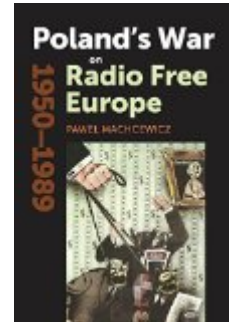


Paweł Machcewicz. *Poland's War on Radio Free Europe, 1950-1989.* Trans. Maya Latynski. Cold War International History Project Series. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015. 456 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8047-9238-7.



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Since its baby steps in 1950, the legendary Cold War broadcaster Radio Free Europe (RFE)—sponsored by the United States (both overtly, through private contributions, and covertly, by the Central Intelligence Agency [CIA]), based in Germany, staffed overwhelmingly by exiles from no less than five Eastern European countries, and often credited with helping bring down Communism—consistently counted among the foremost targets of various secret police forces behind the Iron Curtain. No other Western broadcaster into the Eastern bloc faced as much technical interference or defamation. And nowhere else were such offensives as elaborate, intense, or constant as in Poland. These observations come together to form the premise and the leitmotif of Paweł Machcewicz's *Poland's War on Radio Free Europe, 1950-1989*. The revised and expanded translation of his 2007 Polish-language monograph contributes to the growing body of literature about Cold War broadcasting and surveillance alike.

Machcewicz mined several important archives on both sides of the Atlantic to extract a

wealth of new information. In the United States, he consulted the Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, the Harry S. Truman Presidential Library, the Hoover Institution, the National Archives, and select CIA documents made available to him through the Freedom of Information Act. In the United Kingdom, he perused the papers at the Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum. In Poland, he tackled the files at the Central Archive of Modern Records, the Archive of the Institute of National Remembrance, the Archive of the Foreign Ministry, and the Central Archive of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, to name a few.

And yet, even plumbing these depths, Machcewicz admits that he leaves many key questions unanswered. After all, Eastern European secret police files did not survive the wake of 1989 unscathed. Across the Eastern bloc, the responsible ministries' employees hurriedly shredded, burned, and destroyed vast volumes of compromising material. In addition, the Russian archives, presumably housing the bulk of evidence for joint Eastern-bloc covert operations, remain under

seal. To fill the many resulting gaps, Machcewicz interviewed Communist Poland's government agents once charged with eroding the station's credibility and facilitating access to its facilities—in particular, RFE's long-time foe Andrzej Czechowicz. The sum of these Polish sources, spurious considered in the context of RFE up until now, is particularly valuable. Their keystone role in Machcewicz's account, and the author's extensive verbatim citations from them, render an entirely new chapter of RFE's history accessible far beyond Poland.

In RFE's case, two factors necessitate broader access to such sources: the station's Cold War-era structure and the direction that its study has taken since the phase out of the radio's Eastern European broadcasts in the 1990s. For one, within each original target country RFE was designed to function as a "surrogate home radio station," aspiring to replace the Communist-controlled information outlets and focusing heavily on domestic news. Consequently, its personnel, listeners, and Eastern-bloc antagonists used as many as six languages where present-day researchers are lucky if they can read the surviving documents in one or two. Without books such as Machcewicz's, gauging the scope of the broadcaster's impact would remain the privilege of the select few polyglots. For another, the station's existing histories have largely been written by RFE's former American staffers and drawn on American and, to a lesser extent, German government papers or corporate records. One of Machcewicz's most significant accomplishments is to break this cycle and to remind his reader of the broadcaster's Eastern European *raison d'être* and the perils associated with it.

He succeeds, moreover, without reducing the outsize transatlantic enterprise—in 1950, the *New York Times* television critic Jack Gould aptly dubbed RFE an "outfit of formidable proportions"—to a kind of national radio.[1] The station's ambition to be a surrogate home radio station

was really a pixel in a much bigger picture. And although in the book this big picture occasionally gets blurry, Machcewicz never lets it out of sight entirely. Both RFE's American overseers and its international Eastern-bloc secret police nemeses maintain a presence on virtually every page, and RFE's services other than Polish make periodic appearances.

Arranged chronologically from 1950 to 1989, the book's six chapters painstakingly chronicle the attacks of various Polish government offices—especially, several key departments of the Ministry of Internal Affairs—against the station's individual staff members, its identifiable listeners, its Polish desk (earlier known as Radio Free Poland), and the entirety of its operations across borders. Such measures ranged from politically predictable to desperate. All of them aimed against two of RFE's ostensibly central tactics: provocation and sabotage.

