

BOOK REVIEWS/КНИЖНЫЕ РЕЦЕНЗИИ

Tat'iana Mikhailovna Goriaeva. *Radio Rossiia: Politicheskii kontrol' so-vetskogo radioveshchaniia v 1920-kh – 1930-kh godakh; dokumentiro-vannaia istoriia*. 2nd edition. Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2009. 156 pp. 272 rubles (cloth). ISBN-13: 978-5-82431-085-6.

Despite its slimness, this book is not simple and is not, as is claimed, for a wide audience. The title does reflect the book's major theme; however, other themes and eras also figure prominently. Some are directly related to radio while others appear tangential. Stylistics, grammar, vocabulary, and other features make the book labyrinthine and at times frustrating to read, not just for non-native Russian readers. Its heavy, dense academic style and the Russian propensity for passive voice and participial constructions make the book less accessible than it might be. Yet, Goriaeva is clearly an expert on radio with numerous document collections, publications and much archival experience to her credit. Thus, the book can be useful for those interested in radio and its early relations to the state, and how these relations changed as radio came squarely under state control. The lengthy excerpts from letters and other archival materials are alone a valuable source. Goriaeva also touches on views about censorship, musical programming, and biographical information about key players. Her commentary spans a broad time span, from the eighteenth century to the post-Soviet years.

Goriaeva defines radio as “a system, mass media in the pocket of and totally dependent on the regime” and her aim is to understand “the history of the system's creation and its mechanism of action.” (p. 10) Since radio assumes its broad nature in the early twenties, and this “system” solidifies under Stalin in the early thirties, her work contributes to knowledge of the NEP era, even if the book treats other eras as well. She believes that radio is a key element of culture, both producing and reflecting Soviet and later Russian culture. Starting earlier than most other media forms (sound films, television, and the internet) and successfully competing with and staying abreast of newer forms, the radio, she surmises, is a way to understand daily life in its broad strokes across society. She links 1920s radio's live, on-air nature and aesthetic experiments to later media in the “information revolution” and depictions of diverse points of view in the late and post-Soviet eras. Her analysis along this line, however, does not go very far. Perhaps this is because it is not the key theme of the book, but her argument is tantalizing if not completely fulfilling.

Another early section in the book is even more remote from the key

theme. The issue of censorship is treated in a series of quotes and theories ranging from the Petrine era to the post-Soviet period. Quotations and paraphrases from historians, psychologists, and other social scientists run about twenty-five pages without discussing radio and without any clear analytical conclusions. This is the most tangential and weakest part of the book. Although some of the ideas are interesting, they are not placed in the context of radio's development in 1920s-30s.

One short chapter concerns music and radio. In the mid-1920s, concerts were organized especially for the radio and also broadcast live from musical institutions such as the Bolshoi Theater. Goriaeva depicts some of the personalities (musicians, composers, and engineers) involved in intense experimentation with technical methods, form and content. Special radio slots for musical broadcasts grew until by the late 1930s they occupied as much as three quarters of available air time. The music played ranged from Russian classics, to contemporary symphonic and operatic compositions as well as Western classical works. Some shows also introduced musical commentary. Light music was more controversial, but nevertheless jazz orchestras led by Leonid Utesov and Oleg Lundstrom appeared regularly and radio formed its own choir and orchestra. Goriaeva raises an interesting censorship issue here. One must not only consider program, but also music's role in setting tone and meaning as subject to censorship. Goriaeva depicts the further politicization of music and the arts in the 1930s, when artists were directed to be more active in building the new socialist society and to become more vigilant against any opposition. Yet, other directives called on radio, as a medium with one of the largest audiences, to ensure that its programming provided people with rational and relaxing leisure. Thus, the artistic division of the radio was walking a tightrope between satisfying this call for leisure culture with the demand for ideological correctness.

The book does have something to offer the reader specifically interested in the NEP era. One chapter addresses the situation of radio archives in the 1920s and 1930s. Evacuation and destruction of archives during the Second World War resulted in the loss of valuable sources. Yet, Goriaeva has done an exhaustive study determining which archives still contain extant materials and this is invaluable to NEP era researchers.

The second half of the book is dedicated to a detailed and well-documented depiction of the transfer of radio broadcasting, technical support, and commercial sales from a joint stock company arrangement to an arm of the state closely supervised by the Party. Letters, conference stenographic reports and legal orders depict the debates, personalities and lines of argument occurring as the transformation took place. The author describes how nascent radio was truly a democratic institution in its very

early years, allowing for multiple viewpoints from radio staff and listeners as well as experimentation in programming. The censorship present for print media did not come into play for the radio until the mid-twenties and then only gradually. More agencies became involved in oversight. Not only did the Party begin controlling staff appointments, but rules and regulations were developed as radio grew in breadth of broadcasting as well as in the geographic distances covered by new and better implemented technologies. "Radio leaders were fully aware that losing their power over the on-off button, they would become fully dependent on the state ideologically, financially, and technically, turning into an appendage of CC (Party Central Committee) agitprop, and would not have any perspective for creative and political development." (p. 88)

