

Listening Out, Listening For, Listening In: Cold War Radio Broadcasting and the Late Soviet Audience

KRISTIN ROTH-EY

Why did people in the late Soviet Union listen to Western radio broadcasts, and what, if anything, is important about the fact that they did? Conventional wisdom will answer these questions in straightforward fashion: Western broadcasters (the BBC, the Voice of America, Radio Liberty, Deutsche Welle, and so on) told people truths that the Soviet regime hid from them; people listened because they were hungry for those truths; and truth-telling ultimately eroded faith in the Soviet system. Many former broadcasters argue much the same; in their memoirs and historical accounts, they speak assuredly about the radios as oases of “freedom” and “democratic values” embraced by eager listeners behind the Iron Curtain.¹ With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the partial opening of the archives, we do now have much better documentation of Soviet *regime’s* approach to Western broadcasting. We now know, as suspected, that the authorities followed what they called the “enemy voices” (*vrazheskie golosa*) obsessively, fretted that the population was doing the same, and channelled major resources into tackling the problem. Yet the Soviet audience experience—not the audience idealized, demonized, or feared, but the actual audience

For comments on previous drafts of this article, I would like to thank the anonymous readers for *The Russian Review* as well as Elena Razlogova, and respondents at presentations held at University College Dublin, Cambridge University, the University of Konstanz, and the University College London School of Slavonic and East European Studies.

¹Arch Puddington, *Broadcasting Freedom: The Cold War Triumph of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty* (Lexington, KY, 2000); Michael Nelson, *War of the Black Heavens: The Battles of Western Broadcasting in the Cold War* (London, 1997); Gene Sosin, *Sparks of Liberty: An Insider’s Memoir of Radio Liberty* (University Park, PA, 1999); George Urban, *Radio Free Europe and the Pursuit of Democracy: My War Within the Cold War* (New Haven, 1997); James Critchlow, *Radio Hole-in-the-Head/Radio Liberty: An Insider’s Account of Cold War Broadcasting* (Washington, DC, 1995). For an insightful review essay see Marsha Siefert, “Radio Diplomacy and the Cold War,” *Journal of Communication* 53:2 (2003): 365–73.

The Russian Review 79 (October 2020): 556–77

Copyright 2020 The Author. *The Russian Review* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC on behalf of the Board of Trustees of *The Russian Review*. This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons License, which permits use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

remains a comparative cipher. In a few specific cases, historians have been able to analyze the impact of Western broadcasting on public opinion.² We also have some sociological data to give us a sense for audience size and composition—some collected at the time by Soviet researchers, and some collected by U.S.-funded Radio Liberty from Soviet travelers abroad. (By the 1980s, the estimates are that 50 percent of the urban population listened to Western broadcasts occasionally, 25 percent regularly.³) Perhaps we may conclude in the end that “Western broadcasts kept hope alive” and “contributed to fostering democratic change,” to quote the editors of *Cold War Broadcasting*, an important recent collection.⁴ But to do this confidently, I think, we need a more nuanced understanding of who was listening, *how* they were listening, and why: we need an audience.

This article proposes one: listeners to Vsevolod Borisovich Novgorodsev, a Soviet émigré to the UK who broadcast on the BBC Russian Service to the USSR.⁵ Novgorodsev made his mark with a weekly show, launched in June 1977, known as “Rok-posevy” (“Rock Seva-Style,” or “Rock According to Seva”).⁶ Despite the name, the show featured a wide range of contemporary Western popular music: some weeks he played the British Top Ten; others shows he built around listener letters and requests; and there were also single artist or group programs—an entire “Rok-posevy” devoted to Jimi Hendrix, Queen, Culture Club, multi-part series on Led Zeppelin, John Lennon, Elton John, Iron Maiden, and many more, featuring music, information, and commentary. The programs were a short thirty minutes, and although music was their *raison d’être*, what fans and critics frequently focused on was Novgorodsev himself. “Rok-posevy” was regularly jammed until 1987, when jamming was lifted, and it continued until 2004.

For people of a certain age from across the former USSR, “Seva” is a name that stands all on its own, no surname necessary; Seva *is* (as the jingle to his show ran) “Seva Novgorodsev, London, BBC.” Today, we can visit a Seva website, maintained by a devoted fan club, with an extensive collection of old broadcasts, interviews, press clippings, and photographs.⁷ Novgorodsev has developed a strong brand identity in the post-Soviet context:

²See Amir Weiner, “Foreign Media, the Soviet Western Frontier, and the Hungarian and Czechoslovak Crises,” in *Cold War Broadcasting: Impact on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe*, ed. A. Ross Johnson and R. Eugene Parta (Budapest, 2010), 299–318; and Zbigniew Wojnowski, “De-Stalinization and Soviet Patriotism: Ukrainian Reactions to East European Unrest in 1956,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 13:4 (2012): 799–829.

³See R. Eugene Parta, “The Audience to Western Broadcasts to the USSR during the Cold War” and Elena Bashkirova, “The Foreign Radio Audience in the USSR during the Cold War: An Internal Perspective,” both in *Cold War Broadcasting*; Parta, *Discovering the Hidden Listener: An Empirical Assessment of Radio Liberty and Western Broadcasting to the USSR during the Cold War* (Stanford, 2013); Graham Mytton, “Audience Research at the BBC External Services During the Cold War,” *Cold War History* 11:1 (2011): 49–67; and Oleg Manaev, “The Influence of Western Radio on the Democratization of Soviet Youth,” *Journal of Communication* 41:2 (1991): 72–91.

⁴Johnson and Parta, eds., *Cold War Broadcasting*, xxiv, 350.

⁵I use “Novgorodsev” (rather than “Novgorodtsev”) following his preferred transliteration.

⁶“Rok-posevy” might also be translated as “rock sowing.” The original title of the show, which Novgorodsev took over from another émigré broadcaster, Sam Jones (Semion Iossman), was “Pop Music Program from London” (“Programma pop-muzyki iz Londona”). In November 1987, Novgorodsev launched “Sevaoborot,” a live, mixed music-discussion program inspired by formats on the BBC domestic service Radio 4, which ran until 2006.

⁷See <http://www.seva.ru>. All URLs cited in this article were last accessed June 19, 2020.

a frequent guest on Russian radio and television talk shows, he is a “legendary” figure of the Cold War culture wars. What interests me, however, is the Seva brand of the *Soviet* era, as developed through the complex interaction of Novgorodsev the individual and his audience. To research this Soviet Seva, we have the seva.ru materials as well as an extraordinary collection of letters sent to Novgorodsev at the BBC, now held by the Hoover Institution Archives in California, and the institutional records of the BBC.⁸

LISTENING OUT

To begin investigating Seva and his audience, I propose that we step back first to consider listening and sound—listening as practices, sound as experience. Scholarship on the phenomenon of Western broadcasting to the Soviet bloc has tended to treat broadcasting in terms of informational content—what was said to whom—and with this analytical framework, the content might just as well have been a newspaper slipped under the door as a radio program: the question of the medium itself rarely registers. Part of the issue is that most analyses have prioritized textual programming over music, in light of both Western broadcasting’s indisputable role in the circulation of *samizdat* and *tamizdat* and the Soviet bloc authorities’ own anxieties.⁹ Yet even if we limit ourselves to textual programming, the medium remains crucial. Most media scholars emphasize radio’s unique properties of intimacy and its ability to spark the imagination; many historians of the medium see it as having exercised transgressive political and social power. “Radio [has] often played with the subversive potential of unseen voices, challenging and even mocking conventional social

⁸Novgorodsev’s website states that he has more than ten thousand listener letters in his possession. The Hoover Archives collection is twenty-six boxes and covers the years 1976 to 1991, with only a handful from the years before 1988. However, excerpts of letters from the pre-1988 period are available in the BBC Written Archives Centre holdings and in the texts of the show itself, as discussed below.

