Voices
of Freedom

Radio Free Europe in the Cold War Era

Voices of Freedom - Radio Free Europe in the Cold War Era

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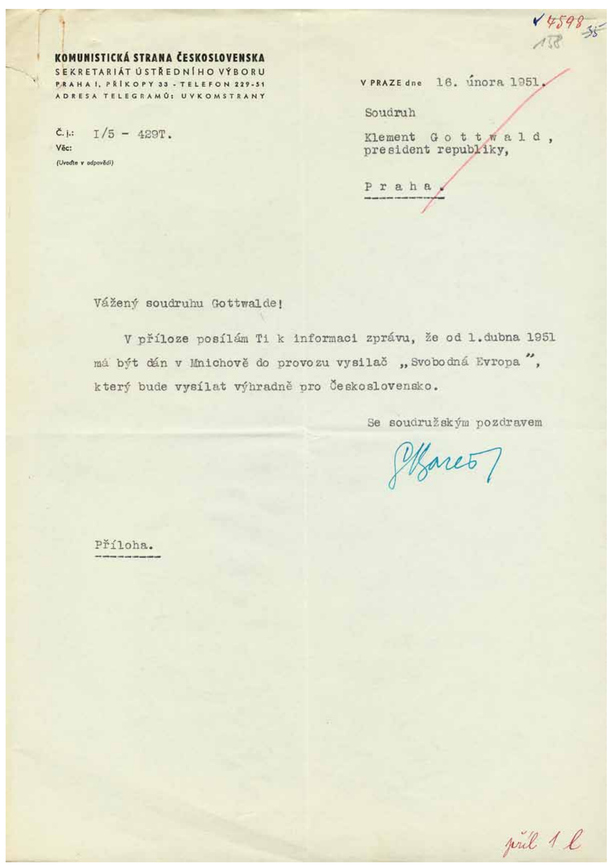
The Launch of Czechoslovak Broadcasts by Radio Free Europe

Czechoslovak exiles achieved two firsts at Radio Free Europe (RFE). Czechs and Slovaks were the first to launch test broadcasting on 14 July 1950 and were later the first to begin regular broadcasts on 1 May 1951, on 417 metres medium wave. The Council of Free Czechoslovakia, an exile group, had been preparing for that moment since September 1949.

The initial 1950 pilot programmes were recorded at RFE's studios in the Empire State Building in New York, before the tapes were sent on to Munich by plane. Test broadcasts in Germany were carried on a 7.5 kW shortwave transmitter nicknamed "Barbara" which was located on a truck at the Lampertheim former military base near the Czechoslovak border. Only 10 hours a week were broadcast, with all programmes lasting 30 minutes and comprising news, information and short political analyses.

Two celebrations were held at the Bayerischer Hof hotel in Munich on the morning of 1 May 1951: the presentation of a shortwave transmitter, and the inauguration of broadcasts to Czechoslovakia. Speakers included the Europe director of RFE, Forrest McCluney; Alexander Heidler, a Czech Roman Catholic priest who later became a very popular presenter of RFE's religious programming; the European representative of the American Federation of Labour, Irwing Brown; the president of the National Committee for a Free Europe, Charles D. Jackson; and the director of the department, Ferdinand Peroutka. RFE ceremonially launched its broadcasting at 11 A.M.

In his speech, Charles D. Jackson highlighted the unique task facing the exiles and Czechoslovak broadcasting: "From this station, free Czechs and Slovaks will speak to their subjugated countrymen."



KOMUNISTICKÁ STRANA ČESKOSLOVENSKA
SEKRETARIÁT ÚSTŘEDNÍHO VÝBORU
PRAHA I., PŘÍKOPY 33 - TELEFON 229-51
ADRESA TELEGRAMŮ: UVKOMSTRANY

V PRAZE dne 16. února 1951.

Č.j.: I/5 - 429T.
Věc:
(Uvedte v odpovědi)

Soudruh
Klement Gottwald,
president republiky,
Praha.

Vážený soudruhu Gottwalde!

V příloze posílám Ti k informaci zprávu, že od 1.dubna 1951 má být dán v Mnichově do provozu vysilač „Svobodná Evropa", který bude vysílat výhradně pro Československo.

Se soudružským pozdravem

Příloha.

přil 1 l

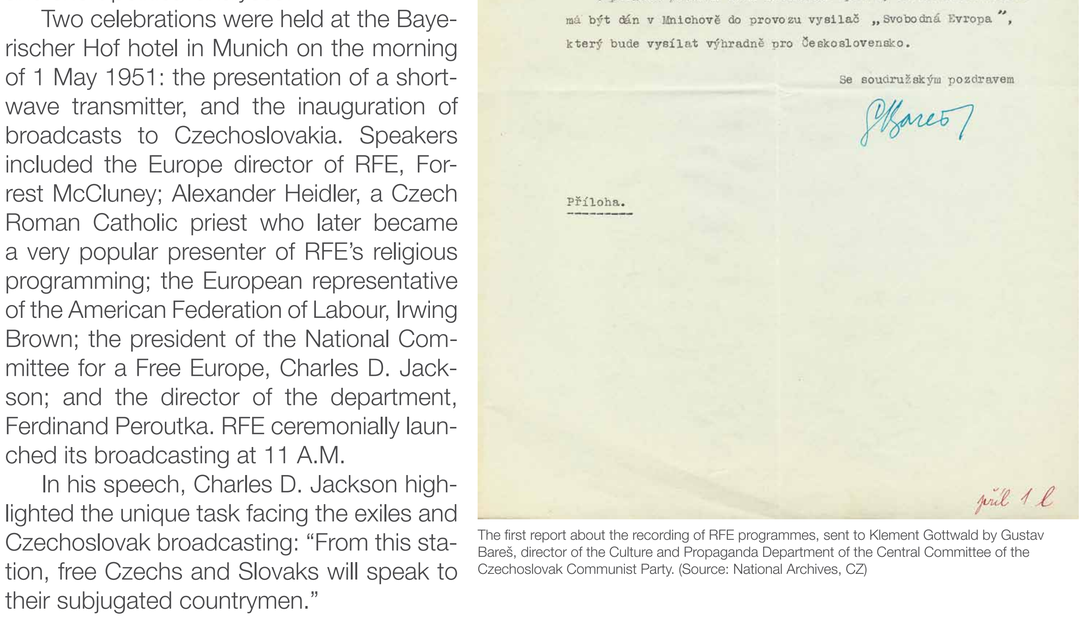
The first report about the recording of RFE programmes, sent to Klement Gottwald by Gustav Bareš, director of the Culture and Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party. (Source: National Archives, CZ)

CAPTION: Propagook revisited....When the people speak

IS RADIO FREE EUROPE run by "cannibals, hyenas, husky barkers of imperialist lackeys," as the men who rule in the Red Presidium say? Writing secretly to RFE headquarters in Munich, Germany, and explaining what broadcasts from Western democracies mean to them, the people use such expressions of appreciation and affection as: "dear friends who console us;" "a life requirement;" "a candle which burns in the darkness." Shown above are officials of Crusade for Freedom's RFE overseas staff, sorting mail from listeners of the free world network which is supported by voluntary American funds.

photo from: Ruth Nathan,
CRUSADE FOR FREEDOM - 345 E. 46th St., NYC - OXford 7-3939

NCFE employees reading letters from listeners. (Source: Security Services Archive, CZ)



RFE editor Zdeněk Eliáš in front of a model of the Iron Curtain and a map of RFE's broadcasting operations. (Source: private archive of Kate Elias)

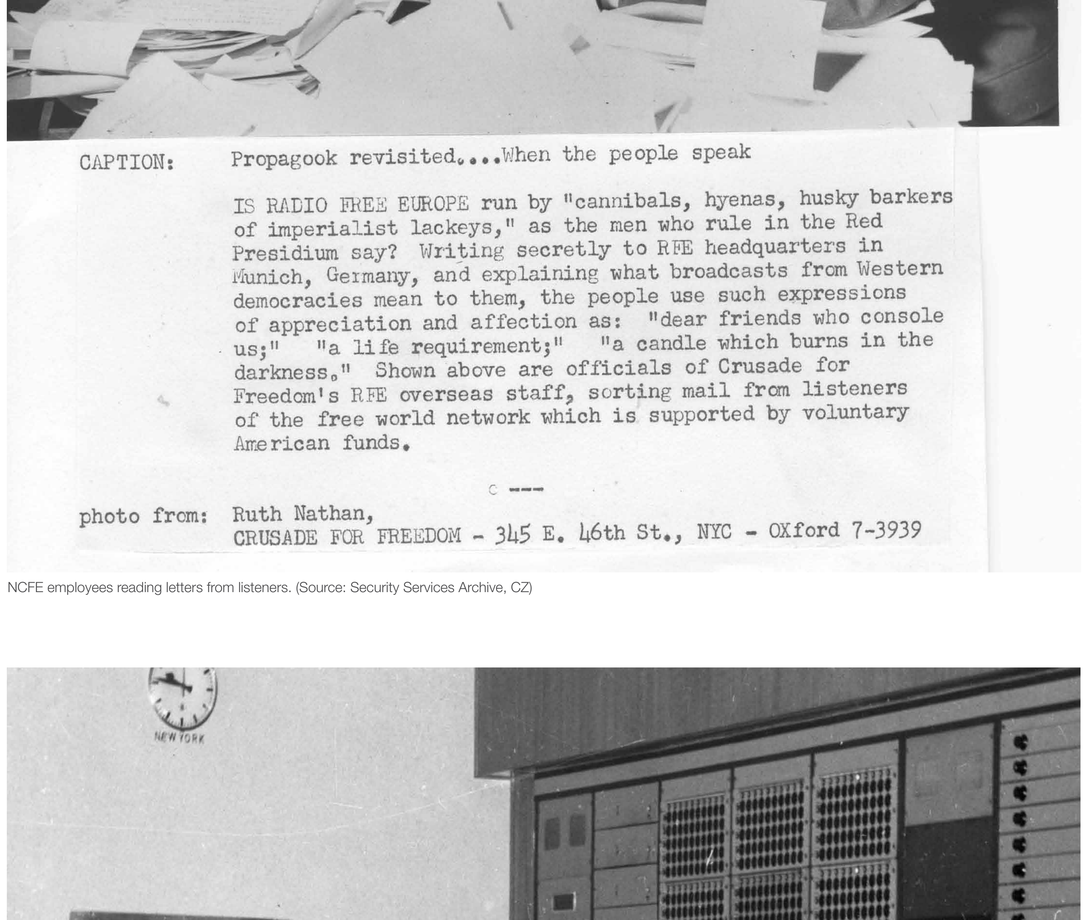
National Committee for a Free Europe

After several months of preparation, the National Committee for a Free Europe (NCFE) was established in New York on 1 June 1949. Its foundation was announced via a press release by the NCFE's chairman, Joseph Clark Grew, an experienced diplomat and politician. The committee was made up of around two dozen important figures in American politics, science and journalism, among them future U.S. president Dwight D. Eisenhower.

