

March 6, 1958

Radio Liberty Russian Broadcasts Reviewed

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Summary:

An International Organizations Division reviewer highlights problems in Radio Liberty Russian programs in early 1958

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6 March 1958

MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

SUBJECT: Observations on RadLib Russian Programs

Note: For this study of RadLib's Russian programs, 30 complete daily programs for the period extending from the end of last October through the beginning of January were reviewed in script form, and tapes of a half-dozen broadcasts were audited. Thus, the sample of the printed scripts can probably be considered fairly representative for the period covered, while the number of audited broadcasts is obviously too low for confidence in the degree to which they are a valid reflection of production techniques.

1. First of all, it is necessary to point to a disturbing ambivalence of approach characterizing, in the main, programs on Soviet domestic themes, on the one hand, and the remaining output, on the other. For broadcasts on Soviet topics, the aim seems to be to encourage a total and massive overthrow of the Soviet system through the systematic denigration of the bases and institutions of that system. In contrast, most other broadcasts apparently are inspired by the attempt to encourage and sustain the forces for change in the Soviet Union by disseminating information and views which will stimulate independent thought about and raise dissatisfaction with official Soviet policies and which will project desirable alternatives to the Soviet system. It is obvious that even if the first strategic and tactical line were not a violation of good sense and of official information policy, the implementation of two such divergent lines would, at best, confuse the audience and jeopardize the Radio's integrity among its listeners.

2. It has been found that a large number of the programs dealing with Soviet internal matters were frequently ironic, contemptuous, didactic, hortatory, denunciatory, and, on occasion, little short of provocative. Many seemed to proceed from a personal animus, with ridicule and propagandistic cliches substituting for any attempt at sober and serious discussion. This was found to be true not only of such regular feature programs as "Land to the Peasant," "A Friendly Chat"

(for servicemen)

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(for servicemen) and "Variety Show" (dramatic programs on domestic themes), but also of the bulk of special features dealing with a variety of domestic developments as they occur or take on topical interest.

3. On the other hand, programs concerned with events and phenomena outside the Soviet scene were, in the main, treated in a sober, calm and dispassionate manner, obviously intended to instruct through subtle precept and the force of reasonable analysis. This category includes programs devoted to developments in non-Soviet communist-ruled countries.

4. Two outstanding exceptions to the bulk of programs on Soviet domestic themes are the weekly features "From the Realm of Thought" and Prof. Denicke's talk. "From the Realm of Thought," written and broadcast by the Russian writer Vl. Weidle, concerns itself with problems of ideology, probing the vulnerabilities of basic Marxist-Leninist theory in light of the current ideological ferment through earnest, stimulating, scholarly discussion. Denicke's analyses of a wide spectrum of topics of domestic Soviet concern are also characterized by sobriety of approach, sharp insight and breadth of knowledge.

5. It seems clear that if the observations made above on programs concerned with domestic Soviet events are valid, nothing will be gained by going into greater detail about this category of broadcasts; the basic approach is wrong and must be changed before a consideration of specific aspects of these programs is meaningful. As for the remaining output, the following may be said:

News, News Commentary and Analysis -- on the whole, programs devoted to news reporting, commentary and analysis do a good job of providing the listener with a representative selection of news of important international developments, with the basic material necessary for an informed judgment, and with a variety of legitimate points of view on the news. Commentary and analysis are usually sober and restrained in content and presentation. The program devoted to comments in the world press on news developments is often a most effective way of handling direct refutations of the official Soviet line. As can be expected, news programs do not maintain a consistently high level: sometimes, too great stress is placed on news of secondary importance for transparently tendentious reasons; sometimes, it is questionable that the subject of a news commentary can legitimately be

considered "news"

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considered "news" at all; at times, the news analyses are too flagrantly unobjective. It is probably the existence of these irregularities, rather than the amount of time actually spent on news programs in their various forms, that sometimes make it seem that not enough attention has been paid to the news.

Developments in Non-Soviet Communist Countries and the World Communist Movement -- Programs on these subjects are usually handled in an astute manner, supplying listeners with real understanding of the current Communist ferment and of deviations from Soviet theory and practice in the direction of greater flexibility in the economic, cultural and political fields. However, this entire category suffers from the shortcoming that not enough attention is devoted to these questions, or at least, that they are not handled in a sufficiently comprehensive and systematic fashion. Thus, for example, concerning Polish developments, which were particularly well handled, there was only one regularly scheduled feature, "Review of the Polish Press" -- certainly too confining a category for a systematic treatment of events in Poland. For the rest, reliance was placed mainly on sporadic features, regular features of a catch-all nature, and material in news programs, which seems a most unsatisfactory way of handling material of such importance to the Soviet audience.