⁹Western broadcasting’s value as a source of information is central to the case made by former staff (see footnote 1). Information also frames many academic studies, including Maury Lisann, *Broadcasting to the Soviet Union: International Politics and Radio* (New York, 1975); Simo Mikkonen, “Stealing the Monopoly of Knowledge? Soviet Reactions to US Cold War Broadcasting,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 11:4 (2010): 771–805; and idem, “Radio Liberty—the Enemy Within? The Dissemination of Western Values through US Cold War Broadcasts,” *Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis. Studia multiethnica Upsaliensia* (2010). For the role of Western broadcasting in circulating *samizdat/tamizdat* the best work is Friederike Kind-Kovács, *Written Here, Published There: How Underground Literature Crossed the Iron Curtain* (Budapest, 2014). It is also a leitmotif of the literature on dissent. See, for example, Mark Pittaway, “The Education of Dissent: The Reception of the Voice of Free Hungary, 1951–56,” *Cold War History* 4:1 (2003): 97–116; Gayle Durham Hollander, “Political Communication and Dissent in the USSR,” in *Dissent in the USSR. Politics, Ideology and People*, ed. Rudolf L. Tökés (Baltimore, 1975), 233–75; Ludmilla Alexeyeva, *U.S. Broadcasting to the Soviet Union* (New York, 1986); L. M. Alekseeva, *Istoriia inakomyshliia v SSSR: Noveishii period* (Moscow, 2001); and Robert Hornsby, *Protest, Reform and Repression in Khrushchev’s Soviet Union* (Cambridge, UK, 2013), esp. chap. 5. Although the literature on jazz and rock music in the Soviet bloc discusses Western broadcasting as a vector, it seldom explores the radio listening experience. See Sergei Zhuk, *Rock and Roll in the Rocket City: The West, Identity, and Ideology in Soviet Dnepropetrovsk, 1965–1980* (Baltimore, 2010); Ute Poiger, *Jazz, Rock and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany* (Berkeley, 2000); S. Frederick Starr, *Red and Hot: The Fate of Jazz in the Soviet Union, 1917–1991* (Oxford, 1994); Timothy W. Ryback, *Rock around the Bloc: A History of Rock Music in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union* (Oxford, 1990); and Artemy Troitsky, *Back in the USSR: The True Story of Rock in Russia* (London, 1988).

norms,” conclude the editors of a prominent edited volume on radio history.¹⁰ To explore the analytical potential of these ideas in the Soviet case, we need to know more about what I would like to call “listening out”—that is, Soviet modes of engagement with Western broadcasting in the broader context of evolving Soviet media practices. And along with this, I think, we would do well to consider the materiality of Western radio’s sound—once again in the broader context of *Soviet* media, the evolving soundscape of late socialism. This article can only scratch the surface. But let us take a moment to think about—to visualize and imagine-by-ear—the experience of listening to “Rok-posevy.”

Among radio scholars, no one has written more evocatively about the radio experience than Susan Douglas; “listening out” is an homage to her 1999 work, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination*. Douglas is at her most powerful writing about the radio experience for America’s teenagers in the 1950s and ‘60s, stressing two modes of listening as emblematic: in bed alone late at night (when your parents thought you were asleep, but you knew teens across the land were with you), and in a car cruising with the windows down (when your parents were wondering where in the world you were, while everyone who was anyone, everyone who mattered to you—your peers—could hear you miles off). Both of these modes of engagement suggested the value of the listener’s autonomy, but they also trafficked heavily in group identity, teen power, as did so much of the music radio then played. It was, Douglas argues, a heady mix and drove radio’s immense popularity at the time.

This image of the radio experience is now so much a part of American folklore, so mythologized by cinema and television, that it can sometimes color the picture of radio more broadly. It was, however, a specific mode of listening, with practices every bit as particular to its time and place as, say, listening to Nazi broadcasts in the German kitchen was particular, to name one mode explored powerfully by scholars.¹¹ The radio experience is not generic: no listening is ordinary listening. The Soviet radio experience, too, comprised specific modes, varying widely by technology, geography, and era.¹² Two obvious examples were public listening to wired sets, as was common in the Stalinist period, versus listening to wireless sets at home; and listening to radio in the Western borderlands, where the airwaves were often alive with options, versus listening in remote regions with patchy reception at best. Listening to Western radio broadcasts on shortwave was yet another distinct mode, and one that itself varied significantly by context.

¹⁰Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio, *The Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio* (New York, 2002), xiii; Susan Merrill Squier, ed. *Communities of the Air: Radio Century, Radio Culture* (Durham, 2003).

¹¹See Kate Lacey, *Feminine Frequencies: Gender, German Radio, and the Public Sphere, 1923–1945* (Ann Arbor, 1996).

¹²Stephen Lovell, *Russia in the Microphone Age: A History of Soviet Radio, 1919–1970* (Oxford, 2015); A. A. Shere!, *Audiokul'tura XX veka: Istoriia, esteticheskie zakonomernosti, osobennosti vlianiia na auditoriiu: Ocherki* (Moscow, 2004); T. M. Goriaeva, *Radio Rossii: Politicheskii kontrol' sovetского radioveshchaniia v 1920–1930-kh godakh. Dokumentirovannaia istoriia* (Moscow, 2000); T. M. Goriaeva, *Velikaia kniga dnia' ... Radio v SSSR. Dokumenty i materialy* (Moscow, 2007); Karl Schlögel, *Moscow, 1937*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, UK, 2012), 224–28; James von Geldern, “Radio Moscow: The Voice from the Center,” in *Culture and Entertainment in Wartime Russia*, ed. Richard Stites (Bloomington, IN, 1995), 44–61.

By the time the BBC first aired Seva Novgorodsev's pop music program in 1977, "enemy voices" had sounded in Soviet space for nearly three decades, and both people and regime had developed a range of practices for interacting with them. Indeed, the dimension of the Soviet encounter with Western radio to emerge most clearly from the archives is the regime one: the routine consumption of Western broadcasts (via transcription more than personal listening) that grew steadily across the political elite from the 1950s on.¹³ Non-elite interactions with Western broadcasting also changed over the decades, quantitatively and qualitatively, as people gained access to new technologies, such as transistors and tape recorders, and greater leisure time; and as attitudes to listening, official and popular, shifted as well.

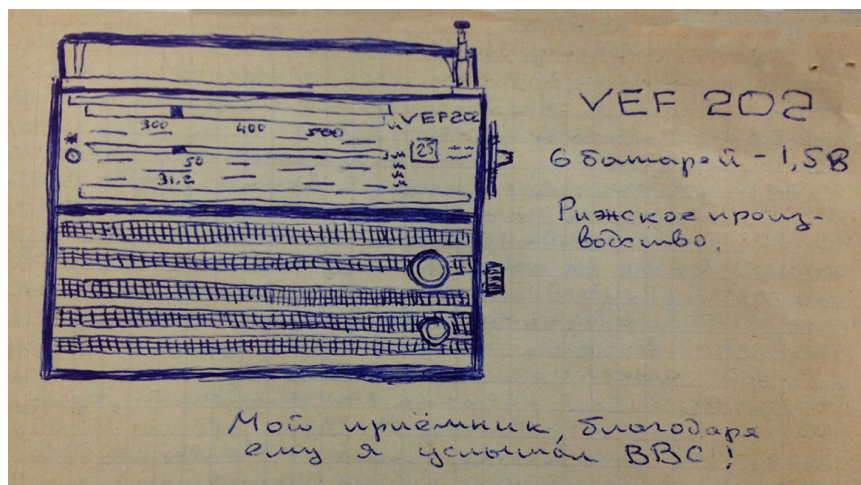


FIG. 1 "My radio receiver. Thanks to it I heard the BBC" (1989). Seva Novgorodsev letters, Hoover Institution Archives, box 1.13.

One of the great points of interest in the Seva Novgorodsev materials is that they speak directly to the question of the evolving radio experience. Many of Novgorodsev's correspondents wrote about their practices—*how* they listened—and the portrait they paint is, in some respects, similar to that of the golden age of the American teen listener evoked by Douglas. Tuning in to "Rok-posevy" was a planned event that happened in extra-ordinary time. (For technical reasons, reception of short-wave broadcasts was much better in the evening hours, and Western broadcasters adjusted their schedules accordingly to reach their target audience.) "Rok-posevy" broadcast at midnight, long dark in most places for much of the year, and, importantly, on Friday nights, so at a time already associated with relaxation and fun. Letters to Seva often mention the time, as if to stress its specialness. "How do you sleep after Seva's shows?," one young woman asked her fellow listeners in a letter to Novgorodsev, which he then read on the air. "I'll answer for myself," she continued.

¹³Broadcaster and historian Vladimir Tolz discussed elite practices in a series on Radio Svoboda, "'Rodina Slyshit': Chast' chetvertaia: Novye slushateli v Kremle i novye temy," <http://www.svoboda.org/programs/TD/2004/TD.073104.asp>. For parallel practices in Eastern Europe see the materials in Johnson and Parta, eds., *Cold War Broadcasting*.

“Poorly. I wander around like a lunatic until three in the morning, trying not to forget anything.”¹⁴ “I am sure that 99 percent of your listeners are rockers,” wrote another. “A random person would not have the energy to stay up ‘till midnight.”¹⁵ Novgorodsev’s listeners, to judge by the correspondence, were nearly all in their teens and twenties and self-consciously young: that is, they identified themselves as young, and identified the music they loved and the act of listening with youth as well. They were also overwhelmingly male. Yet in other crucial respects, the “Rok-posevy” listening experience was very different from those Douglas describes—neither intensely private, like the transistor under the bedcovers, nor raucously public, like the blaring car radio on the strip. Listening to “*Rok-posevy*” seems to have been very much a domestic affair—home-based, but also open within the home: Seva’s fans were more likely to have been fiddling with the antennae in the main room than hiding in bed; sometimes they sent Seva questions from their mothers.¹⁶ And most important, I think, the “Rok-posevy” experience was shaped by, even defined by, jamming—jamming as a material and emotional presence.¹⁷

GIVEN THAT IT WAS SUCH A LIGHTNING ROD in the Cold War and also, for many millions of people, a fact of daily life, it is surprising how little historical attention jamming has attracted.¹⁸ The general idea of jamming as the use of noise to inhibit people’s ability to tune in to broadcasts is well understood, but the variety of techniques, the different contexts of their use, and the details of the systems that administered them are not. My intention here is not to delineate this history, but rather to underscore that there is a history; jamming was never a universal practice, but rather a variegated and capricious one.¹⁹

As a general rule, broadcasts in languages not native to the USSR were left untouched. But Soviet interference was imprecise, sometimes blocking broadcasts it did not target, including domestic ones, and missing the ones it did. To an extent, imprecision is the nature of all jamming.²⁰ Soviet jamming, centrally directed by a division of the Ministry of Communications in Moscow and administered by technicians working locally who targeted

¹⁴“Rok-posevy,” May 22, 1981, <http://www.seva.ru>.