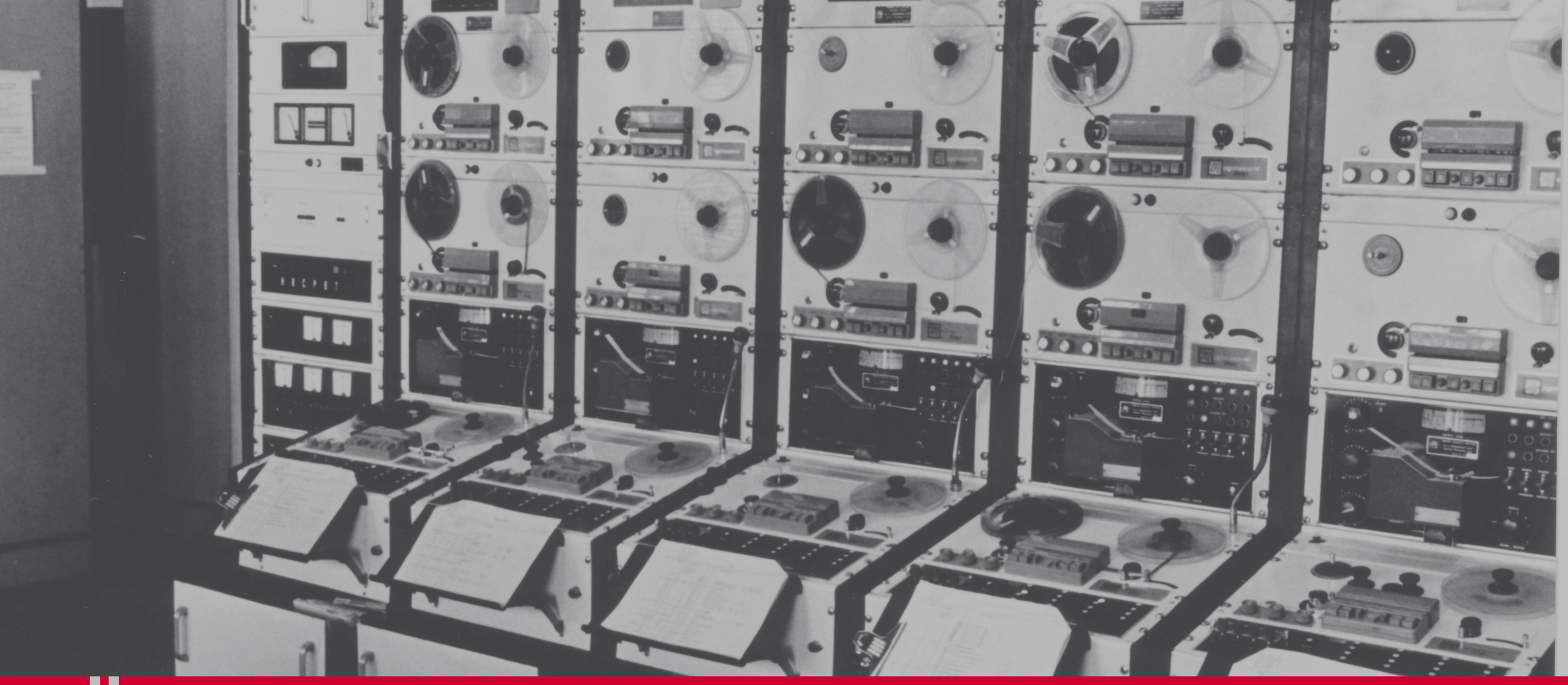
The aim of the NCFE was to support democratic politicians who had fled to the U.S. in the face of Communist pressure in Eastern Europe. At the same time, the committee wanted to use the presence of the these exiles' to acquaint the American public with their beliefs and feelings. The idea was to use radio and the print media to boost the concept of national and individual freedom among the inhabitants of the Eastern Bloc. Another goal was to support co-operation between like-minded exiles from various European countries residenting in the U.S.

The NCFE press statement contained the following sentences: "Weapons and economic aid are necessary, but they are not enough. Only a victory in the field of ideas and spiritual values can be permanent."

The NCFE's most significant act was the establishment of RFE. The Freedom Bell became its symbol, standing for the campaign to free Eastern Europe of Communism.



The news department of the Czechoslovak section. (Security Services Archive, CZ)



II.

New York, Munich, Prague

In an unusual move, the organisation of RFE was divided into a New York section (management, programming centre) and an executive section in Munich. However, from 1961 only an agency covering events in the U.S. remained in New York.

RFE at first occupied rented premises in Munich, before all employees moved in the course of 1951 to a complex on Oettingerstraße near the city's English Garden. The station remained at the building, which was originally conceived as a hospital, until the 1990s. Today it is used by the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich.

The advantage of basing RFE in Munich was its strategic location in the centre of Europe, not too far from its the target countries. Despite the almost impermeable Iron Curtain, the location allowed for the easier circulation of up-to-date information. At the same time Munich, with its unique museum collections, libraries and university, was an inspiring city for editors.

Teleprinter RFE 3-76. (Photo: Josef Rakušan)

After the fall of the Iron Curtain in late 1989, RFE not only had to find a fresh direction, but also – for financial reasons – a new headquarters. Thanks in part to then Czech president Václav Havel and prime minister Václav Klaus, a new home was procured in Prague. The move of RFE/Radio Liberty (RL) to the Czech capital began in March 1995, with regular broadcasts from Munich ending on June 9 of that year. Many RFE/RL employees chose to retire when the move took place and stayed on in the German city.

Simultaneously, broadcasting began from the former Czechoslovak Federal Assembly building adjacent to Prague's Wenceslas Square. Since 2009, RFE/RL has been based in an newly constructed building in the city's Hagibor district.

The RFE building today. (Photo: Prokop Tomek)

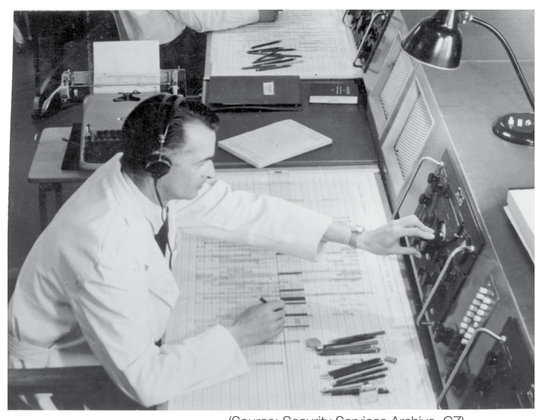
"Erchingen 1": Photo of the RFE radio mast, taken by the secret services in the 1950s. (Source: Archive of secret services documents, CZ)

Entrance to the RFE building, first half of the 1990s. (Photo: Josef Rakušan)

View of the RFE studios, 1950s. (Source: Archive of secret services documents, CZ)

Master Control Room at RFE, Munich. (Photo: Josef Rakušan)

Archive of RFE recordings in Munich, 1960s. (Source: Archive of secret services documents, CZ)



(Source: Security Services Archive, CZ)

News department of the Czechoslovak section. (Photo: Josef Rakušan)

(Photo: Josef Rakušan)

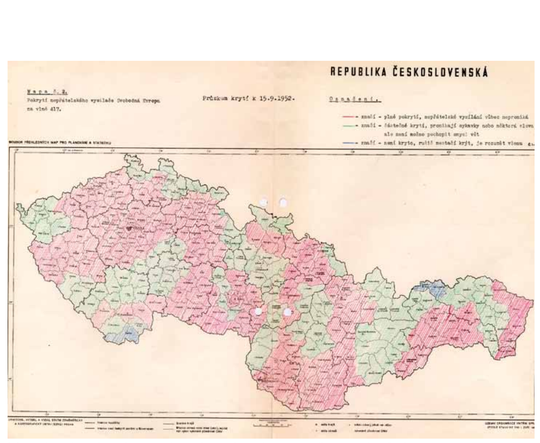
Jamming

Attempts to break the monopoly on information held by the Comminist governments by means of radio broadcasts met with stiff resistance on the other side of the Iron Curtain. This typically took the form of jamming signals transmitted with the aim of limiting the people's ability to listen to foreign stations, in particular the BBC, Voice of America and Vatican Radio aside from RFE. Such jamming was in contravention of the international commitments of the Soviet Union and its satellites.

Deliberate interference on short-wave in particular was carried out by local jamming stations in large cities and agglomerations. Generally speaking, there was less jamming in rural areas. In view of the technical characteristics of short-wave broadcasting, Eastern Bloc states teamed up to jam signals, with Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Poland, Romania, Hungary and the U.S.S.R. co-ordinating their approach from the early 1950s.

Poland ended local jamming in 1956, with long-distance short-wave jamming continuing after a political cooling from the start of the 1960s until the 1980s. Romania abandoned such disruption completely in 1964, while Hungary took the same step the following year. RFE broadcasts were jammed in the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria until the end of 1988.

