Radio Canada, Radio in the American Sector (Germany), and Deutsche Welle. He discusses the reasons and scope of their broadcasts, and provides some interesting tidbits, like Canada's interest in broadcasting because of its large Dukhobor population and Vatican Radio's expanded broadcasting and listenership following the ascension of John Paul II to the papal seat. In general, though, this section is much too brief and would be well worth expanding.

Also interesting (though scattered throughout again) is how people in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union used western broadcasts for their own purposes from the 1960s onward. Not only did they listen to western radio to receive information of their own country, but also to get information out to others. For example, Solidarity used RFE to broadcast the group's meeting times and places. Nelson brings this point to a climax with Yeltsin's use of RFE to marshal the people behind him in August 1991, while Gorbachev listened to the BBC as he was held under house arrest in the
Crimea. It is this interaction between the targeted people and the radios that bolsters Nelson’s conclusion that western radio went beyond sustaining hopes and actively helped end the Cold War.

At this point, though, I must disagree with the author’s main point that radio brought the communist system down. One can agree that radio served as a way for people to learn of things happening abroad and within their own countries. One can further agree, to some extent, that the radio broadcasts’ helped sustain people’s hopes (though one may question how true this was after 1956, and certainly not after 1968). However, in regard to western radio being the primary reason as to why communism fell apart in the end, I cannot agree. Focusing on the radios alone, Nelson neglects to tell what was happening in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe through these years. He neglects the physical suppression of rebellion and dissent, the economic stagnation from the 1970s onward, as well as the moral rot of the regimes, which Gale Stokes has so elegantly pointed out elsewhere.[3] Dissatisfaction with the system was not simply a result of western radios. Rather, dissatisfaction was a result of the moral rot of the system, which itself was made possible by the policies of the communist regimes themselves. People did not need western radios to tell them this. They experienced it day to day. Furthermore, with little or no hope of western intervention, people were forced to find ways of living outside the system to sustain themselves. Thus, they used the radios to fit their own purposes given their own situations.

Perhaps the most glaring problem with the book is that Nelson never probes the issues in any depth. In particular, Nelson claims that radio was the most important weapon in the Cold War, yet he never discusses its overall role in Cold War strategic planning or what exactly it was supposed to achieve as a measure of psychological warfare. While he notes the name change of RL (from Radio Liberation to Radio Liberty), he never discusses the radio’s (changing) purpose—was it simply for sustaining the hope of people, to discredit communism, or was it to help pave the way for liberation? Again, he offers no explanation for the changing role the radio played as Cold War strategy evolved and matured over time. He also does not adequately account for the continuation of western broadcasting through the 1960s and even today (though he does note the decreased funding and broadcasting hours all faced). In general, more work by historians is needed on the subject of radio in the latter stages of the Cold War.

Nelson’s lack of depth is even more surprising given the impressive array of sources he has compiled and gone through. His bibliography and notes evince this—he cites numerous primary sources from British, American, and Russian archives, plus personal interviews that he conducted. As a broad overview this book will appeal more to a general than scholarly audience. Nonetheless, his bibliography is impressive and anyone who is planning to do work on radio warfare, psychological warfare, or any of the major international broadcasters of the Cold War will want to consult his bibliography before beginning.

Notes

[2]. Especially see Hixson, Parting the Curtain; for an account by a dissident expelled from the Soviet Union see Vassily Aksyonov, In Search of Melancholy Baby (New York: Random House).


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