¹⁵“Pop programma na 11/12 marta 1983 Goda,” 3, <http://www.seva.ru>.

¹⁶For references to listeners’ mothers see Seva Novgorodsev letters, Hoover Institution Archives, box 1.11; “Rok-posevy,” February 17, 1984, “Pis'ma i zaiavki,” <http://www.seva.ru>.

¹⁷Given the idiosyncrasies of the evidence, it is difficult to gage the size and distribution of the audience. The overwhelming majority of the letters in the Hoover Institution Archive collection and the BBC collection are from listeners in the western regions of the RSFSR and the Ukrainian SSR.

¹⁸As defined in KGB training documentation, jamming or *radioprotivodeistvie* was “the artificial creation of interference to hinder and render impossible the operation of an enemy’s radiotechnical equipment.” See *Kontrrazvedyvatel'nyi slovar'* (Moscow, 1972), 242, available at http://genocid.lt/KGB/ci_dictionary.pdf.

¹⁹On the Soviet Union, the most detailed work to date is by former radio journalist, and former Lithuanian Minister of Communications, Rimantas Pleykis, who has published numerous articles online, and co-produced a documentary, *Empire of Noise* (2000), available on YouTube. See Rimantas Pleykis, *Radiotsenzura*, Radio Baltic Waves, Vilnius, Lithuania, May 2002. See also George Woodward, “Cold War Radio Jamming,” in *Cold War Broadcasting*, 51–65; Jerome S. Berg, *Broadcasting on the Shortwaves, 1945 to Today* (Jefferson, NC, 2008); and its companion volume, *Listening on the Shortwaves, 1945 to Today* (Jefferson, NC, 2008). For a discussion of social attitudes to jamming based on Radio Liberty research see Mikkonen, “Stealing the Monopoly of Knowledge?” 787–90.

²⁰The conditions for the propagation of radio waves are themselves variable (depending on the time of day, time of year, and other factors).

frequencies, as directed (and who themselves did not listen to the programs), was perhaps particularly error prone.²¹ Foreign broadcasters developed techniques of evasion—broadcasting on multiple frequencies simultaneously, for example, or holding off transmissions for several minutes in an effort to trick jammers into concluding they had moved to a different frequency. The authorities, well aware of jamming’s liabilities and expense, periodically flirted with lifting their “radio-defenses”: 1973 to August 1980 was one such window. But even in comparatively open periods, jammers continued to target broadcasters selectively. The noise, and the idea of the noise, never went away.²²

What effect, then, did jamming have on the late Soviet radio listening experience? The term “jamming” in English conveys a sense of finality: something is either jammed or it is not. (The Russian verb “*glushit*,” etymologically related to the word for deafness, conveys an irrevocability of its own.) But Soviet radio jamming was in fact a fluid phenomenon. Not only did policy vary over the years and vary from broadcaster to broadcaster, the noises themselves, though all aversive, were variable: white noise, a mechanical buzzing, a stream of garbled voices, looped electronic music. Moreover, the effectiveness of jamming varied in different regions and over time—day to day, week to week, and even minute to minute. A listener who had been tuning in to “Rok-posevy” faithfully for months might find it suddenly absent, blocked; or, the other way around, a long-jammed program might suddenly come into the clear. A listener might find the program audible for the first ten minutes and then gradually overrun with audio interference—or vice versa. Listeners were in this way always listening through jamming, even when there was no interference, because jamming was always a credible threat.

As István Rév argued, we need to understand jamming not only as an absence, but as a presence; not only as a block on speech but also as a speech act itself. Rév, building on the work of Jacques Attali, made the essential connection between sound (or noise) and power. According to Attali, “any organization of sounds is ... a tool for the creation or consolidation of a community, of a totality.”²³ Noise is at the heart of political power. Rév’s insight was to frame jamming noise in these terms, as something that “established and confirmed the presence of the Communist authorities in the air, and thus in the private sphere of the secret listener.”²⁴ But if the shrieks and drones of Soviet jammers unmistakably embodied the authorities in domestic space, they also, and in equal measure, confirmed the presence of their adversaries. *Something* was being blocked, after all. And so Soviet jamming policy meant the authorities, having staked their claims, never really left to the listener’s room, but then again, the enemy voices never left, either. The presence effect was doubled, intensified, and constitutionally loaded: the world without, and within, was a noisy, crowded place.

²¹Ivan Tolstoi, “Efir – chisty: Kak Radio Svoboda borolos' s sovetskimi glushilkami,” <https://ru.krymr.com/a/radio-svoboda-protiv-sovetskih-glushilok/29628238.html>.

²²See Kristin Roth-Ey, *Moscow Prime Time: How the Soviet Union Built the Media Empire that Lost the Cultural Cold War* (Ithaca, 2011), chap. 3; and Lada Silina, *Vneshne-politicheskaia propaganda v SSSR v 1945–1985 gg.* (Moscow, 2011), 77–97.

²³Jacques Attali, “Noise: The Political Economy of Music,” in *The Sound Studies Reader*, ed. Jonathan Sterne (New York, 2012), 32.

²⁴István Rév, “Just Noise? Impact of Radio Free Europe in Hungary,” in *Cold War Broadcasting*, 244.

That jamming shaped the “Rok-posevy” experience is clear from the many letters that mention it and its prominence thematically on the show.²⁵ Listeners described jamming as an elemental force, unpredictable and mighty. A “storm suddenly erupted on air,” and “they jam by turning on some kind of hellish machine.”²⁶ It was “as if the devil had been let loose on the earth, or Jesus Christ had risen from the dead,” they wrote.²⁷ Sometimes people complained about the BBC’s “puny signal ... completely drowned by the nightly tidal wave of the megawatt jammers” or offered suggestions.²⁸ One listener asked for his request to be played in the first ten minutes of the show “because in the beginning of the show they don’t jam the station and you can hear something.”²⁹ Another asked for a favorite song *not* to be played “because all the interference lends some sort of weird air of mystery to the songs you put out, and I am a nervous person.”³⁰ The technological literacy of the Soviet audience was also much in evidence: “You work over a very broad metre band and for that reason jamming you is a piece of cake,” explained one listener. “In the ‘conditions’ which are created here, however, it would be better if your broadcasts were conducted on a more restricted regime: some ‘pruning’ in the region of the lower frequencies, an increase in the higher ones.”³¹

To listen through jamming required application, yet Novgorodsev’s correspondents tended to describe all “listening out” as a purposeful act, subject to discipline and reflection, even when their audition was not hindered. And jamming as a presence—again, even in its material absence—also contributed a sense of drama to listening. Would you be able to catch Seva this week or not? Would the sound quality be good enough to tape record the show? What is more, although listening to enemy radio itself was not illegal, the very fact of jamming—the authorities in the room—not to mention the term “enemy voices,” always lent a note of transgression to the experience. Some scholars have suggested that what I am calling “listening out” was a completely normalized phenomenon in late socialism, particularly for programming in foreign languages. But memoirs and other documentary evidence indicate a range of behaviors, from avid, open listening to fear-based rejection to indifference.³² Soviet sociologists who queried young people about their listening practices in 1987 found that half of respondents who answered in the negative to a direct question—do you listen to enemy radio?—would later answer in the positive to an indirect (or “catch”) question—where did you first learn about heavy metal music, say. Even in a period of comparative openness, *even in 1987*, many Soviet people were not completely comfortable disclosing their behavior.³³ Novgorodsev’s listeners, to judge by his mailbag, were generally

²⁵For examples see “Rok-posevy,” January 23, 1981, March 20, 1981, and January 20, 1984, <http://www.seva.ru>.

²⁶BBC Written Archives Centre (BBC WAC), E3:1036:1 (1981), vi, vii; *ibid.* (1984), x (Uzbek SSR).

²⁷*Ibid.* (1984), ix (Ukrainian SSR).

²⁸*Ibid.* (1984), x (Ukrainian SSR, via Algeria).

²⁹“Rok-posevy,” March 20, 1981, <http://www.seva.ru>.

³⁰BBC WAC, E42: 610: 1 (1979), 8 (Poltava).

³¹BBC WAC, E3:1036:1 (1984), ix (Leningrad via FRG).

