

**Anna Bischof, Zuzana Jürgens.** *Voices of Freedom – Western Interference?: 60 Years of Radio Free Europe.* Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015. 294 S. \$63.00, cloth, ISBN 978-3-525-37310-1.

**Reviewed by** Simon Ottersbach

**Published on** H-Soz-u-Kult (September, 2016)

For a long time, the scholarly discourse on Radio Free Europe (RFE, or the “Radios”) was dominated by former employees of the broadcaster. In often (semi-)autobiographical contributions they reminisce about their ultimately successful fight against “the big lie” in RFE’s target countries Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria. RFE was a vital, indeed central, asset of the “West” in winning the Cold War. Yet only more recently have younger researchers without personal ties to RFE presented research that goes beyond such Western eulogies and laudations. A selection of these new approaches have been collected in a volume that emerged out of a conference in Munich in 2011: “Voices of Freedom – Western Interference? 60 Years of Radio Free Europe”. Cf. the Conference Report: Voices of Freedom – Western Interference? 60 Years of Radio Free Europe in Munich and Prague, 28.04.2011 – 30.04.2011 Munich, in: H-Soz-Kult, 30.07.2011, <<http://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/tagungsberichte-3750>> (08.08.2016). Here, RFE is not only depicted as a success story told from a Western perspective (= “Voices of Freedom”), as some contributions also focus on “reception and responses in Central and Eastern Europe” (= “Western Interference?”), as the title of the fourth part indicates. Transcending the national boundaries typical for many media histories, the volume seeks to explore RFE as a “multi-layered actor” during the Cold War (p. 14) that functioned as a

truly transnational player employing émigrés from the target countries in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as US-American, and West-German staff. The volume aims to “provide a new, more contextualized understanding of a transnational field of interaction that lies at the heart of the Cold War” (p. 9). It is therefore embedded in recent fruitful attempts to historicize both the Cold War, as suggested by Akira Iriye and others, as well as one of the Cold War’s most important transnational media actors, Radio Free Europe.

The first part recounts the early institutional history of RFE. The contributions here do not reach very far beyond the existing literature, but they are vital for providing a basic understanding of the complexity of the broadcaster for the uninformed reader and give coherence and completeness to the overall volume. The second part considers “Strategies of Legitimization and Structural Circumstances”. Here, A. Ross Johnson – former senior RFE/RL executive and author and co-editor of seminal studies on the history of the Radios Cf. A. Ross Johnson, *Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty. The CIA Years and Beyond*, Stanford 2010; Id. / Eugene Parta (eds.), *Cold War Broadcasting. Impact on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. A Collection of Studies and Documents*, Budapest 2010. – focuses on political and diplomatic conflicts surrounding RFE’s location in Munich. Situated in the American occupation zone, the “uninvited guest” (p. 77) was not much resisted by the

Adenauer administration. Yet under Brandt's Neue Ostpolitik, RFE became a thorn in the side for many societal groups in the Federal Republic: RFE appeared too much like a Cold War relic that in the period of détente seemed redundant. Émigré groups in West Germany criticized RFE for restricting broadcasting on sensitive German national interests such as the Oder-Neisse-Line or the Sudeten issue. As stipulated in RFE's broadcasting license issued by the German authorities, broadcasters were not allowed to touch upon any of these delicate topics in their programmes by order of RFE's American management. In that sense, as Johnson's insightful contribution shows, diplomatic conduct and Western interference also obstructed the freedom of RFE itself concerning free reporting on such delicate political issues, leading, it could be argued, to forms of (self-)censorship. Accusations e.g. by Polish officials that RFE broke international law with its cross-curtain broadcasting are convincingly challenged and refuted in Christian Henrich-Franke's contribution focusing on the "juridical loophole" within which RFE operated.