RFE fought back by using ever stronger transmitters, having presenters employ the clearest possible enunciation, and repeating programmes several times. The effectiveness of jamming depended on the time of day and the time of the year. Listeners created their own special antennas or spent their weekends in the countryside, where RFE could be heard.



Map showing the places where broadcasting was disrupted, 1953 (Source: Archive of secret services documents, CZ)

The former centre of radio interference in Poděbrady today. (Photo: Prokop Tomek)

The mast which was used to disrupt programmes in Poděbrady, as it looks today. (Photo: Prokop Tomek)

RFE broadcasting tower in Portugal in the 1950s. (Source: Open Society Archives, HU)

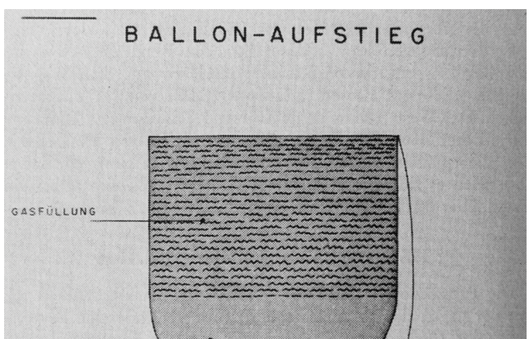
Balloon Operations

Countless thousands of balloons carried hundreds of millions of leaflets into Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland during the 1950s. In our age of advanced information technology, RFE's leaflet operations offer a telling indication of just how divided the world was at that time.

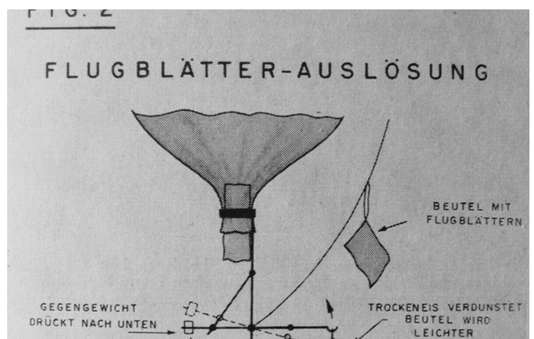
Here the balloons which were to fl-y to Central and Eastern Europe are being prepared in Bavaria, in the 1950s. (Source: Open Society Archives, HU)

The leaflets were intended as a supplement to radio broadcasts and to break the Communists' monopoly on the print media. As mail was strictly censured in the Eastern Bloc and censors destroyed all undesirable materials, the National Committee for a Free Europe decided to send printed information through the air by means of small balloons.

Three balloon operations took place on the territory of Czechoslovakia in the years 1951, 1953 and 1954–1956: "Winds of Freedom", "Prospero" and "Veto". The last of these was intended to support a mood of opposition in Czechoslovakia through a document entitled "Ten Points of People's Opposition". Balloons also carried millions of copies of regular RFE "newsheets" and one-off leaflets across the border.



Instructions for the balloon operation. (Source: Open Society Archives, HU)

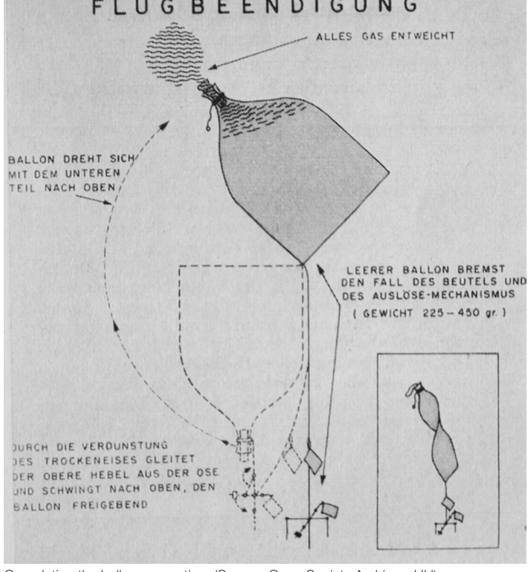


Mechanisms used to spread leaflets from the balloon once it reached the target area. (Source: Open Society Archives, HU)

RFE carried out a similar campaign in Hungary in 1955; the principal aim of operation "Focus" was to encourage the country's latent opposition movement.

Exiles from Poland refused to stir up unjustified hope of Western help among their compatriots. For that reason, no balloons were flown into Poland until 1955. When they were sent, they carried informative materials only, such as a Polish translation of George Orwell's "Animal Farm" or Khrushchev's secret speech at the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party. From November 1955 to August 1956, balloons also brought millions of copies of seven editions of the magazine "Free Europe" into the country. After the Hungarian Uprising was smashed in 1956 RFE ceased all its balloon operations.

The governments of Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland reacted tetchily. On top of diplomatic protests, balloons were shot down, leaflets collected and destroyed and propaganda campaigns run against them in the official press. However, it was not possible to assess independently the actual influence of information carried across the Iron Curtain by balloon.



Completing the balloon operation. (Source: Open Society Archives, HU)

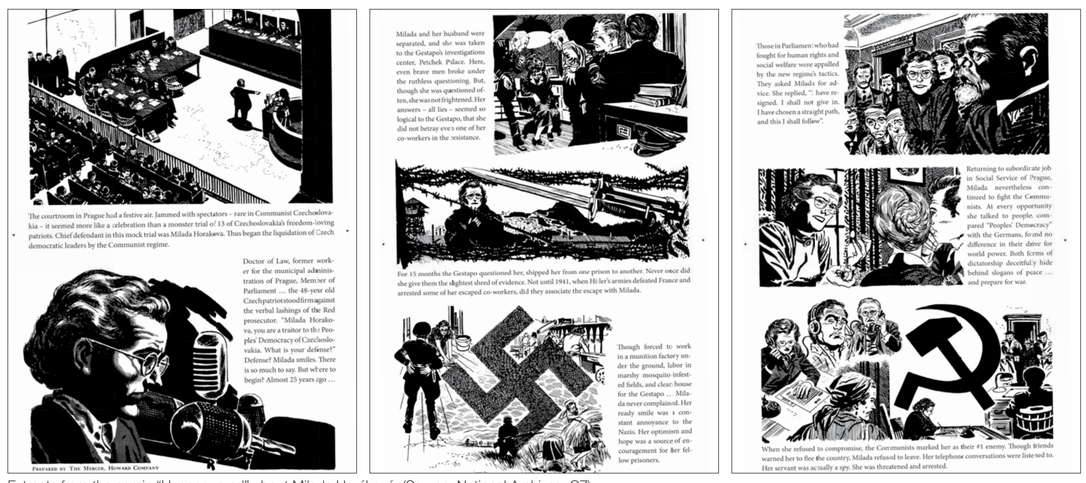
RFE balloons made of rubber with leaflets. (Source: Open Society Archives, HU)

RFE's Printing and Research Activities

The initial plans of the National Committee for a Free Europe included the stated aims of bringing inhabitants of countries behind the Iron Curtain uncensored printed matter and informing the West about goings on in those repressed states. This resulted in the establishment of the Free Europe Press in 1949.

This section of RFE produced information about the situation in Eastern Europe for both specialists and the general public in the West. The fact that the Free Europe Press published in 1951 a comic book entitled "Unconquered" about the democratic Czechoslovak politician Milada Horáková (who had been executed the previous year) attests to the breadth of its activities.

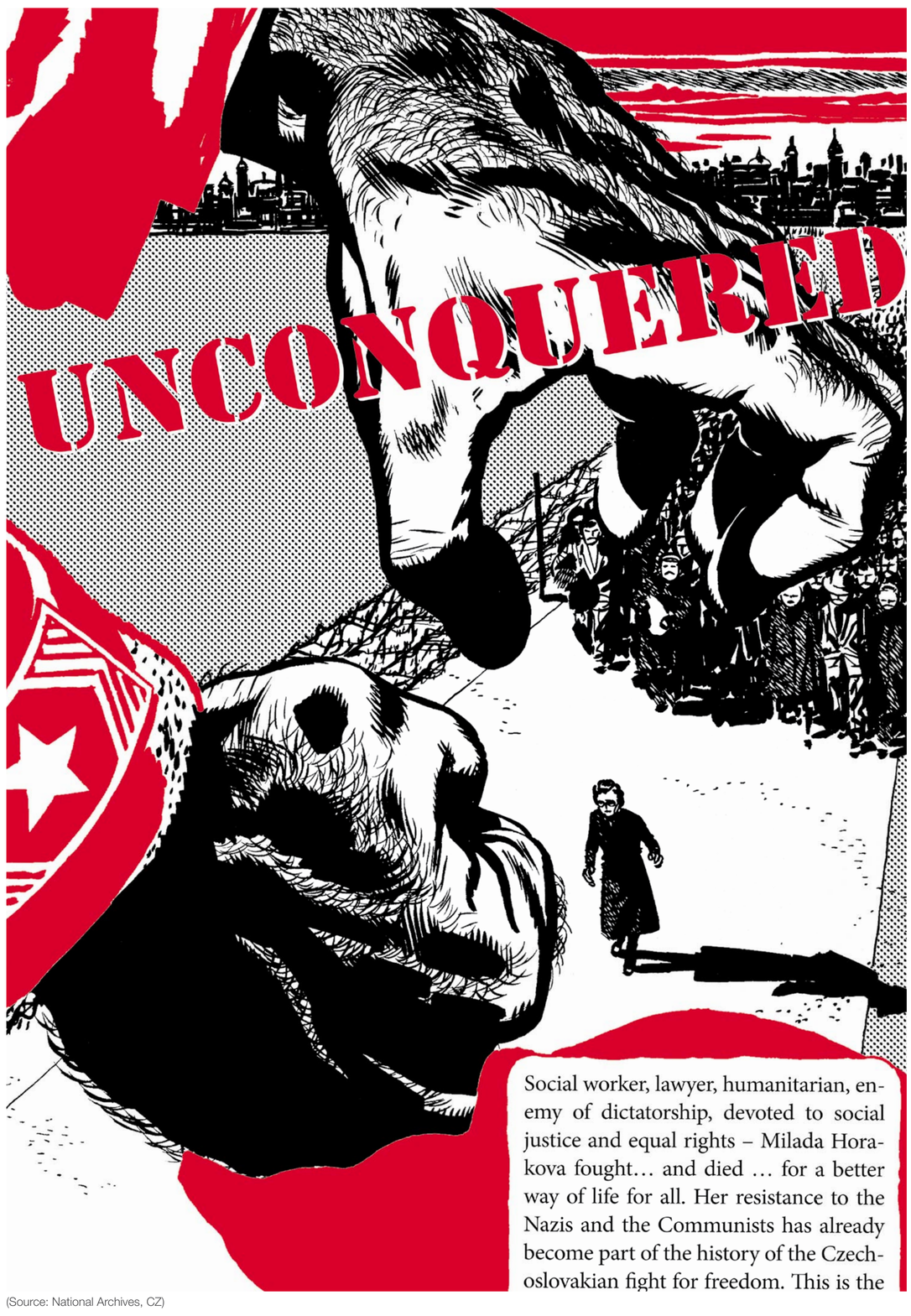
In addition to as national broadcasting departments, RFE had national evaluation and monitoring sections aimed at gathering and analysing information from the official media and other sources behind the Iron Curtain. Staff collected clippings from the Communist press and, collated personal data and other information about party higher-ups. Monitoring used recordings of broadcasts to establish basic information.