³²On listening as normalized behavior see Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, 2013), 178–81. Cf. the interviewees in Donald Raleigh’s collection, *Russia’s Sputnik Generation: Soviet Baby Boomers Talk about Their Lives* (Bloomington, 2006).

³³Manaev, “The Influence of Western Radio on the Democratization of Soviet Youth,” 72–91.

open about their listening with friends and family, though some requested not to be identified by name if their letters were read on air. They were also alive to, and even proud of, its transgressive nature; “listening out” was far from normalized for them; it was something to celebrate, something of a feat.

Writing about radio in the Second World War, Frances Gray argued that for British people, listening to illicit foreign broadcasting was a territorial claim of sorts, an assertion that “even if the air could be co-opted to serve particular military or industrial ends, the soundscape may not be precisely equated with occupied geographical territory.”³⁴ While Soviet jamming was always a speech act, establishing and confirming the presence of the Soviet authorities in the air, Soviet listening *around* jamming spoke, too: “listening out” established and confirmed an alternative territory, a soundscape with its own relation to time, space, and experience, owned and controlled by an alternative community of listeners. Yet for all that, for all of jamming’s tremendous power in shaping the “Rok-posevy” experience, I would not want to argue that jamming itself precipitated listening, that Soviet people tuned in to the show purely because of the interference. (If that were true, then Radio Peking, probably the most consistently jammed of all foreign broadcasters, would have had a large and devoted following among Soviet listeners: it did not.) The “Rok-posevy” audience was not only listening out, or against; it was in a real sense listening in and listening for. The question is: for what?

LISTENING FOR

To listen was to stake a territorial claim in the abstract (“our” sounds, “our” territory), but it also had vital, material dimensions. The abstraction of community met the reality of things: “Rok-posevy” was embedded in the new, transactional social practices around media that marked the Brezhnev era. The structure of the show itself promoted different kinds of exchange, different transactions. Some people tuned in to record—recordings they then might share with friends, exchange for other recordings or other goods, or sell.³⁵ In this sense, a show based around listener requests was an opportunity to acquire something of value beyond the immediate listening experience. It was a practice Soviet radio itself acknowledged in the 1970s in a backhanded way by promoting its own, rival pop music programs: Mayak, the round-the-clock, all-Union station, left nothing to doubt by naming its first show of this type “Record It on Your Tape Recorders” (“Zapishite na vashi magnitofony”). Listening to “Rok-posevy” also gave potential access to valuable commodities: albums, promotional photographs and posters of Western artists and of Seva himself, music magazines and t-shirts from the West.³⁶ The BBC’s records do not say how

³⁴Frances Gray, “Audience, Listener, Soundscape,” in *More than a Music Box: Radio Cultures and Communities in a Multi-Media World*, ed. Andrew Crissell (Oxford, 2006), 250.

³⁵One listener from Moscow even described taping the show via a mixer on two radios tuned to two different frequencies (BBC WAC, E3:1036:1 [1981], ii).

³⁶The files in the Hoover Institution Archives show Novgorodsev received a wide range of requests in the late 1980s, for example: copies of Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag Archipelago*, music amps, a “Rambo” t-shirt, a second-hand TV set and tape recorder, a pocket Bible, prescription drugs, a catalogue from Madame Tussaud’s wax museum, and a job.

many parcels were sent to listeners in the Soviet Union, but judging by the letters and the program recordings (Novgorodsev devoted airtime to listing the parcels he had sent), it was hundreds annually. Some of these were prizes; and, according to the Russian Service's annual report for 1979, that year, the first with competitions in the pop music program, yielded the biggest mailbag since 1966.³⁷ But it is clear that knowing the right answer to quiz questions was not the only way to get things; the show also sent out albums and other materials simply because people requested them.

Many people wrote asking for specific items for their collections. The tone of the requests varied: appreciative, apologetic, teasing (often in the ironic idiom Seva used himself), business-like and, at times, surprisingly demanding. "I got your parcel on the 10th of May. Many thanks! It is an excellent souvenir, simply reeking of Western decadence," wrote one listener from Bashkiria. "But you know, to tell you the truth, I expected an album called *Do You Sing* ... although I'm not blaming you for anything. And besides, you know, it was somehow disappointing to get only the object of my desire, without at least a couple of lines from you personally."³⁸ Some listeners wrote multiple—in some instances, dozens—of times without a response and poured out their frustrations on the page. Their assumption, which Novgorodsev shared, was that Soviet postal censorship was to blame for their missing letters and packages. And they were right to be suspicious. Perliustratsiia (in Russian, *perliustratsiia*, or *PK*) was the work of the KGB's Sixth Department (known as "Almaz"), which not only intercepted and sometimes seized correspondence, but also maintained documentation on foreign individuals and organizations known to have corresponded with Soviet citizens and Soviet citizens who had corresponded with foreigners. As a rule, postcards were more likely than letters to make it past the censors, as were parcels with scientific publications or other content that might be deemed politically neutral.³⁹ "Enemy radio" was in no way a neutral phenomenon in the eyes of the authorities, yet by the late 1970s, as discussed below, Western pop music had an acknowledged, if often edgy position in Soviet life, and it is not impossible to imagine a censor turning a blind eye to a copy of *Melody Maker* magazine, an LP, or even a teenager's letter to London about rock 'n' roll. Evidently, at least some did. (In the case of the magazines and albums and so on, we should also imagine that at least some went home in the censors' briefcases.)

Postal censorship was a frequent theme on "Rok-posevy." Novgorodsev spoke about it often, and listeners wrote in to share advice about how to increase the odds of letters making it to London. The most effective technique was to entrust your letter to someone travelling outside the USSR to post to the UK which, postmarks make clear, many listeners

³⁷BBC WAC, E42: 610: 1 (1979). Of 264 letters total, 224 were for the pop music program. Prizes and souvenir gifts were a common publicity technique used by international broadcasters (Radio Moscow, the USSR's main international service, included).

³⁸BBC WAC, E3:1036:1 (1979), 27 (Sterlitmak, Bashkiria).

³⁹See A.S. Smykalin, *Perliustratsiia korrespondentsii i voennaia pochtovaia tsenzura v Rossii i SSSR* (Moscow, 2015), 217–18; V. V. Mirkin, "Sredstva sviazi kak instrument politicheskoi tsenzury v SSSR (1970-e–nachalo 1980-kh gg.)," *Vestnik Tomskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta. Istoriia*, 2019, no. 59:53–58. Sergei Zhuk cites a 1967 KGB study analyzing the contents of over one thousand letters sent to foreign radio stations in Dnipropetrovsk (*Rock and Roll in the Rocket City*, 66).

did.⁴⁰ But occasionally listeners made clear that they questioned Seva's commitment to them as well. "I've already written you one letter, but you behaved like a typical bureaucrat—I got neither a reply nor a mention on the air, quipped one: "Perhaps you forgot, or the letter did not reach you? You see, I asked for so little. Just a Led Zeppelin album."⁴¹



FIG. 2 Envelope from a letter posted in 1989. Seva Novgorodsev letters, Hoover Institution Archives, box. 1.15.

Seva, they thought, *had* something—access to goods (albums, posters) unavailable in the USSR, but equally, access to information. To read the show's correspondence is to be struck by the contrast between its glib asides and its emotional intensity. "Vsevolod, true lovers of rock are forever in your debt! They get a mass of information, a mass of impressions from your programmes."⁴² Listeners wrote in with precise, urgent questions, and "Rok-posevy" answered them. Early on its tenure, the show introduced a regular rubric of names, dates, and events called "Rock Archive."⁴³ The April 6, 1984, broadcast, for example, began:

⁴⁰Other advice included: writing in English or transliterated Russian; beginning letters with politically correct text (for example, denouncing capitalism, extolling the Soviet Union's international politics); writing on postcards printed to commemorate Soviet holidays. For examples see "Rok-posevy," July 16, 1982, <http://www.seva.ru>. In 1988, Novgorodsev devoted an entire show to the problems with the post and why letters were not reaching the BBC and gifts were not reaching listeners ("Rok-posevy," August 20, 1988, <http://www.seva.ru>).

⁴¹BBC WAC, E3:1036:1 (1979), 7 (Riazan' oblast). One listener who raised doubts about whether Novgorodsev was perhaps exaggerating the problem with the post in order to cover up his own failures sent eight identical, numbered letters and asked him to read out the number on the air. Novgorodsev read the letter and its number (one) ("Rok-posevy," January 20, 1984, "Pis'ma i zaiavki," <http://www.seva.ru>). Listeners also sent Novgorodsev presents, including bottles of vodka, books, souvenir calendars, photographs, drawings, and press clippings and, in the late 1980s, recordings of Soviet rock and pop bands.

⁴²BBC WAC, E3:1036:1 (1979), 11 (Stavropol' area).

⁴³Novgorodsev went on to publish these commentaries in book form. Seva Novgorodtsev, "Rok-posevy," 2 vols. (Moscow, 2008).

