

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

Not so many years ago, there was a thriving cottage industry in the study of Soviet propaganda: political scientists and pundits read the tea leaves in *Pravda*, while the US government employed brigades of specialists to tune in to Radio Moscow. Yet while no one doubted the importance of Soviet mass media, it was their content that excited interest in the West. What made these vast institutions tick, and what role they played in everyday Soviet life, was terrain mostly unexplored.

Stephen Lovell's recent book breaks major new ground, then, as the first full-length history of Soviet radio in English. This meticulous, perceptive study shows off its author's unusual strengths as a historian equally at home in the Politburo, the *kommunalka*, and the offices of the literary journal. The combination turns out to be vital for an understanding of Soviet radio, which was not only a political tool of the first order, but also a major cultural institution, and one with a profound impact on Soviet everyday life.

Lovell writes of Russia 'in the microphone age', 1920 to 1970, when, he says, radio rose to be the preeminent medium on the Soviet scene (only to be dethroned by that pushy upstart, television). Radio's dominance was neither immediate nor inevitable; as in many other countries, amateur enthusiasts took the lead early on, but it was state involvement that ushered in professional, centralized broadcasting. Russian-language historians tend to play this transition from 1920s experimentation (much of it in a visionary mode better known from the period's avant-garde film world) to 1930s institutionalization in a minor key, as a variation on the familiar tune of Stalinist cultural repression. Lovell takes a different approach and emphasizes radio's contribution to creating a national mass audience: As of around 1932, he writes, 'the party now found it necessary to work towards a less rebarbative, supra-class culture that would convey Bolshevik success in building a united new society.' The highpoint of this Soviet radio as social glue was to be the Second World War, when broadcasters worked

hard to produce a service ‘of the people as well as for the people’ by opening up the airwaves to ordinary citizens’ words, and even voices, on an unprecedented scale. Stalinism’s dark postwar finale did much to throttle this initiative, but it also brought huge investment in ‘radiofication’ – expertly documented here-- which soon expanded the audience by leaps and bounds. And as de-Stalinization took hold in the mid-1950s, radio was able to take a ‘demotic turn’ once again. Now technology, too, (particularly mobile recording equipment) stepped in to liberate broadcasters who dreamed of producing more dynamic, populist programming, or ‘socialist radio with a human face’. The post-Stalinist decades, then, were a golden age, Lovell says. Radio reached saturation levels nationwide, and programming genres grew far more varied and sophisticated: with children’s and youth programming, news, sports, drama, humor, light and classical music, and yes, political propaganda, this was a full service and a staple of everyday life under developed socialism.

At times, *Russia in the Microphone Age* reads as something of a defense of Soviet radio- of its ability to unify, uplift, and delight its audiences, its skill in navigating treacherous political waters, and indeed of its own dominance. Given that ‘Soviet mass media’ and concepts like ‘dynamism’ or ‘delight’ so seldom appear together in most imaginations, at least outside the former USSR, the point is very well taken. The book is rich in detail and keenly analytical. Yet, like all media histories, a history of Soviet radio runs the risk of equating the values and experiences of its producers with those of its audience. Speaking of the Stalin era, Lovell writes evocatively of radio ‘voicing the Soviet experience’ and helping the audience to ‘feel Soviet.’ But this was, to be sure, not *the* Soviet experience if we take Soviet as a geographical marker (people living in the USSR), but rather a particular set of ideas of what it meant to be Soviet—one that excluded not only the everyday brutalities, but also, as Lovell details very well, the sounds of everyday ‘uncultured’ speech and, for many people, of their mother tongue.

Lovell is clear that his study is one of Russian broadcasting: Russian was, of course, the USSR’s lingua franca, and as such, dominated all media; focusing on Russian radio makes sense. But Russian radio and Soviet radio were not the

same thing, not even in Russia itself, which broadcast in multiple languages. So, in fact, Soviet radio might well have felt like a linguistic community first finding a mediated voice, an entrée to modernity, and it might have felt like Russian-language dominance—like pride, and resentment, and myriad points in between: the situation varied from place to place and over time, as did, we have to assume, how people understood their Soviet experience. The linguistic issue is the most obvious example of the complexity, but we could look at gender, age, and many other categories of analysis to break down the image of a unified audience so central to the broadcasting ethos.

Surely, the wartime experience, and then de-Stalinization opened up the range of what counted as Soviet experience in important ways. In the golden age of radio, broadcasters discovered audience differentiation and developed targeted programming. But the limitations on diversity remained strict, the cultural hierarchies rigid. Soviet radio was not only authoritative--Lovell's preferred term-- but authoritarian; while de-Stalinization introduced options to question (some) authorities, it rarely questioned the idea of authority itself. A new wave of broadcasters that Lovell rightly highlights did strive to give socialist radio a human face by making programming more open to ordinary people's voices and concerns. They also remained very much committed to a concept of radio as a mechanism for popular improvement, and a vision of themselves as cultural authorities to guide the way. The kind of radical radio democracy envisaged by the 1920s visionaries was never on the table. The contrast between Soviet media culture and the West's in-your-face, anti-authoritarian 1960s (not to mention the anti-utopian, solipsistic '70s) was stark.

And what of the audience? Lovell makes a strong case for Soviet radio's popularity: listenership was nearly universal, he explains, and millions of listeners sent in letters. Soviet media professionals and sociologists were convinced that listenership meant approval, and Lovell takes much the same view. But it is always far easier to know what broadcasters think of their audiences than what audiences think of broadcasting; people listen (and report listening to the authorities) for complicated socio- personal and political reasons

that go well beyond like/dislike . That Soviet radio was a powerful presence in Soviet everyday life is unquestionable. Understanding the role Soviet radio played in the life of its huge, diverse audience remains more elusive.

Kristin Roth-Ey

University College London