To the first type of measures belonged the already well-studied jamming and government petitions against RFE-related activities, from the 1950s leaflet-filled balloon launches at the Iron Curtain to the radio's broadcasts as a threat to West Germany's *Ostpolitik* since 1969. The second category was considerably more extensive, meriting a lion's share of the book's densely filled pages. It included using secret police agents to infiltrate RFE's offices; recruiting the station's disgruntled employees as informants; blackmailing Polish travelers interviewed by RFE's extensive Audience Research Department in the West; having well-known journalists spearhead domestic slander campaigns; pitting RFE against other influential émigré outlets, such as the Paris-based journal *Kultura*; making physical threats (both failed and executed) against the radio's high-ranking staff; and even getting Polish government subsidies for several make-believe émigré periodicals in the West.

In the process, Machcewicz captures several trends and debunks a few persistent clichés. RFE

listenership, the reader finds out, was anything but loyal: listener numbers peaked in times of Eastern-bloc crises and ebbed during lulls. The station, as one would expect, did not remain a silent victim of the efforts to discredit it; the Polish desk exposed the attacks to the best of its ability. Besides, the desk's émigré staffers, the author suggests, were much more independent from their US supervisors than either the Communist-era slander campaigns or most existing scholarly accounts would have it.

Unfortunately, the abundance of data in the book is not always conducive to generating many other provocative conclusions along these lines. The sheer volume of accumulated evidence frequently overwhelms and obscures the account's analytical thrust. Neither do the book's long rosters of names translate into a fluent and dynamic anecdotal narrative with a recognizable cast—a “thriller” that a cover blurb promises—that would excuse analytical lightness by appealing to a wider audience. Alas, the mere presence of spies and secret police agents does not a thriller make, especially when these protagonists' frequently one-dimensional sketches call into question the adequacy of secret police documents for generating full-bodied portrayals. The outcome is an account that is too frugal with methods and analysis to be fully scholarly and too dense to be consistently journalistic. Although Machcewicz's awareness of his sources is remarkable—the book is peppered with reminders of the limitations of the files and interviews and with justifications for the author's resulting need to speculate and interpret—the reader is largely left to his or her own devices when it comes to organizing the material into more than a chronology.

Above all, the argument remains unclear—and the book's premise, which Machcewicz appears to wield as an argument, is rather a foregone conclusion than a suggestion in need of proof. Similarly elusive are the author's stakes: does RFE's decades-long defensive say something

about RFE, Poland, or the Cold War at large—and what exactly? Furthermore, there is little concerted effort to capture qualitative historical change across the extended forty-year-long period. In this regard, it could have been helpful to reflect on the pros and cons of typologizing the attacks against the station. Indeed, one can infer that in the 1950s, Polish officials targeted RFE as a nest of Western spies; in the 1960s, as Jews or Zionists; in the 1970s, as Nazis. However, articulating such inferences and connecting them remains the reader's responsibility; the narrative confounds such attempts multiple times. Overall, if Machcewicz had reflected less on the sources that are not at his disposal—by repeatedly justifying interpretation that, he seems to forget, has long been historiography's norm—and more systematically on those that are, the book would have been stronger.

Finally, there is the question of language: first, Machcewicz's own; and second, that of the Polish Secret Police. To characterize the attacks against RFE, the author chooses a vocabulary strikingly reminiscent of Cold War-era fundraising campaigns for RFE, speaking of “war,” “struggle,” and “weapons” used “relentlessly.” However, his account also tells a story of such attack's frequent failures—especially during the 1950s and 1960s—and of the long hiatuses between them. “Relentless,” therefore, is hardly the most circumspect term. The same goes for Machcewicz's other aforesaid appropriations of period vocabulary.

“Sabotage” and “provocation”—the pet peeves of the Polish Secret Police—recur with great frequency. Yet both terms remain opaque and ill-defined throughout the narrative. What exactly was the meaning behind these two fronts? How did it change in the course of the conflict? Here, Machcewicz does not appear tempted by the possibilities of discourse analysis; neither does he seem aware of the venues that such widely creative studies as Cristina Vatulescu's *Police Aesthetics: Literature, Film, and the Secret Police*

in *Soviet Times* (2010) could offer him. His book's loose ends prove that future approaches to Cold War broadcasting as well as secret police will need to carry on with dismantling not only linguistic or national but also disciplinary boundaries.

Note

[1]. Jack Gould, "Radio Free Europe: A Unique Private Enterprise Is Set Up to Pierce Russia's Iron Curtain," *New York Times*, July 9, 1950, X9.

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