April 10th. In 1962, bassist Stu Sutcliffe died from a brain haemorrhage. ...
 April 10th. Eight years later on the same date, Paul McCartney announced that he was leaving the Beatles and April 10th, for this reason, can be considered the official date of the crumbling of the biggest block in the history of rock.
 April 10th. Billy Holly and the Comets recorded the renowned “Rock Around the Clock” on this day in 1954. However, the song became popular only a year later.

And so the chronicle carried on through April, only to be followed by a section “Latest News” (“*Melody Maker* reports that AC/DC is going to perform at the ‘Monsters of Rock’ festival in the English town of Castle Donington on August 18th”). It was an exaltation of facts. Seva’s thirty-minute pop music program played no music at all until minute six.⁴⁴

The urgency of so much of the “Rok-posevy” correspondence is perplexing in some respects. After all, by the time the show hit the airwaves in the late 1970s, Soviet mass culture had struck its own cautious *modus vivendi* with Western popular music. The state-owned record label, Melodiia, released compilation albums of Western pop and rock artists. Central Soviet radio and television ran shows that featured them, and the Komsomol organized dances with their music. The Soviet press carried some current information about the Western music scene; the most important and popular source was the Komsomol monthly, *Rovesnik*, but it was possible to find informed commentary in other publications as well.⁴⁵ Between official, state-sanctioned sources, cross-border leakage from other countries, and the black market, Soviet music fans in the late ‘70s and early 1980s were not starved of sustenance. Even in terms of the enemy voices alone, “Rok-posevy” was far from the only source for Western music and information: VOA and several other stations also offered pop programs. Yet many of Seva’s correspondents described the show as something both unique and essential. “You’ve become a safe haven for us; legends and songs are written about you,” wrote a young man about his group of friends in Leningrad. “We listen to your Saturday shows greedily and call Friday ‘pre-Seva time.’”⁴⁶

Flattery played a part here, no doubt (the potential rewards were nothing to sneeze at) along with a seemingly insatiable hunger in the USSR for information about Western music. But the intensity of the discourse, and its focus, point in another direction as well. Nearly everyone who wrote to Novgorodsev used *ty*, the informal you, and many people commented on the usage—how unusual it was to address a stranger informally, particularly an older person (he turned forty in 1980) and, at the same time, how it essential it seemed, considering how well they felt they knew him; many addressed him as “Seva” or used terms of affection like “Sevushka” or “Uncle Seva.”⁴⁷ Seva is what they were listening for—not just any

⁴⁴Also called “Rock Chronicle” in different episodes (“Rok-posevy,” April 6, 1984, <http://www.seva.ru>).

⁴⁵On television see Christine Evans, “Song of the Year and Soviet Mass Culture in the 1970s,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 12:3 (2011): 617–45. On *Rovesnik* see Zhuk, *Rock and Roll in the Rocket City*, 96–97. *Moskovskii komsomolets* launched a monthly rubric, “Zvukovaia dorozhka,” in 1977 that included a top ten list (compiled by reader write-ins) and discussion of Western bands. See Gregory R. Kveberg, “Moscow by Night: Musical Subcultures, Identity Formation, and Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1977–2008” (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2012), 67–68. See also Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, 190–93.

⁴⁶“Pop programma na 30/29 aprelia 83 goda,” *Pis'ma i zaiavki*, 6, <http://www.seva.ru>.

⁴⁷Other names included Sevoshka, baten'ka Vsevolod Borisovich, družochek Seva, and dedushka Seva.

announcer, but *Seva*, a highly stylized media personality—or what one fan, full of admiration, referred to as a “semi-mythological persona.”⁴⁸

Novgorodsev the individual was a professional musician who had left the USSR at the age of thirty-five as a Jew (he had a Jewish father) and, like many émigrés in search of work, eventually made his way through the grand arched entrance of Bush House, for decades home to the BBC’s international service. Bush House is itself a semi-mythological figure in modern British history—a “cosmopolitan contact zone” in the center of the imperial London cityscape that brought together successive generations of exiled intellectuals.⁴⁹ Like most fellow Bush House cosmopolitans, Novgorodsev came to radio with no broadcasting expertise. What he offered instead was his musicianship and, more to the point, an unusually broad and perceptive understanding of the Soviet youth audience. In his twenties, Novgorodsev had quit a promising career in the marines to devote himself to music, playing in jazz ensembles and eventually heading a successful pop group, *Dobry molodtsy* (Brave or Good Lads—a Russian folkloric reference). As recounted in his 2011 memoir, his youth reads like a textbook of Thaw-era awakening. The young Novgorodsev fell in love with jazz as a teenager listening to the “Willis Conover Jazz Hour” on the VOA; as a student in Leningrad, he dressed *stiliaga*-style, sported a crew cut, and perfected his English one summer as foreign tour guide; he even had connections to the Soviet Union’s interior West, the Baltic: he spent much of his childhood and early youth in Tallinn, which he later wrote inoculated him against nostalgia as an émigré in London: “I had already been in emigration and what’s more, I had grown up there.”⁵⁰

Although, with this Tallinn-Leningrad background, Novgorodsev was a quintessential urbanite, he also toured the interior of the USSR widely as a musician, and it is this unique experience that he credits with shaping his understanding of the “Rok-posevy” audience. In multiple interviews, Novgorodsev recalls sitting in London and remembering the crowds of young people he had once seen on tour—lonely, bored, and harassed. These were the people he imagined listening to him on the radio. “The most important thing about my shows,” he said in 2011, “was that someone was talking to beaten down Soviet young people (*zabitaia sovetskaia molodezh'*), people shouted at by their teachers and their parents, in normal language.” “I had a duty to the people I had so often seen in the concert halls,” he commented two years later.⁵¹

⁴⁸“Rok-posevy,” March 20, 1981, <http://www.seva.ru>.

⁴⁹Novgorodsev recounts his history to the point of emigration in *Seva Novgorodtsev, Integral pokhoz na saksofon* (St. Petersburg, 2011). On Bush House see Alban Webb and Marie Gillespie, eds., *Diasporas and Diplomacy: Cosmopolitan Contact Zones at the BBC World Service, 1932–2012* (London, 2012); and Alban Webb, *London Calling: Britain, The BBC World Service and the Cold War* (London, 2014). On the important role of Soviet bloc émigrés see Simo Mikkonen, “Exploiting the Exiles: Soviet Émigrés in US Cold War Strategy,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 14:2 (2012): 98–127; and Friederike Kind-Kovács, “Voices, Letters, and Literature through the Iron Curtain: Exiles and the (Trans)mission of Radio in the Cold War,” *Cold War History* 13:2 (2013): 193–219.

⁵⁰Novgorodtsev, *Integral*, 159. On Estonia as the “Soviet abroad” see Anne E. Gorsuch, *All This is Your World: Soviet Tourism at Home and Abroad after Stalin* (Oxford, 2011), chap. 2.

⁵¹A. Reznichenko, “Chto poseesh,” *Itogi*, April 18, 2011. On “duty” see “More, dzhaz i Bi-bi-si,” December 31, 2013, interview available at <https://jewish.ru/ru/interviews/articles/175475/>. For further comments on his experiences touring and his understanding of his Soviet audience see E. Veselia, “Rok ‘po Seve’, ili neskol’ko stranits iz zhizni gospodina Novgorodtseva,” *Moskovskie novosti*, July 30, 1995; “Vse muzykal’nye slivki ia

It was in the period of his Dobry molodtsy career that Novgorodsev dropped his birth name, the Jewish Levenshtein—a decision he has described many times as a straightforward professional matter. Levenshtein, he thought, simply did not fit with a group whose name and repertoire referenced Russian folklore and, not considering himself a Jew, he had no personal attachment to it.⁵² He took the Slavic Novgorodtsev, the name of a navy officer he had liked, which he then briefly changed back to Levenshtein to conclude the paperwork for his emigration. At the BBC, he was Novgorodtsev again, and the Soviet press used the name change issue, spread thick with anti-Semitic illusion, to disparage him. A notorious 1982 *Rovesnik* article featuring a first-person narrative allegedly penned by Seva's mother to express her bewilderment and shame over her traitorous son concluded (in the journalist's voice): 'Who is he, in the end, really! A Jew? A Russian? Or an Englishman? You be the judge. We think he is, well, a nobody. Without a clan, without a tribe. Garbage.'⁵³

The *Rovesnik* smear spread widely, to judge by the BBC mail bag: one correspondent wrote that it was harder to get your hands on the magazine than Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*.⁵⁴ But anyone who had been listening to "Rok-posevy" would have heard a good deal of the story already—and in Novgorodsev's own voice. Some listeners clearly imagined Seva as a rocker himself, pressing him in their correspondence to put in a personal word with their idols: surely, they thought, he had David Gilmore's address, surely he could ask him a question when next they were out, cadge an autograph? In fact, Novgorodsev built up his vast knowledge of the contemporary rock scene like the gray-haired, middle-aged Russian *intelligent* he was—by consulting the neatly organized collections of the BBC Research Department. He listened to jazz on own time, not the music he showcased on the BBC. Novgorodsev made no effort to hide these facts, nor did not hide his family origins and career with in a Soviet pop band; he sometimes joked about them. Yet as Seva, he managed at the same time to forge an intimate connection with listeners on their terms, without condescension and in "normal language," to voice their tastes and experiences, to be at once a voice of authority and a voice of worth listening for.

