

## VOICES OF FREEDOM – WESTERN INTERFERENCE? 60 YEARS OF RADIO FREE EUROPE IN MUNICH AND PRAGUE

Radio Free Europe (RFE) began regular broadcasts from Munich sixty years ago with a news programme by its Czechoslovak department. To mark this anniversary, the Collegium Carolinum (Munich), together with the Czech Centre (Munich), and the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes (Prague) held the conference *Voices of Freedom – Western Interference? 60 Years of Radio Free Europe in Munich and Prague* from 28 to 30 April 2011 at Munich's Ludwig-Maximilian University. The conference revolved around RFE's role as one of the most political and polarizing of all international radio broadcasters in the Cold War context. What were the station's goals and how did it go about achieving them? To what extent did RFE contribute to an exchange of information and knowledge between East and West?

The station's political significance and the importance attached to similar international media in current politics and foreign affairs were demonstrated not least by the fact that the conference was held under the auspices of the Bavarian Prime Minister Horst Seehofer and the Czech Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg. This was also clear in the public discussion on the theme of "International Broadcasting Today" at America House with former RFE journalist and current President of Estonia Toomas Hendrik Ilves, US Consul General Conrad R. Tribble, political scientist and media expert Hans J. Kleinsteuber (University of Hamburg), Associate Director of Broadcasting at RFE/RL in Prague, Abbas Djavadi, and Ingo Mannteufel from the Deutsche Welle. In the introductions and contributions of this discussion the tensions between political regard for the station, scholarly insights, and the perspectives of contemporary witnesses that were felt throughout the conference were already apparent.

In addition to encouraging debate on contemporary cultural politics and foreign policies, the conference also provided a forum for former RFE workers and listeners in various panel discussions. Aside from their expert knowledge, these witnesses also described their intensive and emotional experiences of the station to their academic audience. In a panel chaired by Zuzana Jürgens (Munich), the former RFE employees Géza Ekecs (Munich), Anneli Ute Gabanyi (Berlin), Jenny Georgiev-Keiser (Munich), Agnes Kalina (Munich), and Wiesław Wawrzyniak (Berlin) described work procedures and

internal tensions between RFE departments and the station's management and recounted their personal memories and life stories. It became clear that these employees, regardless of whether they came from the East or the West, identified strongly with their work ("It wasn't just a job, it was a lifestyle"), but not necessarily with the RFE management. In a further panel discussion the focus turned to the perception of the station from outside. Chaired by Petr Brod (Prague), this panel brought together the contemporary witnesses Ludmil Janev (longtime RFE listener, Augsburg), Wlad Minkiewicz (journalist, Munich), Petr Pospíchal (signatory of the Charta 77 and founding member of the Citizens Forum in Prague), György Varga (translator and former RFE correspondent, Budapest), and Martin K. Bachstein (former Co-Director of the Broadcast Analysis Department at RFE, Pöcking). Those panellists, who were based at that time in Eastern Europe, described listening to RFE and other radio stations and discussing the news. They revealed that music programmes in particular (such as Teenage Party presented by Ekecs) had sparked their interest. All agreed that radio had played an important role in broadening their intellectual horizons. Bachstein spoke about RFE's perception in West German public opinion. Due to persistent resentment towards Eastern Europe, it tended to view RFE with scepticism. These panel discussions revealed that the station's employees identified strongly with RFE and were on close terms with each other. Yet the question of the relationship between the station's American management and its Eastern European employees remained unresolved, as did the issue of the influence of various intelligence agencies on the station. In these discussions it emerged that a dialogue with contemporary witnesses on the question of how RFE functioned and how it is remembered today is fruitful and should be continued in the future.