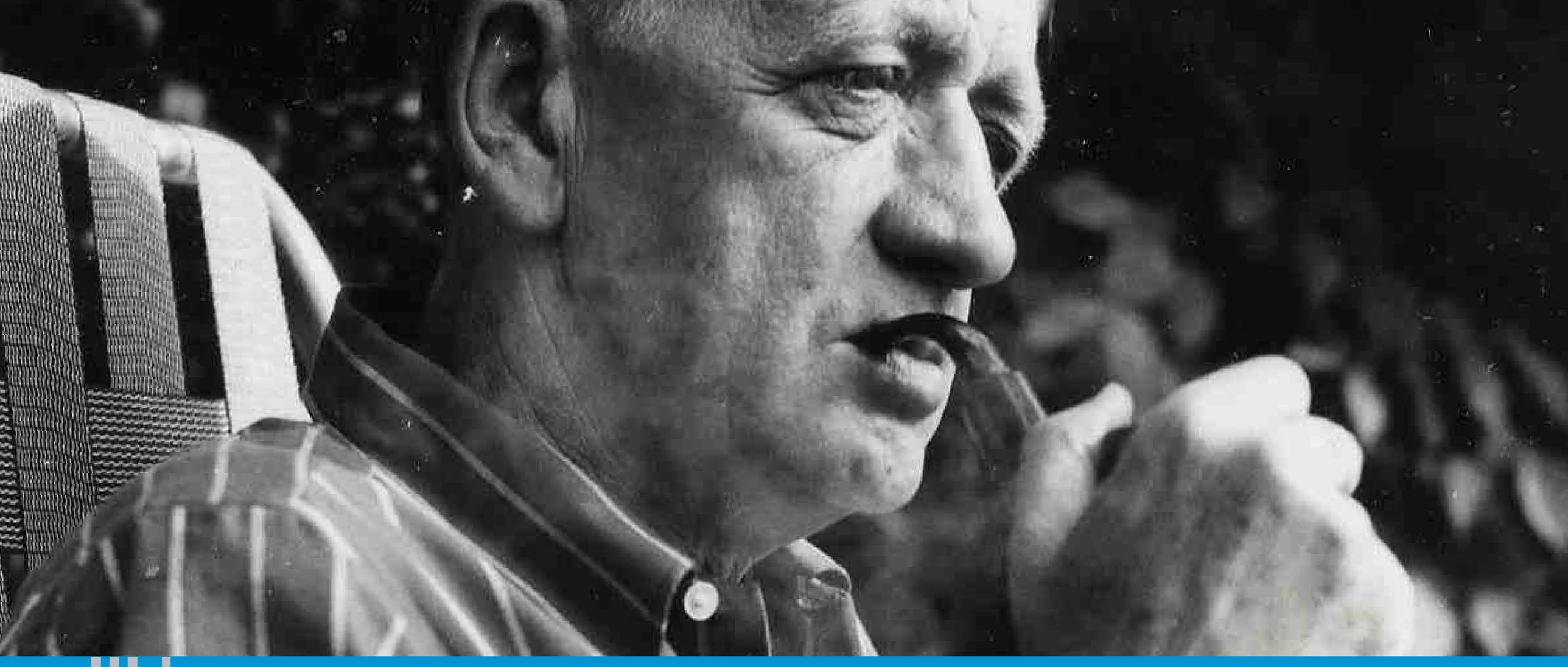
Extracts from the comic "Unconquered" about Milada Horáková. (Source: National Archives, CZ)

RFE's correspondents in Western Europe gathered information. In the initial years of the radio station's existence, this was provided by refugees who had just left Czechoslovakia; later it came from occasional legal visitors. However, the borders of the target countries remained closed.

The situation changed in the 1980s. For instance in 1985 an exiled married couple named Čeřovský set up the Free Press Agency in Munich. They acquired up-to-date information about civic groups and the persecution of the regime's opponents by phoning activists in Czechoslovakia, then passed on the information they had transcribed to RFE/RL. After all, the station was forbidden from directly gathering information in its target countries and was only able to make use of news published elsewhere and acquired from other sources.



(Source: National Archives, CZ)



III.b

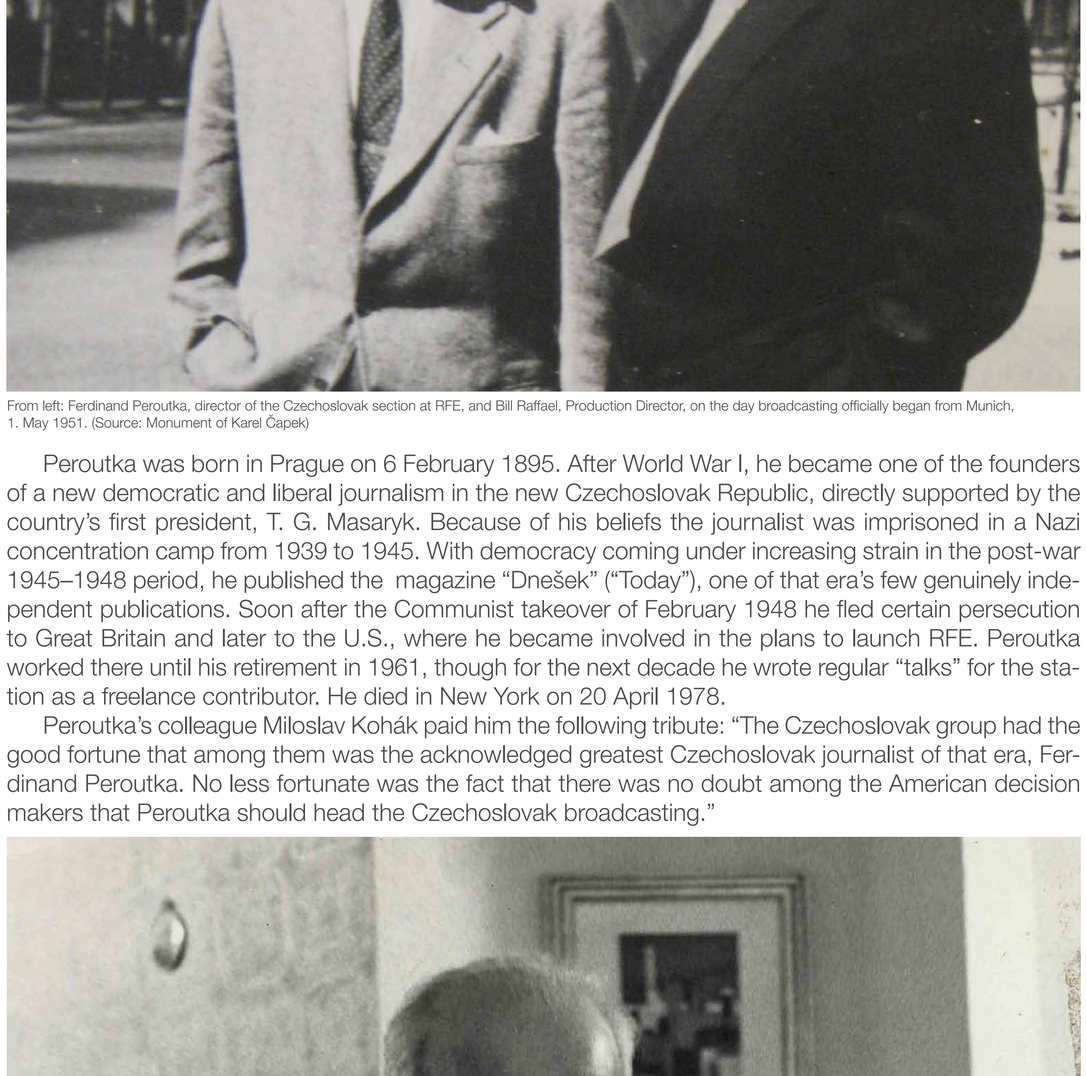
Ferdinand Peroutka

The leading Czech journalist Ferdinand Peroutka became director of the Czechoslovak service of RFE in New York on 6 April 1950. For the NCFE his appointment represented a link to Czechoslovakia's democratic past.