VOICE AND IDEOLOGY

In Soviet public culture, the association between ideology and voice was written into the common term for Western broadcasting, "enemy voices." Because the ideological grounding of all broadcasting was axiomatic, all voices could be categorized as enemies or friends based on their source (their objective position in the class struggle). For linguistic anthropologists studying "ideologies of the voice," on the other hand, a key question is

staralsia peredavat': Radiovedushchii i zhurnalist Seva Nogorodtsev o zhizni na radio Bi-bi-si," *Kommersant*, February 26, 2019; and Mariia Arbatova, "Seva Novgorodtsev kak zerkalo russkoi emigratsii," available at <http://www.seva.ru/media/?id=11>.

⁵²"I remember going on stage one time in Astrakhan," he told one interviewer. "The announcer came on: Antipin, Petrov, Sokolov. And, the head of the ensemble, Vsevolod Levenshtein! I felt a ripple pass through the hall. Later, analyzing it, I realized: well, *there were no Levenshteins* in epic Rus'; it doesn't fit at all. And I took a split-second decision: you need a stage name" ("More, dzhaz i Bi-bi-si" [emphasis added]).

⁵³"Kto on takoi?" *Rovesnik* 9 (1982): 27–28.

⁵⁴BBC WAC, E3:1036 (1983), 5; 18. Letters from 1982 also mentioned the *Rovesnik* piece (ibid. [1982], 4).

how sound is interpreted and source-stamped *by listeners*—that is, the ways in which sonic vocal qualities like pitch serve to index social identities, including race, class, ethnicity, and gender. The voice in their understanding is distinct from language; and indeed, “in the voice ... there is an excess beyond language.”⁵⁵ Radio, as a nonvisual medium, offers a particular test case of this idea of excess in that listeners have literally no other information beyond the sonic to interpret (or read). And interpret they do: researchers find that radio listeners strongly categorize (read into) speaker’s social identities, as well as appearances and characters, via voice.

Radio scholar Jason Loviglio argued, for example, that National Public Radio (NPR), the main publicly funded service in the United States, is immediately identifiable by listeners as “liberal” on the political spectrum because of the vocal qualities of its presenters: not only are there far more women broadcasting on the station than is typical for American radio, both male and female voices differ stylistically from everyday norms: on NPR, female announcers have lower voices and use less pitch variation and dynamic range than is typical, while males use more. The broadcasts “read” liberal—or shall we say “hear” liberal—regardless of the content because of implied gender dynamics of the announcers’ vocal styles.⁵⁶

In a similar vein, it is fair to say that any Soviet person who walked into a room with a radio playing “Rok-posevy” would have been able to identify it within moments as *non-Soviet* based on sound alone. Certainly, in some cases, the music itself would make the point: the show did feature bands that Soviet radio would not touch, especially heavy metal and punk bands. But beyond the music what marked “Rok-posevy” was the Seva sound and, at its heart, Seva’s voice.

What made the voice of Seva Novgorodsev so patently non-Soviet? The most famous of all Soviet radio voices belongs to Iurii Levitan, Moscow’s lead announcer in the Stalinist 1930s and ‘40s and indeed the proxy voice for Stalin himself, whose own voice in Russian was accented and unimpressive. Levitan’s instrument was a gravelly bass, his delivery marked by its slow cadences—commanding, masculine footfalls on the ear.⁵⁷ By the time Novgorodsev was broadcasting to the USSR in the 1970s, Soviet radio had changed markedly from this mode. Competition from Western broadcasters was one factor. Soviet broadcasters had been routinely reprimanded by the authorities in the Khrushchev era for producing leaden, lifeless programming, and many of them agreed: in behind-doors discussions, people

⁵⁵Jessica Taylor, “‘Speaking Shadows’: A History of the Voice in the Transition from Silent to Sound Film in the United States,” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 19:1 (2009): 3.

⁵⁶Jason Loviglio, “US Public Radio, Social Change, and the Gendered Voice,” in *Electrified Voices: Medial, Social-Historical and Cultural Aspects of Voice Transfer*, ed. Dmitri Zakharine and Nils Meise (Göttingen, 2012), 137–46; Jason Loviglio, “NPR Is Still Expanding the Range of What Authority Sounds like after Fifty Years,” available at <https://theconversation.com/npr-is-still-expanding-the-range-of-what-authority-sounds-like-after-50-years-124571>.

⁵⁷On Soviet radio finding its voice see Stephen Lovell, “Broadcasting Bolshevik: The Radio Voice of Soviet Culture, 1920s–1950s,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 48:1 (2013): 78–97. On Levitan specifically see Dmitri Zakharine, “Voice – E-Voice Design – E-Voice Community: Early Public Debates about the Emotional Quality of Radio and TV Announcers’ Voices in Germany, the Soviet Union and the USA (1920–1940),” in *Electrified Voices*, 226; V. M. Vozchikov, ed., *Iurii Levitan: 50 let u mikroфона* (Moscow, 1987); and M. S. Gleizer, ed., *Radio v dni voiny: Ocherki i vospominaniia vidnykh voenachal'nikov, izvestnykh pisatelei, zhurnalistov, deiatelei iskusstva, diktorov radioveshchaniia* (Moscow, 1982).

were frank about the pressing need to win back audiences from “enemy voices” and the desirability of copying its techniques to do so.⁵⁸ The development of portable recording technologies and the comparative political openness of the post-Stalin period further worked to spur on reform and open the airwaves up to new sounds. By the 1970s, listeners in the Soviet Union had access to an unprecedented range of programming, from sports to radio theater to pop music to documentaries and youth-oriented talk shows to news.⁵⁹ Yet late Soviet radio, for all its diversity and sophistication, retained fundamental vocal parameters.

From its earliest days, Soviet radio had been tasked with modelling “proper” speech for its audiences. The modelling functions of broadcasting put it in a different category than cinema which, as Oksana Bulgakowa elucidated, did open its vocal range to radical innovation in the post-Stalinist 1950s.⁶⁰ Soviet radio, rarely acknowledged as “art,” despite much campaigning on the part of its professionals, never had the same expressive latitude.⁶¹ Radio’s announcers were selected via rigorous competitions—national competitions in the case of all-Union radio—and enjoined to keep the weighty *Dictionary of Syllabic Stress for Workers in Radio and Television* close to hand.⁶² E. Emel’ianova, one of Soviet radio’s most illustrious announcers and voice teachers, rallied every “announcer to know her language perfectly and fight for its purity” by studying the dictionary and “literally absorbing the spirit of Russian speech correctly pronounced, with faultless stress and diction. Do not rely on your memory!” she warned.⁶³

As early as 1950, nearly all of Soviet radio was pre-taped for broadcast, and this eliminated the risk of on-air gaffes that had in earlier decades threatened an announcer with dismissal, or worse. But radio veterans recall reviewing tapes before broadcast to correct the delivery of even the highest officials. Attempts by some progressive journalists to broadcast live or unrehearsed interviews with real people met with consistent pushback. Soviet radio consistently foregrounded written text over improvised speech and trained over untrained voices.⁶⁴ Not all announcers in the 1970s sounded exactly alike, to be sure, and listeners developed preferences among them, as they did for different programs. But the barriers to individualized, idiosyncratic vocal performances on Soviet radio, to creating an on-air personality and deploying it as a mode for mediated communication, were formidable.⁶⁵ In the words of one radio veteran, reflecting in 2002, the broadcasting studio

⁵⁸*Pozivnyye trevog i nadezhd: Maiak sorok let v efire* (Moscow, 2004), 42. Roth-Ey, *Moscow Prime Time*, 67–74.

⁵⁹Lovell, *Russia in Microphone Age*, 181–210.

⁶⁰Oksana Bulgakowa, “Vocal Changes: Marlon Brando, Innokenty Smokhtunovsky, and the Sound of the 1950s,” in *Sound, Speech, Music in Soviet and Post-Soviet Cinema*, ed. Lilya Kaganovsky and Masha Salazkina (Bloomington, 2014), 145–61.

⁶¹Here I am referring not to radio theater (which did allow for different voices), but to radio announcing.

⁶²The *Slovar' udareniiia dlia rabotnikov radio i televideniia* went through multiple editions from the 1950s through the 1990s.

⁶³E. Emel’ianova, *Chto nuzhno znat' diktoru* (Moscow, 1969); idem, *Diktor u mikroфона: Sbornik statei* (Moscow, 1959, 1983).

⁶⁴Lovell, *Russia in the Microphone Age*, 161–80; Simon Huxtable, “Making News Soviet: Rethinking Journalistic Professionalism after Stalin,” *Contemporary European History* 27:1 (2018): 59–84.