The dimension of RFE's programming is discussed further in the volume's third part titled "Journalistic Practice and Program Content". Susan D. Haas examines journalistic practice in RFE's Central Newsroom – an internal news agency that provided the data and information for all of the multi-lingual radio services in RFE's working language, English. Most of the Newsroom's journalists originated from English-speaking countries, so they were not linguistically alien in this American institution. Yet in the field of journalism, their employment at RFE carried with it a certain stigma: working for a CIA-backed propaganda radio was deemed incompatible with American journalistic principles of credibility, independence, and accuracy – at least for outsiders. Despite all professionalism and application of strict self-imposed rules – often superseding those of many other US media outlets. For instance, RFE news items had to be vetted by two independent

sources before they could be aired in the hourly news programmes. – their peers considered RFE's journalists to be, in Haas's words, "journalistic émigrés", or outcasts in the field. Moreover, they often found themselves trapped between the interests of two often conflicted groups: the American administration, who had to translate US national policy into RFE policy guidance, and the émigrés with their personal agendas who were working for language desks that were often profoundly nationally heterogeneous. In her convincing article, Haas not only opens up the transnational microcosm within RFE itself but also positions its journalists and their symbolic capital in the transnational Western journalistic field. The national heterogeneity of RFE's institutional microcosm is further illustrated by Martin K. Bachstein's article on the conflicts within RFE's Czechoslovak service.

Presenting voices from behind the Iron Curtain in the fourth part, Jane L. Curry diagnoses RFE's significant and multi-faceted influence on the Polish Communist elite. Despite publicly dismissing RFE as "CIA propaganda", the elites were "among Radio Free Europe's most dedicated users" (p. 203), both as avid listeners to transmissions and as thorough readers of daily programme transcripts. Their motivation was not only to be able to counter RFE's "propaganda" in the country with the station's highest listenership. Distrusting both their own media and intelligence reports, as well as the Soviet Union, the Polish regime "felt [a] need for 'independent sources'" (p. 204) to learn "what was really happening in their own circles and all over Poland" (p. 207) – and the world. And they found them in the programmes of RFE. Consequently, the broadcaster not only served as a surrogate radio station for the population but also, according to the interviewees, informed political decisions by the communist regime to varying degrees. What is somewhat problematic in Curry's article is her narrow source basis. She bases her article on "thirty-eight in-depth interviews [...] with Polish government

and Communist Party leaders” (p. 203) from Stalinism to the revolutions of 1989/1991. In her oral history approach, Curry relies only on the self-ascertained “anecdotal evidence” (p. 207) from the interviews without any further corroboration e.g. by archival documents from Communist Poland. Yet such documents are accessible to researchers, as is demonstrated e.g. in Paweł Machcewicz’s 2007 study on the Polish regime’s fight against RFE – also published in 2014 in an updated English translation Paweł Machcewicz, ‘Monachijska menażeria’. Walka z Radiem Wolna Europa 1950–1989, Warsaw 2007. English translation: Paweł Machcewicz, Poland’s War on Radio Free Europe, 1950–1989, transl. by Maya Latynski, Washington DC 2014. –, whom she surprisingly never mentions in the footnotes. An analysis of these interviews either against the backdrop of Machcewicz’s study, based on both interviews and archival material, the use of which Machcewicz arguably overdoes at the cost of readability Cf. Yuliya Komska, Review of: Machcewicz, Paweł, Poland’s War on Radio Free Europe, 1950–1989, transl. by Maya Latynski, Washington DC 2014, in: H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews, June 2015. <<http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=43341>> (08.08.2016). , or juxtaposed to own archival research would have made her otherwise very informative contribution much stronger.

Beyond the selection of scholarly articles discussed here, the volume also contains in its fifth part one research-based study and several interviews under the title “Accounts from Contemporaries”. Besides including some radio practitioners, these interviews add some very instructive personal recollections, especially on the role of RFE for the everyday life of the people under Communism. These accounts partially level out the one point of criticism that needs to be raised here: the imbalance concerning studies related to the five language desks. The Romanian Service, for instance, is specifically analysed in three of the 13 academic articles, but the Bulgarian in none explicitly. At least, two of the short accounts

feature Bulgaria and add some balance. And being a conference volume, such imbalance is acceptable. It should, however, encourage the community of RFE scholars to invest more scrutiny also into RFE’s “smaller” services.

Nonetheless, the editors have managed to collect contributions that provide original insights into the vexed and complex history of Radio Free Europe and Cold War international broadcasting. Many innovative, transnational perspectives have been introduced into the discussion and new paths for future research sketched out. The volume therefore serves as a thought-provoking plea for further research into international broadcasting and the transnationality of the Cold War – a plea that now needs to be taken up both by the senior scholars and the young voices researching Cold War radio broadcasting.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

**Citation:** Simon Ottersbach. Review of Bischof, Anna; Jürgens, Zuzana. *Voices of Freedom – Western Interference?: 60 Years of Radio Free Europe*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. September, 2016.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=47907>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No  
Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.