

Book Reviews

Stephen Lovell, *Russia in the Microphone Age. A History of Soviet Radio, 1919-1970*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2015.

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This book is the first English language research published on the subject of Soviet history through the perspective of Radio, as the main communication medium. Unlike previous Russian papers on the subject, the present endeavour is realized by an actual historian, in a less subjective manner. It is the result of ten years of research done in the Soviet archives. The author, Stephen Lovell, is a Professor of Modern History at St John's College in Oxford with a PhD from the School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES) at the University of London. His research interest focuses on the Cultural and Social History of Russia in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Lovell goes beyond the political history of the USSR to reveal how analyzing Soviet Radio can be illustrative for the ensemble of cultural history. He, thus, distances himself and his work from conventional mainstream history by distinguishing between the ideological agenda of a political regime (be it a totalitarian one), and the grass-roots impact and implementation of the agenda.

The book is well documented with archival material and recordings throughout the former USSR, following the beginnings of Soviet radio up to the end of the 1960's, while presenting the wide range of radio programs such as theatre, music, political shows, children shows, radio literature, radio film etc.

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The volume is divided into seven chapters, preceded by an introduction entitled “Why Radio?”. It proposes an explanation for the relevance of the Radio phenomenon in Soviet history, media history and for cultural history in general. The introduction serves as a justification and is not a methodological chapter. The seven chapters follow a chronological staging of Soviet Radio history, with the exception of the last chapter, which represents rather an in-depth study of the content of the radio shows.

The first chapter, *Institutionalizing Soviet Radio*, refers to the origins of Radio, Soviet claims of inventing it and the efforts made by the Bolsheviks to institutionalize and centralize the media, in comparison with the similar situations in the UK, Weimar Germany and the US.

The second chapter, *Radio and the Making of Soviet Society*, provides a presentation for the role of Radio in unifying and centralizing Soviet (civic) identity through uniformity. It also brings into account the evolution of technology, from logistical challenges and interference, to the contribution of amateurs (or “hams”).

In the third chapter, *How Russia learned to Broadcast*, Lovell depicts the illusions of interactivity and the rise of state controlled broadcasting. This stage brings the triumph of ‘Socialist Realism’ over naturalism, as the Soviet public is told what they are experiencing and officials attempt to define Radio: is it art or ‘spoken newspaper’?

The fourth chapter, *Mobilizing Radio: The War*, exposes the restrictions executed by Soviet officials on ordinary consumers and ‘hams’, as well as the role of radio in disseminating propaganda during the Second World War. As listening to the news becomes a daily ritual for citizens desperate to learn about the war, Soviet Radio reaches its peak in influence, complexity and realism.

By the fifth chapter, *From Wire to Efir: Radiofication and Beyond*, we are acquainted with the end of the Stalinist period, when efforts made by Soviet officials to restrict foreign broadcasting become futile and measures to professionalize staff and diversify programs were insufficient to satisfy the growing cultural demands of the Soviet people.

The sixth chapter, *The Magnitofon and the Art of Soviet Broadcasting*, follows the shift from live shows to pre-recorded, higher quality and diverse content. This change brought about a lessening of ideological pressure from officials and their propaganda.

The final chapter, *Radio Genres and Their Audiences in the Post-War Era*, re-iterates the types and genres of Radio programs, from children shows ideologically constructed for ‘miniature adults’, simplified news outlets, rehabilitated Radio Theater, sports, youth shows or music.

After the last chapter, the author included a 5 page *Epilogue*, with the purpose of justifying the chronological barrier. Thus, Lovell explains the end of his focal point around 1970 because of the changes undergone by Radio in the Soviet Union during the *Détente* period: pervasive propaganda and censorship proceed to hide the impact of stagnation and the rise of television as the main media. He makes a concise step by step timeline of Radio in the Soviet Union up to 1991 and of Russian Radio after independence and close to the moment of publication under Vladimir Putin.

Also relevant for the author’s timeline choice is the insufficient quality and quantity of the archival material after 1970. Moreover, the amount of time covered by this volume is diverse and lengthy enough (50 years) to require a full stop after 1970 in order to maintain coherence and academic consistency.

After the *Epilogue*, the author inserts his notes on the sources and archives utilized, as well as a much needed glossary of terms. Most of the specialized and technical concepts invoked in the book are of Russian origin and need appropriate translation, as well as contextual explanations.

The limits of this book are connected to the fact that it is a rather general paper. Some of the author’s previous research papers that constitute the basis for the present work are more particular, while the volume is broad but not exhaustive. Lovell gives very little information about the reception and content of the foreign (and illegal) radio channels and programs, as experienced by the Soviet people. Also, there is little or no information concerning the content of the Comintern broadcasting outside

of the USSR. This information would have been equally relevant to the understanding of the whole radio phenomenon throughout the time period under scrutiny.

Throughout the text of the volume, the author gives episodic instances in order to exemplify the observations made regarding the evolution of Soviet Radio. These case studies have a persuasive effect, as well as convey a more human and palpable dimension to the subject of Radio. However, the combination and shift from analytical style to irony lessens the academic character of the work, while simultaneously improving the attractiveness of the text.

There are no clear conclusions drawn at the end of each chapter and, instead of a final chapter of conclusions, Lovell ends with an Epilogue, hinting at a work in progress. This, in turn, gives the volume a more descriptive aspect.

Nevertheless, the scope of Stephen Lovell's work is remarkable and the methodology applied to his research is of sound historical background. Beyond the book being simply a general work on the nature and historical evolution of Soviet Radio, it is a significant improvement on the knowledge of Soviet (and Communist) propaganda, society, culture and mentalities.