⁶⁵The history of the BBC, which long rejected the use of colloquialisms, Americanisms, and “regional accents” in favor of a formal style and so-called “received pronunciation” (English as spoken by educated elites in the southeast of England), provides an interesting comparison. Despite important changes during the Second

was understood as a world apart, the “holy of holies.” She went on: “Extraneous conversations, the traitorous rumblings of the depths of the first-person singular, smoking and drinking, as well as coughs, hiccups, and wanton sneezes were all absolutely forbidden. ... God forbid something untoward got on the air.”⁶⁶

Novgorodsev was not a trained broadcaster, but he spoke good, grammatically correct Russian at a measured pace; his shows were carefully scripted and taped, not improvised, and they sounded it.⁶⁷ The BBC Controller even questioned whether they might bore people. To his ear, the programs sounded “rather clumsy,” he wrote in a memo to the Russian Service, comparing them unfavorably to youth programming on the BBC’s Radio 1, the unbuttoned, domestic pop music service launched in 1967 in a direct bid to win audiences away from pirate stations. “However,” he mused, “perhaps the fast moving, flippant, zany Radio 1 style would be incomprehensible over there. Or would it?” The Russian Service’s editor reassured him: “clumsy is a word I would never dream of using to describe Seva’s programmes.”⁶⁸

Soviet listeners would have heard a voice with far greater tonal variation, far more individualism than was possible on contemporary Soviet radio— a voice in which the depths of first-person singular did not just rumble, but fairly roared. Novgorodsev’s Seva played with his vocals: he might trill in falsetto, for example; he used sound effects to generate echoes of his voice and to distort it. “A spectre is haunting Europe ... the spectre of rock-‘n’-roll!” he intoned, the vocals reverberating in a ghostly manner.⁶⁹ Introducing a track by the group The Three Degrees in one early (1979) broadcast, he slid his voice to the top of his range to declare that listening to it “made him feel like a completely new person!”⁷⁰ It was odd, risible, and slightly suggestive. Sometimes listeners could hear Seva exhale a little on air, or even sigh; he sighed, for example, just before launching into a more or less factual explanation of cross-dressing, which came up in a program about Pink Floyd. The very fact of an open-minded discussion of cross-dressing (or, in later shows, topics such as homosexuality) was radical itself, but the sigh—a soft, warm, in-the-ear sound, indexed to the feminine—added something more.⁷¹ Listeners might imagine they heard something of

World War in particular, the real breakthrough to broadening the range of voices on the BBC would not come until the 1960s. See D. L. Lemahieu, *A Culture for Democracy: Mass Communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain Between the Wars* (Oxford, 1988); and David Hendy, “BBC Radio Four and Conflicts over Spoken English in the 1970s,” *Media History* 12:3 (2006): 273–89.

⁶⁶Natal’ia Kiseleva and M. Kusugarshv, *Dvazhdy dvadtsat’, ili sorok schastlivykh let: Radiostantsiia “Iunost’”* (Moscow, 2002), 87.

⁶⁷Novgorodsev has discussed how difficult it was for him to write scripts that would connect stylistically with young audiences. See “Interv’iu: Seva Novgorodtsev: ‘Ia odin iz poslednykh radio-mogikan,’” <http://www.zvuki.ru/R/P/29560/>. Pirate radio DJs in Britain also struggled at first, settling on a “predictable mid-Atlantic watering down of the verbal pyrotechnic excesses of American pop radio.” See Robert Chapman, *Selling the Sixties: The Pirates and Pop Music Radio* (London, 1992), 81.

⁶⁸BBC WAC, E40:720:1 (1984). Novgorodsev himself, when asked to about his influences, acknowledged not only BBC Radio 1’s John Peel, a veteran DJ of the pirate stations, but another BBC legend, Terry Wogan, who made his name on the more middle-of-road (and middle-aged) music station, BBC Radio 2.

⁶⁹“Rok-posevy,” December 1, 1978, <http://www.seva.ru>.

⁷⁰The track was “The Runner,” a top ten UK hit in 1979 (“Rok-posevy,” March 23, 1979, “Britanskii spisok,” <http://www.seva.ru>).

⁷¹“Rok-posevy,” July 6, 1979, <http://www.seva.ru>. The reference was to the Pink Floyd 1967 track “Arnold Layne,” which mocks a man who pilfers women’s clothing from laundry lines. Novgorodsev noted with approval

Seva himself in it—perhaps his personal discomfort with the topic, or anticipation of audience disapproval, or even, who knows, wistfulness. In fact, in its playfulness and ambiguity (including occasional gender ambiguity), Seva’s voice shared a page with the new sounds of post-Stalinist cinema Bulgakova described. But it was also very different, both as an identified “enemy,” ever on the edge of being lost to the national “radio defenses,” and as a voice reaching people in their homes.

In post-Soviet reminiscences, comments about enemy voices *as voices* are common.⁷² Willis Conover’s mellifluous baritone made an impression on many, including Novgorodsev and the 1950s cohort of young Leningrad poets, Joseph Brodsky among them.⁷³ Novgorodsev’s colleague at the BBC, Anatol Goldberg, took on something like folk hero status among the Soviet intelligentsia for his even-handed tone.⁷⁴ (“Comrade Mister Goldberg, tell us at least *something!*” sang bard Aleksandr Galich.) Zinovyi Zinik, writer and Goldberg’s colleague at the BBC, wrote that Soviet audiences were “hypnotised and enchanted first and foremost by the form rather than the content of his commentaries, by the sheer theatrical mask of reserve, neutrality, open-mindedness and ironical turns of his voice.”⁷⁵ A 1973 Soviet exposé on the BBC concurred in its own way, singling out Goldberg, who broadcast in Russian, as an adept at its particular brand of anti-Soviet propaganda. In a “soft, conversational tone,” he “skillfully draws over himself the veil of an ‘informed and impartial’ person.”⁷⁶

Conover’s voice has been associated, like the jazz he played, with the ideals of individualism and political freedom, while Goldberg’s vocal style is said to have tapped into and reinforced a certain Soviet idea of English composure and fair play.⁷⁷ The Seva image, and Seva’s voice, had qualities of both. He, too, had a loose-limbed vocal style, a lightly ironic, conversational approach. Like Conover, he broadcast from the position of connoisseur: he had knowledge, and he was delighted to share it. Like Goldberg, he conveyed an air of reasonableness and referred to Britain as home (“*u nas*”). Yet Seva was at once more and less fathomable than either Conover or Goldberg. His voice, audibly made-in-the-USSR (Goldberg, who emigrated in 1918, had lightly accented Russian), was a radically individual and un-Soviet one.

that homosexuality was no longer a crime in the UK in a program about David Bowie. “By all this I mean that human nature is complex and ambivalent and deviations from the norm need to be treated with understanding and tolerance rather than articles in the criminal code” (“Rok-posevy,” February 13, 1981, <http://www.seva.ru>).

⁷²“Alfavit inakomyshliia”: Bi-bi-si,” Radio Svoboda: Poverkh bar’erov s Ivanom Tolstym, September 20, 2011, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/24335161.html>.

⁷³Margo Shohl Rosen, “Willis of Oz: How Willis Conover Enchanted the Thaw Generation of Poets with his ‘Jazz Hour’ Radio Program,” *Urbandus Review* 16 (2014): 204–5. Novgorodsev wrote: “The sound of Conover’s voice made me tremble every time” (*Integral*, 87).

⁷⁴A. Galich, “O printsipal’nosti” (1970).

⁷⁵Zinovyi Zinik, “Goldberg’s Variations,” *Wasafiri* 26:4 (2011): 4. See also Zinik’s novel *Russkaia sluzhba* (1983).

⁷⁶Vladimir Artyomov and Vladimir Semyonov, “The BBC: History, Apparatus, Methods of Radio Propaganda,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 4:1 (1984): 79.

⁷⁷Novgorodsev himself authorized this association in his memoir, *Integral*. See Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge, MA, 2004); and Zinik, “Goldberg’s Variations,” 4 (“His voice was perceived as an identity card of liberal England, real or imaginary”).

Novgorodsev's correspondence contains multiple references to the sound of the program and its importance for listeners. Seva's voice was "pleasingly confidential," "cheery and energetic," and so stood out among the "dull and coarse voices" on the radio, one listener said, he was able to use it alone to tune in to the right frequency.⁷⁸ Listeners often recalled the first time they heard Seva: "The sound of your free voice was simply a shock," wrote one.⁷⁹ "Where in the world did this informal (*neformal'nyi*) announcer come from?" another listener recalled asking himself.⁸⁰ One eighteen-year-old called up for military service wrote, "To be honest, I don't want to at all because I won't hear you for two years."⁸¹ The loss of Seva's voice even inspired verse: "Why the dismal smile? Why the sad eyes? .../ My father took away my radio/ I can't listen to Novgorodsev anymore/ That's what I'm grieving for ..."⁸²

AUTHORITY AND INTIMACY

The power of the Seva brand was personified, literally, by his voice—a voice of intimate authority. Seva was playful but authoritative, protective without being patronizing, near yet very far. Novgorodsev's age is important; it was evidently important to his listener-correspondents, who referred to it often in one way or another in their letters. Reading through them, one is struck by their gratitude, and sometimes, surprise, that an adult was willing to take their interests seriously.