From left: Ferdinand Peroutka, director of the Czechoslovak section at RFE, and Bill Raffael, Production Director, on the day broadcasting officially began from Munich, 1. May 1951. (Source: Monument of Karel Čapek)

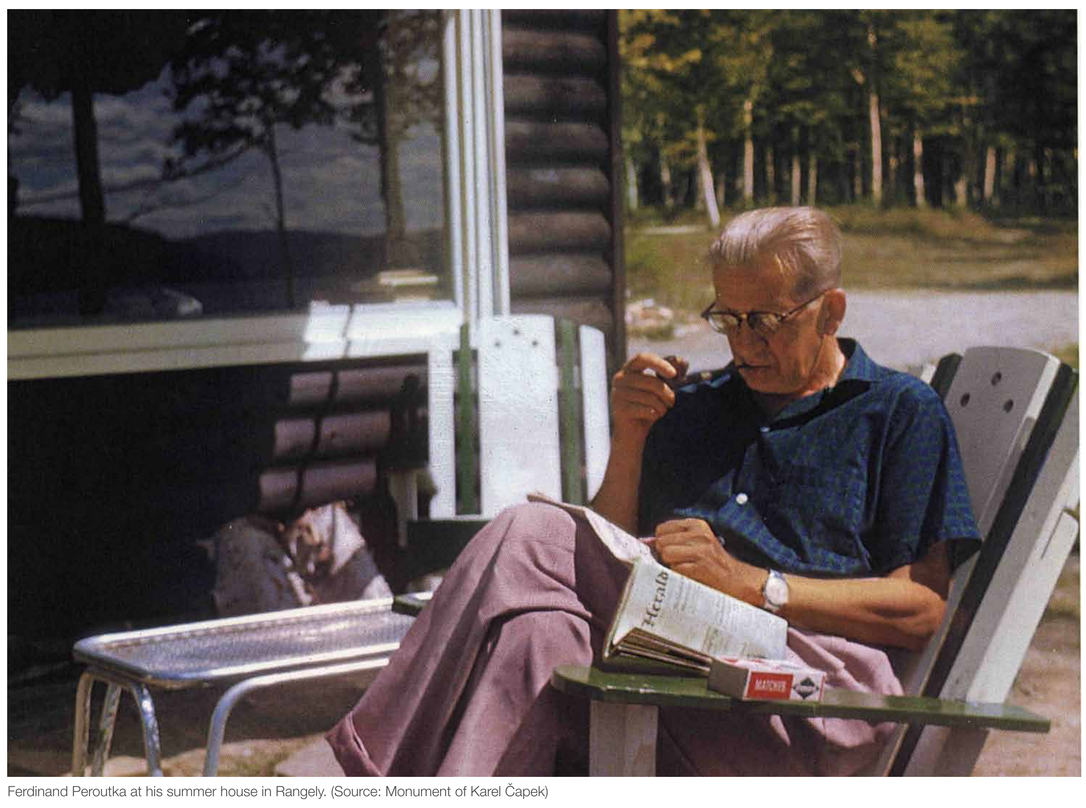
Peroutka was born in Prague on 6 February 1895. After World War I, he became one of the founders of a new democratic and liberal journalism in the new Czechoslovak Republic, directly supported by the country's first president, T. G. Masaryk. Because of his beliefs the journalist was imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp from 1939 to 1945. With democracy coming under increasing strain in the post-war 1945–1948 period, he published the magazine "Dnešek" ("Today"), one of that era's few genuinely independent publications. Soon after the Communist takeover of February 1948 he fled certain persecution to Great Britain and later to the U.S., where he became involved in the plans to launch RFE. Peroutka worked there until his retirement in 1961, though for the next decade he wrote regular "talks" for the station as a freelance contributor. He died in New York on 20 April 1978.

Peroutka's colleague Miloslav Kohák paid him the following tribute: "The Czechoslovak group had the good fortune that among them was the acknowledged greatest Czechoslovak journalist of that era, Ferdinand Peroutka. No less fortunate was the fact that there was no doubt among the American decision makers that Peroutka should head the Czechoslovak broadcasting."



From left: Dr. Karel Steinbach and Ferdinand Peroutka in New York in the 1970s. (Source: Monument of Karel Čapek)

Here is an extract from Peroutka's speech at the launch of broadcasting on 1 May 1951: "One magazine wouldn't have meant much in a country where freedom reigned. But one free magazine, one radio station in a dictatorship – that's a revolution. Because such a regime bases itself and sustains itself on the fact the only the government can speak and nobody may reply, that anybody can be charged but nobody can defend himself."



Ferdinand Peroutka at his summer house in Rangely. (Source: Monument of Karel Čapek)

Ferdinand Peroutka's ID card at RFE. (Source: Monument of Karel Čapek)

Copy of the magazine "Přítomnost – The Present" from September 1938. Peroutka was the editor-in-chief. (Source: Monument of Karel Čapek)

Departure of Julius Firt, deputy director of the Czechoslovak section, to Munich, 1957. From left: Samuel Belluš, Julius Firt, Mr. Škaloud, Ferdinand Peroutka. (Source: Monument of Karel Čapek)

Peroutka's identity card when he emigrated to England in 1948. (Source: Monument of Karel Čapek)

IV.

The Czechoslovak Service of RFE: Rádio Svobodná Evropa

From the beginning of 1950, the service had teams in both the U.S. and Germany. The fact that around 20,000 refugees had left the country in the two years after the Communist takeover in Czechoslovakia contributed to a successful start.

The Czechoslovak editors, from left: Milan Schulz, Lída Rakušanová, Karel Moudrý, Karel Kryl. (Photo: Josef Rakušan)

Hundreds of people, often important figures from the worlds of culture and politics, passed through the Czechoslovak section in the over 40 years of its existence. In addition to Ferdinand Peroutka and the journalist Pavel Tigrid, in the early days they included the writers Egon Hostovský and Jan Čep and in the 1980s the singer Karel Kryl and the poet Ivan Diviš. Working at RFE became a mission for these people. At the same time, they often did not put down roots in their new home, due to the fact that they hoped for a speedy return to their homeland. Nevertheless employment at RFE spelled the loss of contact with their nearest and dearest in Czechoslovakia, while also raising the risk of reprisals from the authorities.

Ivo Faltis, Martin Štěpánek and Lenka Kravčíková in the RFE studio in Munich in the early 1990s. (Photo: Josef Rakušan)

Meeting of the Czechoslovak editors in the early 1990s. (Photo: Josef Rakušan)

The Czechoslovak service at RFE was unique among other services in one respect: it was the only one which combined broadcasts for people of two languages and two nationalities, Czechs and Slovaks. That combination was tested many times over the years, but it held until the disintegration of the joint state. In 1993, Czechs and Slovaks parted ways at RFE/RL, as the Czech service gradually curtailed its activities, whereas the Slovak service, first under the direction of Ivan Cikl, then Miroslav Neoveský and finally Daniel Bútora continued in its broadcasts up to the 31st of December 2003.

The path to liberty in Czechoslovakia was a long one. After a period of hope and exile activism in the 1950s, reform of the Communist regime became a realistic possibility in the 1960s. However, that hope was dashed in the decades that followed by „normalisation“, i.e. re-establishment of the old structures after crushing the Prague Spring and societal demoralisation. RFE overcame its internal strains to fulfil its role as an alternative media outlet and was indisputably a factor behind the changes that occurred at the end of 1989. High-quality reporting of events during that momentous year was a huge success.

Pictures taken secretly by Pavel Minařík, a security services agent: RFE in Munich, 1975. (Source: Security Services Archive, CZ)

The Velvet Revolution and RFE

The reawakening of civic society nearly 20 years after the suppression of the reforms of 1968's Prague Spring was one factor which helped RFE's Czechoslovak broadcasting grow sharply in significance. Thanks to the number of contributors among Czechoslovakia's dissident community and the letters and phone calls received in response to broadcasts, RFE in effect became a domestic station located in a neighbouring state. The cessation of jamming in December 1988 made RFE's programming far more accessible to Czechs and Slovaks in the momentous year that followed. RFE helped change the atmosphere in the country by, for instance, in the summer of 1989 reading a list of signatories of the "Several Sentences" petition, which called for an end to repression and was later signed by 40,000 people. By a happy coincidence, the director of RFE's Czechoslovak department, Pavel Pecháček, was able to fly to Prague on 21 November and got accreditation as a journalist. That very day he recorded on Wenceslas Square and, by telephone, sent sound to RFE from the first demonstration there, including speeches by representatives of the opposition Civic Forum.

Editor Lída Rakušanová cuts the barbed wire in Železná Ruda. (Photo: Josef Rakušan)

RFE's reports from the initial protests on Wenceslas Square were not only of symbolic significance – they were also very important in terms of the actual information they conveyed. As late as Wednesday 23 November, neither Czechoslovak Television nor Czechoslovak Radio staff could broadcast freely. The distribution of newspapers, in particular Svobodné slovo (Free Word) and Lidová demokracie (People's Democracy), was thwarted by the Communist Party and the StB secret police. Victory was far from assured: on Friday 24 November 1989, Pavel Pecháček was expelled from the country on the orders of the StB.

The Czechoslovak section in November 1989, from left: Petr Noskovič, Mr. Kusín, Karel Moudrý, Ivan Cikl, Petr Brod and Lída Rakušanová. (Photo: Josef Rakušan)

Pavel Pecháček

Pavel Pecháček was born on 2 July, 1940, briefly after his father, Jaroslav Pecháček had been arrested, due to his membership in the democratic party “strana lidová”. After the communist takeover in March 1948 Jaroslav and his wife were compelled to emigrate from Czechoslovakia to West Germany. Pavel and his two younger brothers and sisters grew up alone in Czechoslovakia. In January 1961 Pavel Pecháček enrolled at the DAMU (faculty of theatre) in Prague in the subjects direction and dramaturgy. There he became acquainted with Václav Havel - the later president of the Czech Republic - who is still today a good friend of his.

Pavel Pecháček. (Photo: Josef Rakušan)

While he was studying Pavel Pecháček got a position as news editor at the Czechoslovakian broadcasting service in January 1965. In the same year the state security service interrogated Pavel Pecháček about his father, who was working at Radio Free Europe (RFE) in Munich at that time. By the end of the 1960s the state security however had little interest in Pavel Pecháček - this changed immediately after his emigration in September 1968. In August 1968 after the Sovjet invasion life in Czechoslovakia had become without prospects for Pavel Pecháček: Under the plea of going on vacation to Yugoslavia he succeeded in leaving Czechoslovakia. But actually, he went together with his family to Austria. Regarding his experience in broadcasting and due to his profession Pavel Pecháček was employed as an editor at RFE in Munich by the end of 1968. On his radio programme he used the pseudonym “Petr Horák“.