In papers presented by international scholars the issues raised by contemporary witnesses were examined from another perspective. In the first panel, four papers addressed the theme of international broadcasting during the Cold War. In sketching the historical context, Igor Lukeš (Boston) showed that the Eastern European emigrants, whom Lukeš called exiles, "were trapped in a divided world". The West supported their cause for a short time only before changing tack in the late 1940s to support the international status quo. In this context the exiles were an unwanted distraction. Media such as RFE represented one of the few areas where they retained a measure of power. Alexander Badenoch (Utrecht) mapped the technical and mental

topographies that dominated broadcasting during the Cold War. While broadcasting functioned in line with the national mental constructs dictated by the international frequency distribution, in terms of technology, it transcended such boundaries. In this way it represented an abiding challenge to national sovereignty. Badenoch described how radio both undermined and redefined national boundaries.

In their contributions Christian Henrich-Franke (Siegen) and Ioana Macrea-Toma (Sofia) focused on RFE operations. Henrich-Franke analyzed the legal context of RFE's activities. In terms of both content and technology, Eastern European states were not in a position to restrict the activities of RFE by recourse to legislation within the framework of international agreements or via the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). Henrich-Franke suggested that this was due to the fact that the law treated radio transmission as two separate components: the transmission of frequency (electromagnetic energy) and the transmission of information (broadcasting programme). While the former complied fully with international law, in its transmission of information RFE took advantage of a loophole in international law. The division of technology and content and the priority given to the protection of national broadcasting frequencies in international broadcasting law allowed RFE to operate within the existing legal framework and prevented it from being prosecuted by communist regimes. Macrea-Toma investigated how RFE gathered its news. She described a process of approximations and guesswork, as the news was sometimes based on a tangle of information that was difficult to substantiate. In the context of a hindered flow of information across the iron curtain, Macrea-Toma showed how the construction of objectivity was a multi-layered phenomenon.

In the second panel papers concentrated on the establishment of RFE in the American and West German context. Simo Mikkonen (Jyväskylä) suggested that the foundation of RFE (and subsequently that of Radio Liberty) was part of the American anti-communist strategy. As opposed to other stations, emigrants played a central role at both RFE and Radio Liberty. However, US institutions never followed through on their original plan to cede greater powers to the stations' Eastern European departments and emigrants remained answerable to the American RFE management. A. Ross Johnson (Washington/Palo Alto) investigated RFE's paradoxical position as a publicly-funded American institution that operated as a private employer subject to the laws of the Federal Republic. Due to security concerns and

resentment on the part of Bavaria's significant expellee community, RFE was often an "unwelcome guest" in the Federal Republic. Richard Cummings (Düsseldorf) described the institutions behind RFE. With the *Crusade for Freedom* initiative, the Free Europe Committee sought to raise institutional, moral, and financial support for RFE among the American public in the 1950s. All the panellists broached the question of the station's relations with the various intelligence services, but neither the papers themselves nor the discussion which followed them arrived at conclusive answers.

The third panel was concerned with news programming at RFE. With reference to the Czechoslovak Broadcasting Desk (BD) and the treatment of the Husák regime in RFE news programmes in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Anna Bischof (Munich) showed how the American management interacted with the Czech and Slovak BD heads. While the management issued policy guidelines, the BDs did take certain liberties. Journalists were instructed not to be overly critical of the Husák regime, which was seen as moderate in the West. Although the journalists followed this instruction, they nevertheless found ways to criticize Husák, for example by comparing Husák's statements from 1969/1970 with those from 1968 and earlier, or by channelling their criticism at Husák's old-fashioned views and behaviour (rather than at his politics). Susan Haas (Philadelphia) dealt with RFE's Central Newsroom, which drew its workers from the West. At RFE they encountered Eastern European emigrants on the various national editorial teams, many of whom had received no formal training in journalism before starting to work for RFE. In their dealings with each other both sides had to work out new norms and standards for their work at RFE. Petru Weber (Szeged) compared Romanian-language and Hungarian-language programming in terms of their treatment of the issue of minorities in Romania. In RFE's Romanian-language service this was a highly sensitive issue and there was a tendency to confine reporting to protests by the Hungarian minority against the Romanian regime. Yet at the same time efforts were made not to alienate Romanian listeners both in Romania and in exile, as RFE sought to unite those groups that were opposed to the Ceaușescu regime. In her analysis of reporting by RFE's Romanian service in December 1989, Anamaria Neag (Lund) showed how its programmes were clearly aimed at ending the communist regime. In pursuit of this goal, the Romanian editorial team placed a strong emphasis on the cruelty of the dictatorial Ceaușescu Regime, gave assurances to listeners that the West took an interest in their plight, used external reporting on the events of 1989