Although the new censorship system was basically in place by 1928, according to Gorjaeva, radio was still organized and administered as a joint stock company. The Kremlin had to figure out how to control the microphone itself. (p. 83) This took place gradually with radio personnel trying from the inside to maintain some autonomy. Gradually control over radio was delegated to various state and party agencies: Narkompochtcl (Commissariat of Post and Telegraph), Narkompros (Commissariat for Enlightenment), Glavlit (the main censorship organ) and party committees at central, regional and local levels. The joint stock company's commercial affairs were reassigned to the state sewing machine agency by late 1927. In short the joint stock company and the independent governing of radio were slowly dismantled. From 1928 to 1931 Narkompochtcl controlled radio, but itself came under new degrees of political control. By 1932, the radio committee, parallel to the news agency TASS, was set up to link radio directly with the Party Central Committee. P. Kerzhentsev headed the radio committee, which included representatives of state agencies responsible for various aspects of radio. Now through a horizontal relationship, party committees exercised direct control of radio. Ironically, Gorjaeva's example for the height of the use of radio for propaganda, ideological control and censorship is the 1939 Supreme Soviet election. Directives and excerpts show that radio personnel understood their role was to bring knowledge of "where, how and for whom to vote" and to keep enemies of the people from being elected. (p. 147)

Also in the late twenties, emphasis was placed on mass production of radio equipment so that radio could be further popularized. Calls went out to strengthen radio especially along the western borders to counter capitalist informational incursions. Discussion of radio's political importance increased. It was no longer a tool for communication of news and opinions but instead for state-controlled expression of ideologically correct ideas. To this end all corners of the USSR had to be equipped to broadcast

the standard lines from Moscow.

By the mid-thirties it was worse than that: “The time has come when no one thinks anymore about the logic of behavior: the repressive machinery had started, in which the main condition for survival was the ability to know the most current state of affairs and immediately adjust to it, not asking superfluous questions.” (p. 137) Goriaeva gives excerpts of orders calling for more vigilance, condemning nationalist and fascist tendencies, and terminating employment of various radio personnel in all spheres. Furthermore, the central *apparat* now scripted all programming and sent it to all radio stations. By the mid-thirties censorship required pre-and post-program approvals and preservation of all copies; censorship staff were provided with radios to monitor broadcasts both at home and at work. Lastly, by 1940 all censorship was controlled exclusively by Glavlit, which meant there was no leeway between organizations.

Goriaeva concludes with a short section on the audience. Acknowledging that archives and social research provide scant audience data, she asserts nevertheless that there was never true conformity among listeners despite increasingly tighter controls over radio content. She gives several examples of people writing anonymous comments refuting standard lines but also cites Solzhenitsyn’s fictional depictions of peasants making vulgar demonstrative gestures toward the radio, particularly during broadcasts of Stalin’s wartime speeches. This weakens her argument to some extent, leaving the area of radio’s impact on the audience still untapped for thorough understanding.

In the second half of the book, Goriaeva elucidates various perspectives and the arguments in debates unfolding internally and across organizational and political lines. In some cases, she provides full texts or lengthy excerpts of documents. We even see comments by Nadezhda Krupskaja, Lenin’s widow, calling for further activity by trade unions and more centralization. Replete with jokes, insults and in-fighting, the excerpts are entertaining and valuable as sources. Nevertheless, Goriaeva insists that ultimately the decisions of Stalin and his inner circle mattered far more than resolutions passed by the commissions she cites. She asserts that starting in 1928 the *apparat* had greater control of radio’s principles, methods and content. Although she does have some excerpts from the NKVD and higher Party organs, it would be useful to have more evidence from this “higher circle” which she claims made the definitive decisions, to counter and undermine the meetings and commissions for which she has elaborate evidence.

The book is strongest when there are documents backing her points. In other places she ventures into a variety of concepts, interesting but not always well supported.

For example, while describing the “crooked mirror” created by media in the majority of the Soviet era, she tosses in that Stalin did not like narration behind films and thus for some time this was forbidden. This is an interesting fact, but lack of invisible narration does not inherently create false information in a documentary. Then she moves to assert theories about invisible voices having power over listeners as evidenced by ancient religious and other rituals. She concludes that unseen voices have an authoritarian nature.

One practical difficulty with this book, which again leads to the conclusion that it is mainly valuable to specialists, is the author’s assumption of knowledge on the reader’s part. Terms, names of state agencies, archives and other abbreviations are not systematically defined. Occasionally, there is an assumption that readers know the theories she is contradicting. For example, she notes there is a firm theory that Stalin did not value radio wholly, which she argues against. (p. 9) What the basis for this argument is, who made it or why are not explained.

Despite its weaknesses, this book offers some very clear evidence for radio’s potential had it been left alone or followed another path. Basically for ten years radio was a vibrant experimental and practical method for giving information, gleaning popular opinions, sharing cultural developments and exploring the recent revolution in many ways. Gorიაeva depicts how in the sphere of radio, changes took place to rein in the creative experimental side of radio, to take out the popular voice and replace it with a controlled single view of politics and the world. Perhaps these are not new ideas, but seeing the documentation of the discussions, debates, and arguments of those who did control and might well have continued to control radio is a fascinating glimpse into the past of a medium often forgotten in our information age, but one which still carries on in the social, political, and cultural milieu.

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