Pavel Pecháček and Lída Rakušanová. (Photo: Josef Rakušan)

Pavel Pecháček talking to the American ambassador in Prague John Shattuck (1998-2000). (Source: private archive of Pavel Pecháček)

In April 1974 Pavel Pecháček had to leave RFE because of cutbacks on personnel. He applied successfully for an engagement at the Czechoslovakian desk of the broadcast station Voice of America (VOA). He moved together with his family to the United States, where he obtained American citizenship in November 1974. RFE and VOA were among the most popular radio stations in Czechoslovakia. In spring 1985 Pavel Pecháček was appointed director of the Czechoslovakian desk of VOA. He contributed to enhance the standard of the programme as well as the number of listeners. In 1989 Pavel Pecháček returned to Germany, where he became director of the Czechoslovak department of RFE. During the Velvet Revolution in November 1989 Pavel Pecháček travelled to Prague, where he was the only reporter fully covering the demonstrations on Wenceslas Square.

From February 1994 to October 2001 Pavel Pecháček headed RFE as president. In October 2001 he became chief of the Czechoslovakian department. Since 2008 Pavel Pecháček functions as counsellor of the president of RFE.

Pavel Pecháček with the Slovak co-director of the Czechoslovak section Ivan Cikl in the early 1990s. (Source: private archive of Pavel Pecháček)

The opening of RFE in Prague, 1990. The Czechoslovak president Václav Havel and US ambassador Shirley Temple Black are in the background. (Source: private archive of Pavel Pecháček)

From left: the sociologist Jiřina Šiklová, Pavel Pecháček and the journalist and politician Jan Ruml. (Source: private archive Pavel Pecháček)

Pavel Pecháček and Karel Moudrý, editor at RFE in the 1980s and 1990s in Munich and Prague. (Source: private archive of Pavel Pecháček)

Pavel Pecháček and Milan Schulz, RFE Munich, end of the 1980s. (Photo: Josef Rakušan)

V.

The Polish Service: Radio Wolna Europa

Regular Polish broadcasting was launched in Munich on 3 May 1952, with trial broadcasts from New York City taking place since August 1950. The Polish service was largely made up of post-war exiles who had not wished to live in a Communist-controlled Poland. A number of new co-workers came on board after September 1981; the so-called “Solidarność Emigrés“.

The priest Tadeusz Kirschke presents a programme, 1960s.
(Source: archive of the Polish RFE section)

RFE editor Jan Tyszkiewicz interviews Dutch singer Ronnie Tober.
(Source: archive of the Polish RFE section)

The aim of the broadcasts was long-term support of the Polish nation’s historical orientation towards the West. Credible reports about where Western countries stood on important issues were to be provided to counter-weigh the distorted information engendered by the regime’s propaganda. However, broadcasting was not meant to breed false hopes, giving priority to the objectivity of information. This principle was seen for instance in the fact that Polish exiles agreed to informative flyers into Poland when RFE carried out its leafleting operations.

The aims of the Polish service included also the creation of a platform for independent groups, such as trade unions and industry groups, to escape the monopoly of power of the ruling communist Polish United Workers‘ Party (PUWP). The rectitude of that approach was fully confirmed following the establishment of the Solidarność union.

Given the strong position of the Catholic Church in Poland, significant space was given to religious broadcasting. Though not focused politically, it had indirect political influence since the church was one of the few independent authorities in Poland.

RFE editors Zygmunt Jabłoński and Roman Sikorski.
(Source: archive of the Polish RFE section)

Editor Witold Srzednicki reading international newspapers, 1968.
(Source: archive of the Polish RFE section)

Poland’s Communist regime closely monitored RFE broadcasts, not only as a threat to internal stability, but also as a signal of American interests. Rather than considering its own weaknesses, the government viewed expressions of civic unrest as evidence of foreign influence, specifically of the Voice of Free Poland – Radio Free Europe. It therefore reacted angrily to the broadcasts and fought against them by means of propaganda, using both editorials and caricatures.

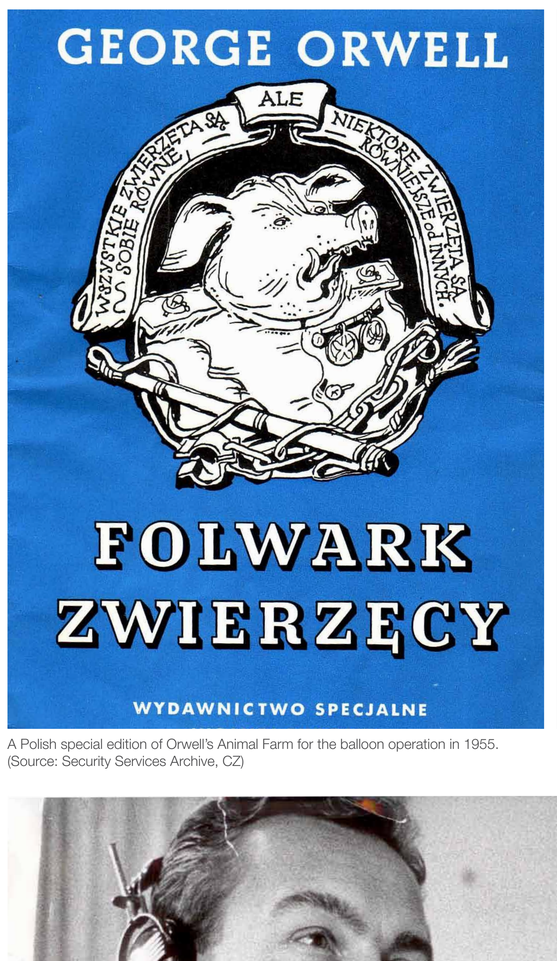
Special edition about Solidarność by the Polish section.
(Source: archive of the Polish RFE section)

Meeting of Solidarność members, 1981. (Source: archive of the Polish RFE section)

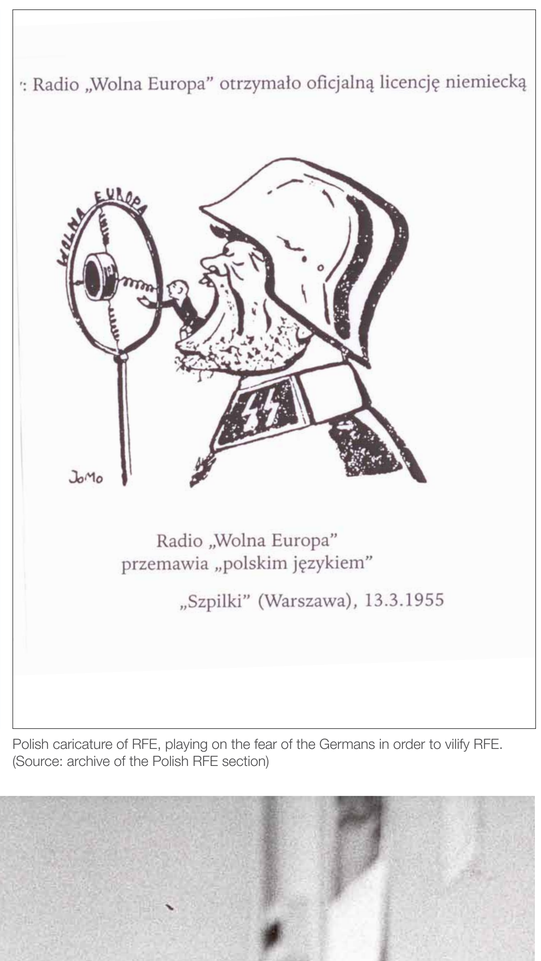
During a period of unrest and the declaration of a state of emergency in Poland in 1981, the state’s leaders accused RFE of fomenting the situation. In actual fact, RFE’s Polish service merely reported on events in the country and made statements by Solidarność public.

RFE’s Polish broadcasts came to an end on 30 June 1994.

The first director of the Polish section Jan Nowak-Jeziorański. (Source: archive of the Polish RFE section)



A Polish special edition of Orwell’s Animal Farm for the balloon operation in 1955.
(Source: Security Services Archive, CZ)



Polish caricature of RFE, playing on the fear of the Germans in order to vilify RFE.
(Source: archive of the Polish RFE section)

RFE editor Henryk Rospendowski, Polish youth programme. (Source: archive of the Polish RFE section)

