This book pays attention to two major issues. The first is the general story of the Radio Free Europe, an American radio station that started its East European career with Czechoslovak broadcast commencing on May 1, 1951. This anniversary gives us unique opportunity to look back and summarize some aspects of our historical knowledge on RFE, an important peaceful means of the Cold War rivalry, from East European perspective.

Certainly, this book would not have been possible without previous works written on this topic. Including the memoirs by ex-RFE American top managers, key editors, and security officers, like Robert T. Holt, Sig Mickelson, Arch Puddington, Glenn Ferguson, Kenneth R. M. Short, A. Ross Johnson, R. Eugene Parta, George R. Urban, and also responsible managers and journalists of the national desks, like the Czech Karel Sedláček, and Karel Jankovský-Drážďanský; the Hungarian Gyula Borbád, László Cseke, László Kasza, and Csaba Skultéty; the Polish Jan Nowak-Jezioranski; the Bulgarian Stepan Groueff and others.

RFE has attracted the attention of several historians, like Richard H. Cummings, Alan A. Michie, Herbert A. Friedman, Martin J. Medhurs, Christopher Simpson, Gerhard Wettig, Donald R. Browne, B. Dante Fascell, David M. Abshire, Leonard R. Sussman, Barry Rubin, Sean Kelly, Burton Paulu, Gary D. Rawnsley – just to name a few experts of the Cold War media, psychological warfare, mediadiplomacy, post-Helsinki era etc. It also has to be said that in comparition with the English language literature, the Hungarian, Czech and Slovak literature on the topic is rather weak, with some exception of the works of Prokop Tomek from the Chech Republic, Miroslav Michálek from Slovakia, Békés Csaba, Borhi László, Frank Tibor, Magyarics Tamás, Maruzsa Zoltán, and Révész Béla from Hungary.

Most of the books on RFE have been published in English. Unfortunately, for too many years East European listeners could only hear about a RFE which was blamed by their governments for its ‘inflammatory and hostile’ voice. This bad, or rather fake image of RFE is unfortunately still true because neither pre-1989 nor post-1989 authentic and balanced evaluations on RFE and its activities are accessible for non-English readers. So this book gives a substantial overview about the issue as well as some insight into the newest historical research and some conclusions in this field.

The second main intention of this book is to publish and evaluate some selected archival materials on the history of the RFE, particularly some materials regarding RFE’s East European Research Department. As the Cold War ended, and RFE had gradually withdrawn itself from East Europe, part of the RFE archives were filed away in the Open Society Archives (OSA) Budapest. By making research into these pre-1989 inner
documents, incl. background reports, press surveys, analysis, interviews, correspondence, evaluations etc., it is possible to make some fresh judgements on the RFE, regarding its broadcast policy, political activities, inner life, and mainly its impact on the East European region. Based on the literature as well as on primary documents, it is possible to shade the picture of this special radio station, RFE, a surrogate domestic radio which was meant to replace the futile domestic radios throughout East Europe. When doing this, it is inevitable to handle a key term, propaganda, i.e. those medial attempts that had been mobilizing and persuading some 80 million inhabitants of East Europe who were denied free access to the Western life.

A fresh wave of opening new archives (institutional as well as private ones) was an important driving force behind the fact that the RFE research gained a new stimulus after year 2000. Among others, some documents from communist archives were published too, and this shed some light on the anti-RFE counter-espionage activities of the East European state apparatuses. And yet, researchers should be careful with these documents, or at best the papers produced by East European secret services have to be treated with high level of cautiousness. One of the most interesting discoveries is how biased these documents are. This bias becomes rather evident when we discover that the obedient agents of the secret services firmly and to the very last set off from the preconception that RFE has always been, is and will always be ‘a tool for American ideological diversion which aims to overthrowing East European communist governments’. This bias is so tangible that practically every source serves this deeply ideological purpose. Just one example which undermines the reliability of East European secret service documents: in their official reports from the mid-1980s, services still vividly refer to and commonly carry on with the argumentations that ‘the RFE has a secret relationship with the CIA’ – despite the fact that the influence of the CIA had ceased some fifteen years earlier.

Documents of the OSA Budapest RFE’s East European Research Department were my primary research sources. As I see it now, these materials, news, commentaries etc. contain the history of the Cold War in a condense form, including the radio in the hands of the American policy making, the fluxus of the East–West relations, their ups and downs, etc. On the other hand it is clear from the sources that RFE was able to provide hope for those who needed it. The type of highly professional news production and programming in RFE’s practice served as a highly competitive alternative source of news against the one sided and strictly controlled communist mass media. And the documents produced by the management and the employees of the radio mean unique sources for analysing and understanding political news-making during the Cold War in general, and regarding communist East Europe in particular. Even within this geographical area, I focused my attention on former Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, and to lesser extent to Hungarians living in Czechoslovakia.

RFE was an American national security enterprise, too. It was a relatively cheap but a rather effective and practically unstoppable machine in the hands of the USA government. Just to indicate the scale of this adventure: at its top, RFE was able to produce some 1060 hours of programmes weekly in 21 different East European languages. Plus the RFE was able to produce radio programmes in a way that they were
not only firmly countering communist news but they were also able to be much more reliable and much more professional than most communist media programmes at any timepoint of the Cold War.

