

Stephen Lovell. *Russia in the Microphone Age: A History of Soviet Radio, 1919-1970.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. 272 pp. \$59.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-872526-8.

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Communism on the Air: Arceneaux on Lovell, *Russia in the Microphone Age*

For a media historian not already immersed in Soviet history, reading this book is akin to dining in an elaborate foreign restaurant, particularly one from a country which the diner has never visited. Yes, there are undoubtedly delicious morsels of food, buried beneath some mysterious sauces and prepared in unfamiliar ways, though the menu is not written for the lay person. This metaphor is not meant as a dismissal of Stephen Lovell's detailed history of Soviet radio, but rather to provide context. The work is aimed at scholars of Russian history, particularly the Soviet era, and seeks to integrate radio broadcasting into the established historiography. There are no new theoretical insights into the medium itself, and while the bibliography does include some classic works of radio scholarship (including those from Susan Douglas and Michele Hilmes), the primary frame of reference is the immense body of scholarship that chronicles the institutional, cultural, and political history of the Soviet Union. A number of such works have explored the role of literature or cinema under the communist regime, though radio, a technology that came of age at roughly the same time as the Soviet Union itself, has remained unexplored. To fill this gap, Lovell has done a significant level of original archival research and

mined various oral history projects to provide firsthand listener accounts of Soviet radio.

The historical chronology begins in earnest in the early 1920s, an obvious frame given that broadcasting was institutionalized in most industrial nations around this time. The Soviet Union launched its first agency devoted to the new medium, Radioperedacha, in 1924, not long after the technology had been introduced in America and Europe. Lovell chooses to end the study in 1970, arguing that television had become the dominant form of broadcasting by this point. An additional, and perhaps equally relevant reason, is the complexity of the phenomenon under examination. This book is "the first full history of Soviet radio in English" (p. 7), and one must acknowledge that covering five decades of the medium in such a massive, heterogeneous country is certainly enough for one monograph.

Lenin famously said, in a quote that appears a few times in this text, that radio was a "newspaper without paper." Given the geographic expanse of the Soviet Union and its low literacy rates in the 1920s and 30s, the new technology contained even more potential than in other countries. One of the primary themes of the book is the government's challenge of efficiently managing this powerful

means of mass communication. This particular challenge is endemic to broadcasting, and governments across the globe have sought different solutions for maximizing radio's social benefits while balancing the demands for revenue. It is not surprising that the Soviets opted for a tightly controlled system, enacting strict rules for censorship. This rigid, top-down control, however, butted up against the communist ideal of egalitarianism, and broadcasters sought to include the voice of the "common person" when possible. The statements from the average worker or peasant farmer that reached the air had to conform to the prevailing government perspective of the day, and also prevailing norms of pronunciation. Lovell cites numerous examples of the ways proper Moscow pronunciation was enforced, in contrast to the numerous regional dialects of the sprawling region. The broadcasting of sporting events was an outlier in this regard; other forms of programming were recorded or scripted in advance, while sports had to be done *sans script*.

The seven primary chapters of the book cover the topic in chronological order, though the pre-World War II era is presented in a somewhat unusual manner; three chapters cover the same time frame, with each having a different focus. The first chapter provides an institutional account of Soviet radio, outlining its slow initial growth and the various government agencies that had ideas (sometimes inconsistent) on how the medium should be managed. Following the pattern adopted in many countries, Russia required listeners to pay license fees to own radios, though most early listening occurred in groups. Radios in public locations, including factories and villages, were connected by wires; Lovell provides numerous statistics to show that for a few decades, wired receivers greatly outnumbered wireless sets. During the war, this system ensured that Russians could not listen to enemy radio broadcasts, as the authorities controlled the wired networks.

The second chapter covers the same early time frame, but with a focus on the response from listeners. The archival record from this era is sparse (even more so than in other countries). The central government's desire to use radio for propaganda and social cohesion was often thwarted by technical limitations and differing ideas on appropriate programming. Serious classical music was not appreciated in the villages, for example, and there was a definite disconnect between urban and rural preferences, a problem not unique to the Soviet experience. This chapter also highlights the important role played by amateur operators in the 1920s, as the government initially enlisted their support in popularizing the medium to remote regions.

Chapter 3, perhaps the strongest in the book, again revisits the same early time frame, but this time from the perspective of aesthetics. Soviet broadcasters recognized that a new style of oration was needed for the medium, though they could not always agree as to the preferred form. Similarly, dramatists recognized that simply reading stage plays into a microphone was a stunted use of radio, and Lovell documents different, innovative ways that sound was used to tell stories. During the 1930s, coinciding with the increase of Stalin's power, these ambitious experiments decreased, and the presentation of serious, dramatic literature became common. Rather than an avant-garde use of sound effects, the voices of famous writers were now a featured attraction on the airwaves.

The remaining four chapters cover World War II and a subsequent growth of radio, and a temporary loosening of restrictions. By the end of the war, official Soviet sources claimed that one-fourth of the nation could be reached by radio, though Lovell speculates that one-seventh was a more reasonable figure (p. 135). Over the ensuing years, the number of wireless receivers (as opposed to wired ones) began to grow, and more regions became "radiofied." Most parts of the Soviet

Union received broadcasts from the government in Moscow, and perhaps another regional network. Round-the-clock national broadcasting was finally implemented in 1960, and in 1964, the government launched a second channel, Radio Maiak. Lovell describes this as an “obvious homage to engaging Western radio stations” (p. 150), with regular news updates and light music.

The use of magnetic tape recorders, a technology adopted from Nazi Germany, warrants its own chapter. Whereas previous methods for recording sound were bulky and expensive, Russian broadcasters now had an easy and portable method for preserving sound. Producers could roam the country more freely, broadcasting sounds from all over, and the growing use of recordings also solved some of the pronunciation problems that had vexed censors for years. Producers no longer had to leave proper enunciation to chance. The last major chapter describes various genres of radio programming from the postwar decades, and includes firsthand recollections of listeners.

Children’s programming was particularly prominent, and writers of this genre were allowed more leeway than with the adult-oriented dramatic programming. The recollections also make clear that, even while the Soviets sought to jam radio stations coming from abroad, listeners regularly found ways to listen, and often preferred them to domestic fare.

Scholars with a particular interest in Soviet history will certainly want to check out this monograph, and radio historians with a particular interest in regulations or questions of aesthetics will also find this book of value. Lovell’s prose assumes a certain familiarity with Russian history, however, and this, combined with his frequent use of Russian words, could make this book a challenging read for someone not already piqued by the topic. To return to the food metaphor at the outset, there’s some good eats in this work, though not for the casual diner.

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