The BBC Controller who found Seva's approach dull specifically questioned the "Rock Archive" segment—the spooling out of factual information that characterized so many programs. As a genre, "Rock Archive" was not dissimilar to the lecture programs that opened discos in the Soviet Union. But Seva in London had a credibility *no komsorg* could match. Many people who wrote to the show adopted a studious tone when questioning a point of fact in rock and pop realia, and Seva's tone was in these cases serious as well. The contrast with his approach to other material is worth emphasizing. Seva's trademark humor derived from his manipulation of stock concepts in Soviet ideological language—quotations from Marx ("a spectre is haunting Europe"), phrases from the Soviet press. "By the way," he asked his listeners, "have you ever thought about why the Swedish group ABBA sings in English? Aren't they kowtowing to the West?"⁸³ He transitioned to a segment on listener mail with "Now let's turn to workers' letters and loafers' requests! (*pis'ma trudiashchikhsia i zaiavki tuneiadtsev*)."⁸⁴ When Evgenii from Kiev asked why he only poked fun at the Soviet things and suggested he make fun of himself more, he agreed and asked him to write back with his suggestions.⁸⁵

⁷⁸Novgorodsev letters, box 2.13, box 1.15, and box 2.3.

⁷⁹Ibid., box 1.11.

⁸⁰Ibid., box 8.8.

⁸¹Ibid., box 1.13.

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³"Rok-posevy," June 17, 1977, <http://www.seva.ru>.

⁸⁴"Pop programma na 21/22 ianvaria 83 goda," *Pis'ma*, 2, <http://www.seva.ru>.

⁸⁵"Rok-posevy," 23 January 1981, <http://www.seva.ru>.

Yet however snide Seva might be about Soviet life and politics, he rarely mocked his Soviet listeners individually. It is true that letters criticizing him for abandoning the USSR or for spouting anti-Soviet propaganda—and there were a good number of these over the years—were often subjected to sarcasm.⁸⁶ But a passion for Ozzy Osbourne, a plea for information about whether one of the couples in ABBA was getting divorced, an expression of anxiety—such things were treated with careful consideration.⁸⁷ When a sixteen-year-old girl wrote that she had no friends and asked if Seva would like her to send some of her poetry, he answered with open arms. “Of course I would,” he said. And in general, kids (*rebiata*), if you have some poems you think might be read on our program, send them in. Don’t be shy.”⁸⁸ Some listeners wrote with more complex psychological needs and family health problems, and it is clear that Novgorodsev corresponded with them; there are indications that he gave listeners advice and even financial assistance.⁸⁹



FIG. 3 “Young BBC-ist.” Drawing included in a July 1989 letter from a student in Kiev. Seva Novgorodsev letters, Hoover Institution Archives, box. 2.6.

To be clear, audience correspondence was central to Soviet media practice as well. Soviet radio actively solicited letters and used them in programming. In the late ‘70s, the main Soviet youth program, “Youth” (“*Iunost*”), claimed to base about 70 percent of its programming on listener letters; and teenage soul-searching (“who am I?”, “what profession should I choose?”) was a familiar genre on the Soviet airwaves.⁹⁰ But radio’s authority and relationship to its listeners in these Soviet programs was distinctive. In the Soviet case, intimacy was always a one-way street by design; listeners were to share of themselves, but announcers never did, despite the periodic handwringing about how impersonal Soviet broadcasting was. Seva, in direct contrast, promoted listeners’ intimate engagement by offering selected information about himself. Regular listeners knew when he had bought a house in London and where he had gone on summer vacation (Greece) and what he had done there; they knew he was a vegetarian and a bicyclist; they knew something

⁸⁶The nature of the anti-Seva letters is debatable. Although it seems clear some writers were genuine critics of Novgorodsev and the show, others appear to have sandwiched questions and requests in the midst of criticism to foil postal censorship. This was the interpretation of the BBC analysts (BBC WAC, E3:574: 1 [1985], 3).

⁸⁷BBC WAC, E42:610: 1 (1979), 22 (Nikopol).

⁸⁸“Rok-posevy,” March 20, 1981, <http://www.seva.ru>.

⁸⁹Novgorodsev letters, box 1.15.

⁹⁰A. Muziria, *V efire – radiostantsiia “Iunost”* (Moscow, 1979), 14.

of his taste in music (his admiration for Rod Stewart, for instance) and heard vignettes about his youth.⁹¹ Novgorodsev expressed personal political views on the program as well, and he framed them as his views rather than as universal truths.⁹² “Rok-posevy” was never about him; the title of the show, after all, was rock according *to* him. Yet speaking to his audience in the first person singular, on intimate terms, presented a version of adult authority radically different from what his listeners would have encountered on Soviet domestic broadcasting. And because, as Seva told his audience, rock music was “a huge social force working toward peace and progress, “Rok-posevy” modelled a very different vision of community as well.⁹³ Many correspondents referred not only to Seva, “*ty*,” but the audience, “*my*,” a community of listeners, and sometimes to one another by name. It is telling that when the cultural climate thawed under glasnost and Seva’s listeners formed an official fan club, with a publication, they called the club NORIS, the “Independent General Rock Information Syndicate” (Nezavisimyi Obshchii Rok-Informatsionnyi Sindikat), and though its members did come together to listen to music and drink (and, incidentally, to fete Seva when he visited the USSR for the first time after his emigration, in 1990), their main, self-declared purpose as a community was to spread knowledge.

LISTENING IN

What, if anything, can Seva Novgorodsev and his audience tell us about Cold War broadcasting in the USSR as a social and political phenomenon, about “listening out”? What I think the “Rok-posevy” example demonstrates most clearly is that analyzing the impact of broadcasting in statistical or content terms alone is a losing proposition. As historians, we do need to tune in—to sounds and styles, to media personalities and relationships. We should look to evaluate Western broadcasting in the context of the contemporary Soviet soundscape, including Soviet broadcasting itself—its own sounds and styles—but also the soundscape created by jamming. And along with this, we should give much more thought, I think, to the medium. Radio itself—evocative, intimate radio—and the way the practice of radio-listening was constructed by Soviet realities—its innate intimacy routinely ruptured and violated, its imaginative power only heightened by its limits—was, I think, essential to the impact of Cold War broadcasting.

Seva Novgorodsev’s “Rok-posevy” was one of the most influential Western broadcasts to the Soviet Union, to judge by its levels of audience engagement and by its cult status to this day. Novgorodsev’s critics in the Soviet press never doubted his impact on listeners—they understood the context—and they attacked “Rok posevy” regularly as anti-Soviet propaganda. I agree with them; it was—but less for what it said about politics directly than

⁹¹Vegetarian and bicyclist reference on “Rok-posevy,” January 20, 1984, and Rod Stewart reference on “Rok-posevy,” July 17, 1977, both at <http://www.seva.ru>. A listener from Kirovgrad wrote in 1989 about what an impression that Seva’s Greek holiday made on him at the time he heard it (Novgorodsev letters, box 1.11). On stories about his youth see “Rok-posevy,” October 20, 1978, <http://www.seva.ru>.

⁹²For an example of Novgorodsev’s expression of personal political views see “Rok-posevy,” April 29, 1983, <http://www.seva.ru>.

⁹³“Rok-posevy,” June 18, 1982, “Pis'ma i zaiavki,” <http://www.seva.ru>.

for what it modelled indirectly in sound and style, and what it offered as experience. Here was a powerful alternative sociocultural space, one that promoted models of authority and community very different from Soviet norms and, indeed, antithetical to Soviet norms. Seva as media personality stood at the center: authoritative—expert, in fact—but democratic with a small “d”; individualistic, but altruistic, communitarian; emotionally expressive and open-minded, but also, always, ineffably cool. The structure of the program itself matched Seva’s persona and reinforced these values—and by structure I have in mind the central role of listener letters and the Seva-listener, listener-listener relationship in the program, and the complex interactive games it played with official language and regime practices, like jamming and postal censorship. In this sense, the “freedom” projected by the show—and all Western broadcasting—was very much dependent on the unfree context of its reception.

All Western broadcasting threw Soviet media on the defensive by ending their informational monopoly, and by introducing new models for media performance that stressed timeliness, dynamism, and consumer-oriented service: Western broadcasting, in effect, changed the popular horizon of expectations for media in the USSR. Novgorodsev’s program was a part of this: thirty minutes of the latest rock and pop music on a Saturday night, a witty host, quizzes, and prizes—it is the very image of dynamic, in-the-here-and-now, consumer-facing cultural consumption circa 1980. But *Rok- posevy*’s promise to Soviet audiences was not only new music and information, and new ways of thinking about media; the more radical promise was the new avenues for thinking about themselves as individuals, and about the nature of authority and community afforded by its very particular sonic experience. The power and significance of cold war radio broadcasting to the Soviet Union is incommensurate with information and inexplicable without an analysis of style, sound, and audience experience. Listening out became not only listening for, but listening in.