V.b

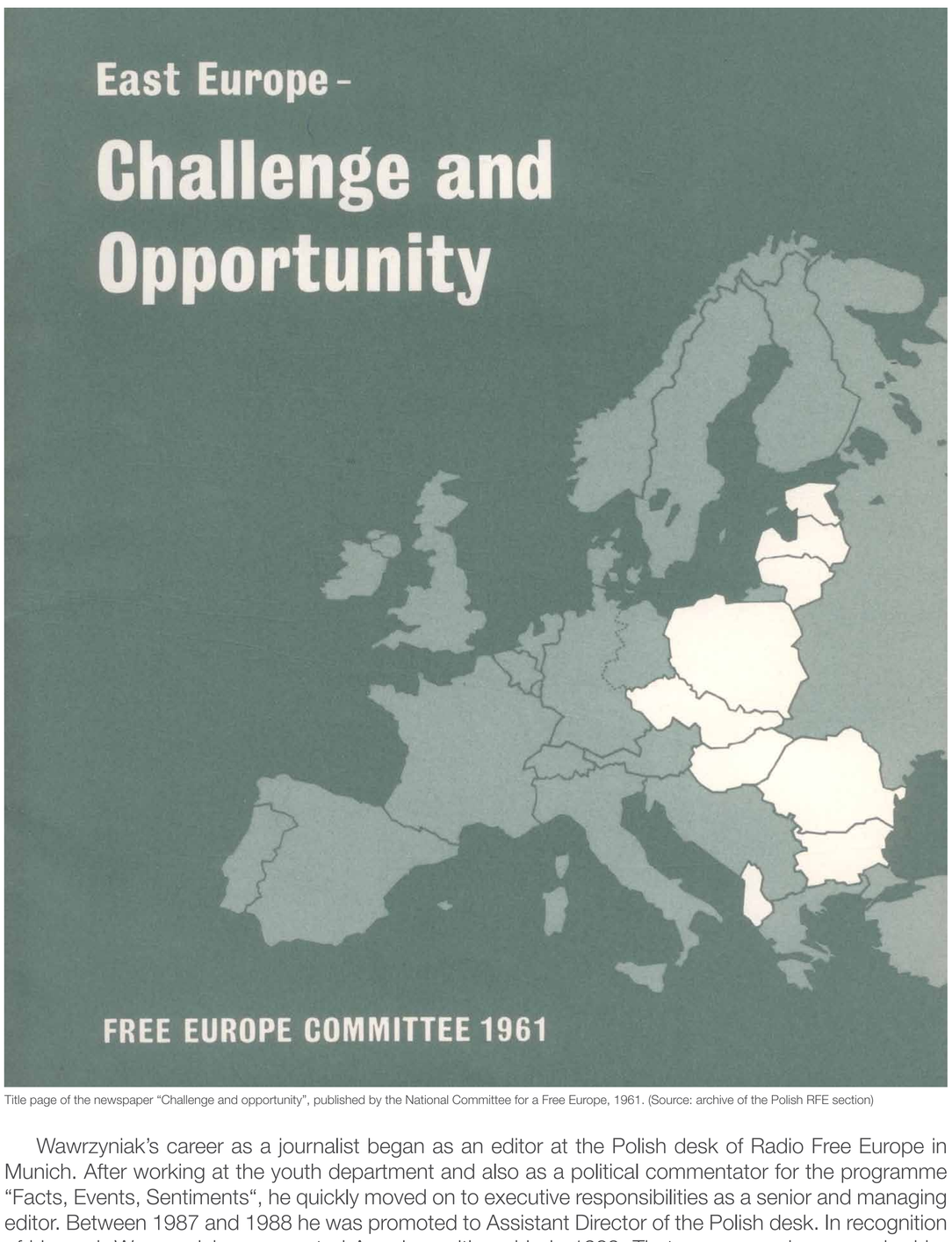
Wiesław Wawrzyniak

Wiesław Wawrzyniak was born on 7 March, 1950 in the Polish spa city of Sopot. After graduating from school in Danzig in 1968, he moved to Warsaw and began studying sociology. Shortly before his graduation he decided to spend one semester in West Berlin. At the time it was his first stay in Germany, where he continued his study of sociology at the Free University of Berlin. Two years after his arrival in West Berlin, the Federal Republic of Germany officially recognized his status as a refugee and granted him political asylum.

Wiesław Wawrzyniak in his RFE office at work, mid 1980s.
(Source: private archive of Wiesław Wawrzyniak)

Interview with Lech Wałęsa in his garden in Gdansk, 1990.
(Source: private archive of Wiesław Wawrzyniak)

Wiesław Wawrzyniak left Europe in 1977 to study Soviet and East European studies at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada. There he completed his degree under the direction of political scientist Professor Teresa Rakowska-Harmstone, who also helped him to make contact with the Polish desk of Radio Free Europe (RFE).



Title page of the newspaper “Challenge and opportunity”, published by the National Committee for a Free Europe, 1961. (Source: archive of the Polish RFE section)

Wawrzyniak’s career as a journalist began as an editor at the Polish desk of Radio Free Europe in Munich. After working at the youth department and also as a political commentator for the programme “Facts, Events, Sentiments“, he quickly moved on to executive responsibilities as a senior and managing editor. Between 1987 and 1988 he was promoted to Assistant Director of the Polish desk. In recognition of his work Wawrzyniak was granted American citizenship in 1989. That same year, he was asked by RFE to travel to Warsaw and recruit Polish journalists for a planned Polish desk there. He worked intermittently at the new Warsaw office from 1991 to 1996. In 1997 he returned to Munich and obtained a diploma as a public relations consultant. However, this foray into a different professional field remained an exception. Wawrzyniak’s dedication to journalism never ceased. From 1998 to 2006 he worked as a freelance German correspondent for the Polish office of the BBC. He spent the following three years as an active correspondent and commentator for the Polish radio Polskie Radio S.A., in Warsaw. Today Wiesław Wawrzyniak is the European correspondent for Polskie Radio S.A. in Chicago and New York. After he left RFE, Berlin has remained his residence and place of work.

Józef Światło: “Za kulisami bezpieki a partii“

(“A Look Behind the Scenes of the Security Services and the Party”)
In 1953, Lieutenant Colonel Józef Światło, a high-ranking officer in the Polish state security apparatus, managed to defect to the West. Światło’s unit at the Ministry of Public Security watched over the members of the Polish United Workers’ Party, meaning he was a leading expert on the Achilles’ heels of both the party and the security services. He himself had taken part in the arrests of Władysław Gomułka in August 1951 and Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński in September 1953.

Józef Światło at work. (RFE/RL Inc. Archives)

The programme „Za kulisami bezpieki a partii“ - “A Look Behind the Scenes of the Security Services and the Party” - was first broadcast on RFE in October 1954 and repeated daily until January 1955. In it, Światło provided detailed information about the secret police’s illegal and terrorist methods, its way of life, the weaknesses of the party’s elite, and their dependence on Moscow.

A leaflet of the same name was prepared to coincide with the broadcasts, with 800,000 copies being distributed in Poland in 1955 by means of balloons.

Józef Światło’s programmes became an established part of the broadcasts of RFE’s Polish service; this was evidently aided by the fact that the Polish authorities had proved unable to come up with an effective method of blocking the station’s broadcasts.

Information gathered within the governing apparatus was one of RFE’s most effective instruments. It revealed both fault-lines and a picture of how the regime really worked, not only to opponents but also to hitherto loyal supporters.

There is no question that Światło’s appearances on RFE impacted on morale in the security service and on the public’s relationship to it. The unveiling of crimes and misdemeanours demoralised party members and secret police officers, showing them that evidence of their wrongdoing would be left if they fell from power. At a practical level, it also led to personnel and organisational changes.

Józef Światło represented a unique source for the Polish department. Other services also showed the truth behind the façade, though they found this harder to do and their approach mainly consisted of analysing information.

“Television lies”: someone has written this on the street as a reaction to the manipulation of official media, Poland 1980s. (Source: archive of the Polish RFE section)

VI.

The Hungarian Service: Szabad Európa Rádió

Various types of people left Hungary in the post-war emigration. Fascists and members of the anti-Semitic Arrow Cross Party departed when the Horthy regime fell in 1944, while many democrats went into exile when the Communists seized power.

Pilot broadcasts of the Voice of Free Hungary were launched in Munich on 4 August 1950. However, the station really acquired significance during the anti-Communist uprising of autumn 1956, when Hungarians demonstrated their rejection of the Communist government and Soviet domination. The uprising and its suppression were a key event of the 1950s, not only for the Hungarian nation and other Eastern Bloc states, but also for RFE's continued work.

In the following years, János Kádár's new leadership took steps towards liberalisation of the economy, which was welcomed by RFE. However, the station did not shy away from striking a critical note when necessary. It also devoted much attention to the sensitive situation surrounding the Hungarian minority in Romania's Transylvania region.

Reading the news, Hungarian section of RFE. (Source: Open Society Archives, HU)

The approach Hungary took towards RFE differed from that of other Eastern Bloc states. There were no attacks, as in the case of Bulgaria and Romania, and no celebrated returns of secret service agents from RFE, as witnessed in Poland and Czechoslovakia. In 1964, Hungary ceased jamming RFE broadcasts in Hungarian, though it continued to block transmissions aimed at Czechoslovakia and the U.S.S.R.

In the mid 1970s, representatives of the Hungarian regime held secret talks with Joseph Szabados, the director of RFE's Hungarian service. The station's broadcasts showed considerable understanding for Hungary's efforts to forge its own socialist path. In the 1980s, György Varga, a reporter with the station's Czechoslovak service, was allowed to operate more or less without restrictions in Hungary.

For these reasons, RFE's Hungarian broadcasts were the first to cease, going off the air in 1990.

The well-known Hungarian presenter Marie Horvath. (Source: Open Society Archives, HU)

The Revolution of 1956 in Hungary

RFE's Hungarian service faced a charges that it had incited the 1956 uprising. The truth is that the Hungarian service demonstrably broadcast programmes that were, according to the station's statutes, objectionable or even unacceptable. It broadcast emotional calls on Hungarian soldiers not to fight against the rebels: "Whoever raises his weapon against an insurgent is a murderer," it said on 24 October 1956. During a broadcast on 27 October "Colonel Bell", real name Julián Borsányi, said there were sufficient weapons and ammunition in the army's stores and told listeners how to get their hands on them. He also called for the destruction of the communications, such as phone lines, by which the Soviets organised supplies. On 28 and 30 October the same editor described guerrilla fighting methods and said inspiration could be taken from Yugoslav partisans. RFE's Hungarian broadcasters also quoted the Western press in such a way as to create the impression that the U.N. would become involved and that the West was preparing for war.

Editorial meeting of the Hungarian section. (Source: Open Society Archives, HU)

However, listeners in Hungary were also looking for glimmers of hope in the foreign broadcasts and gave words on the airwaves a significance they could not have had in actuality.

After an investigation into RFE's work during the Hungarian crisis the station's European director, Richard Cordon, was forced to step down, as were his political advisor, William E. Griffith, the director of the Hungarian service, Andor Gellért, and 13 other members of the department. The crisis and its tragic conclusion led to justified questions within the national services at RFE. What approach should they take to compatriots at home? How could they in good faith cause them no harm? Is political liberation realistic? After the Hungarian revolt the atmosphere at the station changed markedly.