Dynamics of Democratic Societies -- To a large extent, this category of program exhibited the same strengths and weaknesses as the one listed above. While a greater number of regular features was devoted to topics in this general category, they were still inadequate or did not permit a sufficiently comprehensive and systematic coverage of the field, and there was a greater fluctuation in the quality of these programs. Democratic institutions and thought are in need of a more profound, extensive and systematic analysis, with greater emphasis on their practical and spiritual significance to the individual.

6. As a final remark on the programming, it should be noted that there is a tendency towards too great a concern with narrowly political matters. As a result, an entire day's output can be quite heavy and monotonous and give the impression of "propaganda" even when individual programs are handled with circumspection.

7. It has been noted that too few broadcasts were actually audited to permit confident generalizations about production techniques. However, for what it is worth, the programs which were audited contained no

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surprises: the broadcasters seemed to render most capably the intent and spirit of the scripts, the on-the-air broadcasts mirroring faithfully the strengths and weaknesses of the scripts. It may be added that the technique of interviews with non-Russians, which permit the listener to hear snatches of the questions and answers in the original language, was not so smooth as it might have been, and that transitions from one program to another were sometimes too abrupt, as was the occasional case with the fade-outs of music introducing one or another program.

8. The foregoing criticisms of Radlib's Russian programs are not original. They have been made repeatedly by one or another member of the script-evaluation panels and by various members of the Project both in New York and Munich, although criticisms of weaknesses of scripts on domestic Soviet matters may not have been explicitly generalized in the way done here. The need for more subtle, varied and non-polemic programming, with topics analyzed more systematically and with greater depth, has been clearly recognized in the Project. Discussions between New York and Munich on propaganda policy questions and the final positions taken on the aims and methods of exploiting various themes have been in full accord with our thinking here.

9. If, in view of the Project's awareness of the major shortcomings of its radio output, we were doubtful about the utility of transmitting our findings to them, any attempt on our part to devise "solutions" for these shortcomings seemed equally futile. This, because we felt that the stubborn persistence of these shortcomings must be attributable to the existence of sensitive and complex problems and that only those who had an intimate working knowledge of these problems could devise meaningful expedients for overcoming them.

10. Nevertheless, we were in the process of formulating recommendations which we hoped would be more than merely interesting, but irrelevant, abstractions, when the new program schedule, developed by the Project and introduced into the programming last month, arrived. (See attachment) We believe, along with the Project, that this new schedule has every chance of radically improving the Radio's output.

11. The new schedule consists of a number of programming innovations, the most important of which are four 15-minute weekly "Notebook" features -- devoted, in turn, to the Afro-Asian area, to Europe,

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America (North and South), and East Europe -- and a 20-minute weekly "Soviet Notebook" feature. In addition, five minutes each day will be devoted to a report on some significant event in his area by a correspondent from the UN, the U.S., Germany, Paris, Rome, London and Vienna.

12. It is obvious that the new programs concerned with life and developments in the non-Communist world and in non-Soviet Communist countries will greatly help to overcome the previous lack of sufficient material on these areas. More importantly, these topics will be treated more systematically, and, it may be anticipated, with greater profundity than before. It should also be noted that three of these four Notebooks contain a section devoted to the "Human Side," the need for greater emphasis on which has been noted above.

13. The setting up of a twenty-minute program on the Soviet Union should go a long way towards correcting the abuses on Soviet topics noted above. For, although the Soviet Notebook is divided into four parts, it will naturally be considered a unit, with a consistent basic approach demanded of all its constituent parts and with deviations from this basic approach much more easily detectable than is the case with a great number of individual and isolated programs. Inconsistencies between Soviet and other material will also be greatly magnified by easy comparison between the Soviet and the other Notebooks. If the Soviet Notebook should take on the character expected of it, it should exert a healthy influence on programs on the Soviet Union outside its purview by acting as a most conspicuous standard for the others to follow. And, if it should be considered desirable to pursue a cruder line in one or another special Soviet feature program, at least the balance will be heavily weighted in favor of the more sophisticated approach.

14. Of vital importance to a consideration of the new programs is the very likely eventuality that the new schedule will give the Radio supervisors much greater control than heretofore over the content and presentation of program material. This may be inferred from the fact that the bulk of material on most basic subjects and topics will be reserved for the weekly Notebook programs and will, therefore, require, or be susceptible of, more advance preparation than has previously been possible.

15. Lastly, the new schedule should be most attractive to members of the Soviet audience, who will now know to a degree impossible before just when to tune in on programs of particular interest to them and approximately what to expect of them.

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