The history of the RFE is part of the political history of the Cold War. There is however an opinion saying that RFE was a part of a high-scale cultural struggle. Until Stalin as a person, and Stalinism as a social system was alive in East Europe, Western political and cultural conceptions (incl. western books, theatre, newspapers, later on western type of work organisation and economical methods, as well as western aid organisations) were totally marginalised in the geographical region between East Germany and Moscow. During the first decade of the Cold War, the USA itself preferred more militant and aggressive forms of political infiltration, incl. CIA balloon campaigns, psychological warfare projects and the RFE itself. Nevertheless, after a decade or so the USA refined its policy towards East Europe, and thus cultural infiltration began to prevail in these relations. The USA got down to undermine the legitimacy of communist elites by means of peaceful propaganda, massive cultural influence and media warfare. RFE had had a key role in this process, for it was an attractive representative of the economical and cultural superiority of the USA. RFE simply served as a symbol of the Wester lifestyle and freedom; listening to it was risky and therefore very personal, and the listeners could imagine something that did not exist in their social reality. Slowly and only gradually, but persistently the cultural infiltration made its impact.

Radio broadcasting was one of the four determinate tactical elements of the Cold War. Along with international diplomacy, economic pressure and military rivalry, it was the most important psychological weapon of a ideological battle on world scale. In the one hand, it meant a ‘responsibility-free’ diplomatic channel for the USA government. On the other, it was designed to directly influence listeners’ thinking, especially as far as international relations were concerned. RFE wanted to inform and influence, and to do so it had to get massively engaged in everyday politics. This intention had never ceased, on the contrary, it gained a new upturn in the 1980s when RFE became the mouthpiece of illegal East European oppositions of several kind.

What was the enormous interest of East European people toward the RFE’s programmes caused by? One of the main reasons was the informational monopoly of the communist parties. In East Europe – kept under a tight control of national communist parties offering ideologically selected news only – any listener could only chose whether to be misinformed or uninformed. RFE’s history covers a period of time when listeners throughout East Europe were incredibly keen on hearing news from the world political events. This genuine interest toward balanced news was so natural that it would have been very high even if the East European press was free. And this is one of the many paradoxes of the communist system: they intentionally created masses of educated youth, but at the same time they denied them access to free thinking and press. This forced ideological fasting fuelled hunger for reliable news. In return, RFE was popular in East Europe, and its popularity could have been undermined only if and when the communists gave up their monopoly in press. But this was highly improbable.
For some half a decade after its launching, RFE had hardly knew if it was listened to or if yes who its listeners were. When finally the managers received limited feedback from the interviews and listeners’ mails, the radio was very much interested in to find out who its listeners were, when, how, and under what circumstances they listened to the radio. RFE had to compete with nearly half-a-dozen major Western broadcasters on the media market whose target area was also East Europe. And yet, RFE managed to succeed despite several difficulties (incl. massive jamming) it had to face while its competitors did not have to.

East European people listened to RFE, and they were willing to trust it too. From communist perspective, this was already a serious provocation. RFE had not only disclosed communist propaganda tricks, and not only made clear that any hidden act could be soon published by RFE’s news, but communists could also be sure that RFE news will be trusted. This was the radio’s permanent challenge for local tyrans. In 1965, the Research Department asked in an interview what do listeners consider the most important mission of the RFE. Some 77% of the university educated listeners in Czechoslovakia answered it was ‘to provide free access to information from the world’. No doubt that in a region struggling with political deficits, and painful lack of freedom, RFE was regarded as an open window to the free world.

RFE had been engaged in a battle for the minds and hearts of East Europeans. In order to win this battle in the seemingly endless decades of the Cold War, the radio had to be technically well prepared. Simply, bipolar world system made the use of classical medium wave broadcasting at the best with two decades longer, and it was clear for both sides that radio news gained an extraordinary importance. But technical difficulties dwarfed in comparison with the political challenges that RFE had to face. The radio’s American management created a loose net of national desks (rather than a centralised news direction) which were rather free until they obeyed overall RFE directives and policy guidances. If they kept in line with main guidelines of the CIA, the NCFE, the State Department, later the BIB, there was no reason to intervene. According to RFE’s general inner policy, ’Americans were the publishers, while exiles at the national desks were the chief editors’. Good organization, speed, punctuality, and flexible content meant success.

I was keen to examine through the OSA sources how did the USA government under president Johnson reacted upon East European nationalism. According to the documents, the management started to make a clear difference between Czechs and Slovaks roughly from mid-1960s. The first substantial survey among travellers which made difference between listeners’ habits of these two nations was prepared in 1964/1965. From this point on, State Department as well as RFE devoted more and more attention to national differences as important indicators of ‘gaps in the Iron Curtain’. ’Moravians’, or ’Slovaks’, or ’Hungarians living in Slovakia’ became interesting mostly when national tension was high, like in 1968.

From time to time, RFE was forced to face its real impact on East European societies. As reflected in the OSA Research Department documents, the radio was not shy when asked about the extent of its own role. It unambiguously stated that it regarded itself as a major
factor which will sooner or later lead to the rebirth of freedom in East Europe. Indeed, RFE made a very significant effort to fulfill its mission statement engraved on the Freedom Bell: That this World under God shall have a new birth of Freedom.

Archival Sources and Biography

Levélári források - a könyvben az Open Society Archives Budapest alábbi fondjaira és alfondjai hivatkozom:


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