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Underground Over the Air: Radio Liberty, Russian Dissidence, and the Cultivation of a Listening Audience

Through the voices of émigrés, the surrogate broadcasting enterprise embarked upon by the CIA as Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty spoke directly to the subject peoples behind the Iron Curtain, delivering news, literature, history, and politics. On the other side of the Curtain, meanwhile, opposition movements began to coalesce around various interest groups (religious, artistic, and political, and many combinations thereof). RFE/RL saw as their crowning achievement the role they played in providing a broadcast outlet for these movements, thus amplifying these opposition voices.

Before the likes of Sakharov and Solzhenitsyn had become household names in the West, however, Radio Liberty was forging a relationship with its listeners grounded in a responsive feedback loop. Using listener mail, I have chosen to focus on the more mundane reader-listener of the RL Russian service in the early 1960s. This is the audience who proved simultaneously that a thirst existed for what Radio Liberty could provide, and that partially quenching it could lead to greater engagement. And perhaps most importantly, that the thirst was not confined to the intelligentsia, or to any particular elite.

These are the listeners who found in Radio Liberty not so much a kinship with underground movements (though that did, of course, sometimes happen), but who in the main sought a utilitarian satisfaction of a need: access to printed and recorded matter that was otherwise unavailable to them. These two strands can, and did, overlap at times, as that matter was often restricted on political or ideological grounds within the USSR. But the audience with which I am concerned here falls more readily in the category of *kramola*, the kind of seditious behavior that has less to do with ideological dissent, and more to do with the everyday frustrations of a citizen in a rapidly modernizing society.ⁱ The relationship that these listeners entered into with RL over inaccessible material would help to lay the groundwork for the democratic movements of the 1970s.

ⁱ Vladimir A. Kozlov, Sheila Fitzpatrick, and Sergei Mironenko (eds), *Sedition: Everyday Resistance in the Soviet Union under Khrushchev and Brezhnev*, English edn, Olga Livshin (trans), (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).