by Western reporters, and extended its support to the programme of the rapidly-advancing National Salvation Front (Frontul Salvării Naționale).

The following discussion on the influence of RFE reporting and the (questionable) interaction between journalists and the public also served to introduce the next panel, which was focussed on the reception of RFE in East Central Europe. With reference to interviews with members of the earlier socialist nomenclature in Poland, Jane L. Curry (Santa Clara/California) claimed that they too – distrustful of Polish media and news reporting – tuned into RFE to learn more about important events and problems in their own country. Rüdiger Ritter (Bremen) examined the everyday habits and communication patterns of listeners to RFE and other foreign broadcasters. For these people, the act of listening to these stations expressed both their thirst for information and their assertiveness in choosing what radio station they wanted to listen to.

In a paper that may have provoked some contemporary witnesses, Melissa Feinberg (New Brunswick) raised the issue of the social construction of truth and showed this with reference to the various perceptions of the Slánský trial in 1952 at RFE and among the Czechoslovak population. In its reporting of the trial, RFE tried to convince its listeners that any guilt on the part of the defendants resulted from their actions as communists and had nothing to do with their Jewish origins. Yet this view did not penetrate Czechoslovak public opinion and listeners came up with their own versions of what they believed to be the truth.

Prokop Tomek (Prague) described the various attempts by the Czechoslovak government to influence or hinder RFE's activities, mainly through jamming, propaganda, and intelligence service activities. Milan Bárta's (Prague) paper on the temporary cessation of jamming in Czechoslovakia in 1968 was read in his absence.

In the fifth and final panel, papers examined issues beyond the radio station itself. Yuliya Komska (Hanover/New Hampshire) showed how in the 1950s and 1960s RFE was established and developed in the transition from the heyday of radio to the beginnings of television. To secure moral and financial support for the station's activities, RFE's umbrella organisation, the Free Europe Committee, made use of films such as *This is Radio Free Europe* from 1964. The films presented an almost impermeable boundary between East and West to the American public – a boundary that could only be overcome by radio broadcasting from the West. Alfred Reisch

(Szigetmonostor/Hungary) gave an insight into the Free Europe Committee's secret book distribution programme, which distributed over ten million books across Eastern Europe between 1956 and 1991.

In the concluding discussion, which opened with statements by Martin Schulze Wessel, A. Ross Johnson, Yuliya Komska, and Petr Brod, several questions and goals for future research were highlighted. On the one hand, the internal functioning of RFE requires closer scrutiny. How did the editorial process work in practice? How were guidelines on content communicated and enforced? What tensions were there between centralization and decentralization in the editorial process? How did the (American) management interact with the station's (Eastern European) departments? Where can we locate RFE employees within the social history of the period? How can one assess the contribution of the station's (West) German staff? What spirit characterized RFE during the Cold War? And what discourses shaped the station? On the other hand, the history of the station requires further contextualization in the history of the Cold War. How can we reconcile RFE's campaign for change with the Superpowers' desire to maintain the status quo, as described by Lukeš? What "fantasies of the truth" (Feinberg) competed with each other? Here the normative claims of the station should also be historicized. Moreover, the significance of space should be investigated and the concerns, activities, and discourses behind the station located within twentieth-century transatlantic-European history. What was the significance of the station's location in Munich? How was RFE influenced by the West and what influence did it have within its Western European setting? The key words in the title of the conference – voices, interference, freedom, and western– raise questions to be answered in more detail in future research.

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