SZABAD MAGYARORSZÁG

A NEMZETI ELLENÁLLÁSI MOZGALOM LAPJA

12. szám

GENFI SZELLEM

„Genfi szellem." Ez a varázsszó járja be a kommunista sajtót hosszú idő óta mindennap. A genfi szellem minden problémát megoldani hivatott. Ennek jegyében a Szovjetunió hajlandó lépésekre olyan kérdésekben, amelyeknek megoldása már régen kötelessége lett volna. Hazaengedi a jogtalanul visszatartott német hadifoglyok egy részét, visszaadja a támadó háborúval megszerzett porkalai támaszpontot, alkalmazza az elemi udvariasság szabályait a Moszkvában állomásozó diplomatákkal, még a kínaiakat is ráveszi, hogy elbocsássanak néhány törvénytelenül elítélt amerikai pilótát és ígéretet tesz arra, hogy csökkenteni fogják a még ma is háborús készültségben lévő szovjet hadsereg létszámát. Ugyanekkor fegyvereket szállít Egyiptomnak, hogy a Közel-Keleten háborút robbantson ki. Az ENSZ-ben megtámadja Franciaországot, hogy így, meg más módszerekkel, egymás ellen fordítsa a nemzeteket.

Részletkérdésekben engedmény, a valóságban változatlan, könyörtelen politika, ez a szovjet mosolyoffenzíva mai állása. Miután azonban mutatós lépésekre is szükség van, valószínű, hogy a Szovjetunió a közeljövőben javaslatokat tesz majd „a népek közötti szabad kapcsolatok fejlesztésének megkönnyítésére." Kultúrcserét, tudósok, táncosok, énekesek kölcsönös látogatását ajánlja, meghív turista csoportokat és újságírókat, esetleg még néhány újságot is beenged a Szovjetunióba.

A lényeget alig érintő engedmények ellenében azonnali ellenszolgáltatást követel. Nem is gondol a valódi sajtó- és gondolatszabadság megvalósítására, mégis kéri, hogy Nyugat ne tájékoztassa többé a közép- és kelet-európai népeket a világpolitikáról, a szabad országok fejlődéséről, a szovjet igazi céljairól. Így például Molotov, Adenauer moszkvai látogatása alkalmával azt kívánta, hogy állítsák le a léggömbakciót.

Molotovnak többek között a Manchester Guardian című liberális angol napilap szeptember 30-i vezér-

(Folytatás a második oldalon.)

EGY DIKTÁTOR BUKÁSA

Mindenkitől elhagyatva menekült el Argentínából Juan Domingo Peron. Távozásakor Buenos Aires népe százezerszámra özönlötte el az utcákat. Táncoltak, énekeltek, sokaknak könnyes volt a szeme az örömtől: elmúlott a zsarnokság réme. A néhány napig tartó ünnepség után összesöpörték Peron leszaggatott faliképeit és az emberek a diktatúrának még az emlékét is igyekeztek elfelejteni.

Így tűnt el a diktátor, aki feleségét szentté akarta avattatni és önmagáról nevezte el az ország legmagasabb hegycsúcsát, legszebbik palotáját, leghosszabb hídját és legnagyobb színházát.

Valaha úgy jutott uralomra, mint a legtöbb diktátor. Korrupt és tehetetlen kormány helyét vette át tizenegy évvel ezelőtt. Hirdette, hogy az országnak erős kézre van szüksége, szociális reformokat ígért és ezzel maga mögé sorakoztatta „az ing nélkül járó" munkásokat, a „descamisados" szegény, rosszul fizetett tömegeit.

A diktátor tervgazdálkodásba kezdett, de a tervszerűség jegyében fejetlen zűrzavarba taszította az ország gazdasági életét. Iparosítani akart mindenáron és ezért tönkretette a valaha virágzó mezőgazdaságot. A hús- és gabonatermő Argentínában jegyre árusították a húst, mert Peron állama kötelezte a termelőket, hogy terményeiket az állami központoknak adják el olcsó áron. A beszolgáltatásból származó óriási hasznot a túlzott iparosítás, a mértéktelenül terjeszkedő bürokrácia és rendőrség, valamint pompázatos külsejű szociális létesítmények építésére fordították. A peronista párt a munkáscsaládoknak üdülőket, csecsemő-otthonokat és lakásokat épített, de a szakszervezeteket megfosztotta önállóságuktól. Így a bérek és árak viszonyának ellenőrzése kicsúszott a szervezett munkásság kezéből. A munkások alacsony bérek és magas árak formájában tízszeresen fizették vissza az államnak a szociális kedvezményeket.

A rossz gazdálkodás, a felelőtlenség inflációhoz vezetett. Az elégedetlenség enyhítésére Peron — a diktátorok szokott módszerével — a bajokért az Egyházat, egyes társadalmi osztályokat és a „Wall Street bankárjait" tette felelőssé.

(Folytatás a második oldalon.)

A tömeg ledönti és megtapossa Peron szobrát.

Extracts from RFE flyers for Hungary. (Source: Open Society Archives, HU)

VI.b

László László

László László was born near Budapest in 1929. He studied law in Budapest and in Innsbruck after having escaped from communist Hungary. In Austria he took an active part in the work of the Hungarian Refugee Society and soon became well-known within the Hungarian community in Austria.

As a result of this activity RFE also became aware of László László's work, and in August 1951 they offered him a job. László László accepted without hesitation and began working as an editor at RFE in Innsbruck. At that time the Hungarian desk was just being set up. Small editorial teams, six people altogether, monitored radio news relevant to Hungary and put together radio programs based on it. László László thus played an integral role in the early development of the Hungarian desk of RFE.

Conclusion of a pay agreement in the 1970s; László László is fifth from the right. (Source: private archive of László László)

In October 1951 the Hungarian desk was transferred to Munich, and L. László moved to the Bavarian capital. Within only a year he made a successful career leap and became director of the constantly expanding Hungarian news desk.

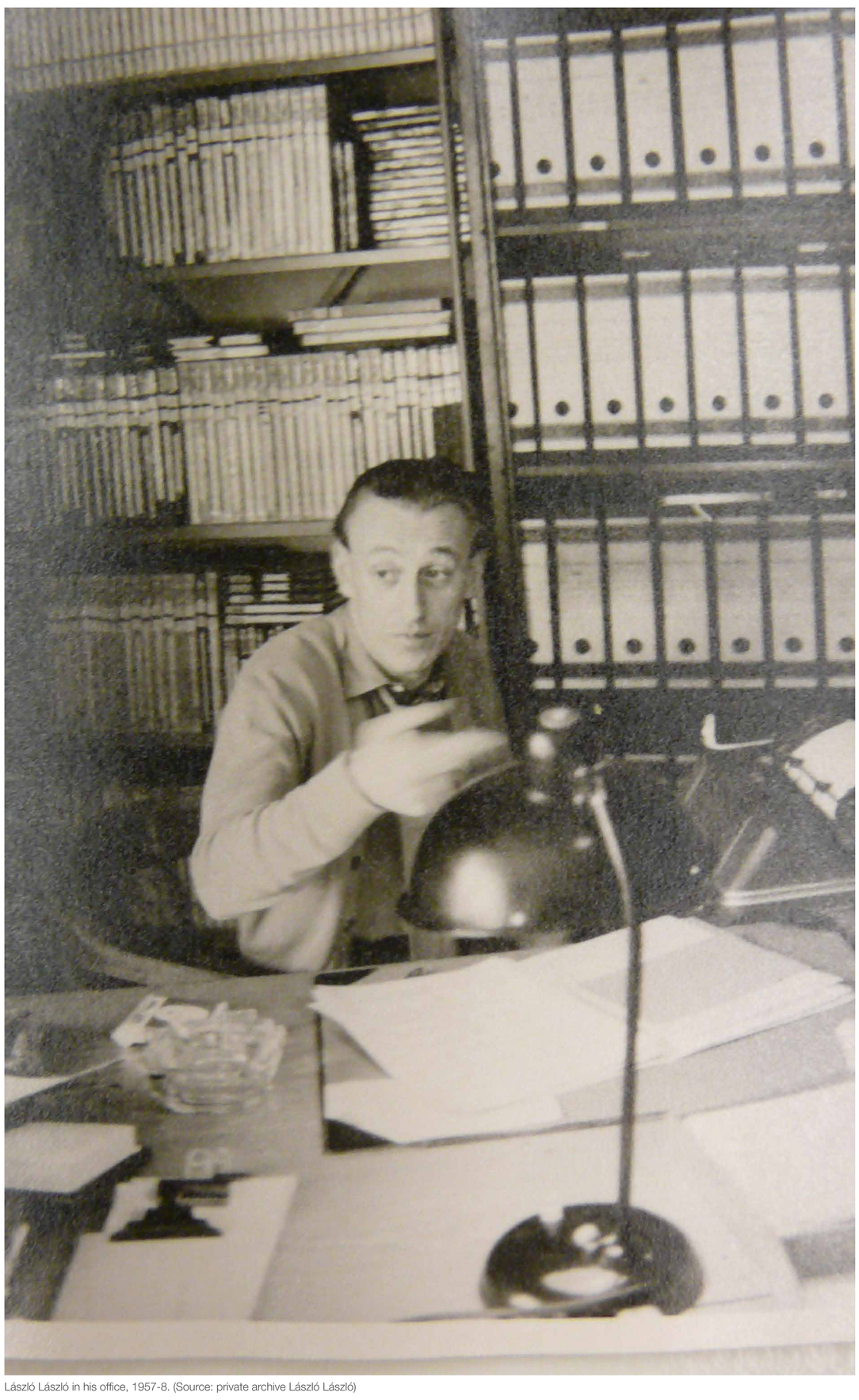
László László with his colleagues in June 1954. (Source: private archive of László László)

László László talks to his deputy, Bela Bartos, in 1957. (Source: private archive of László László)

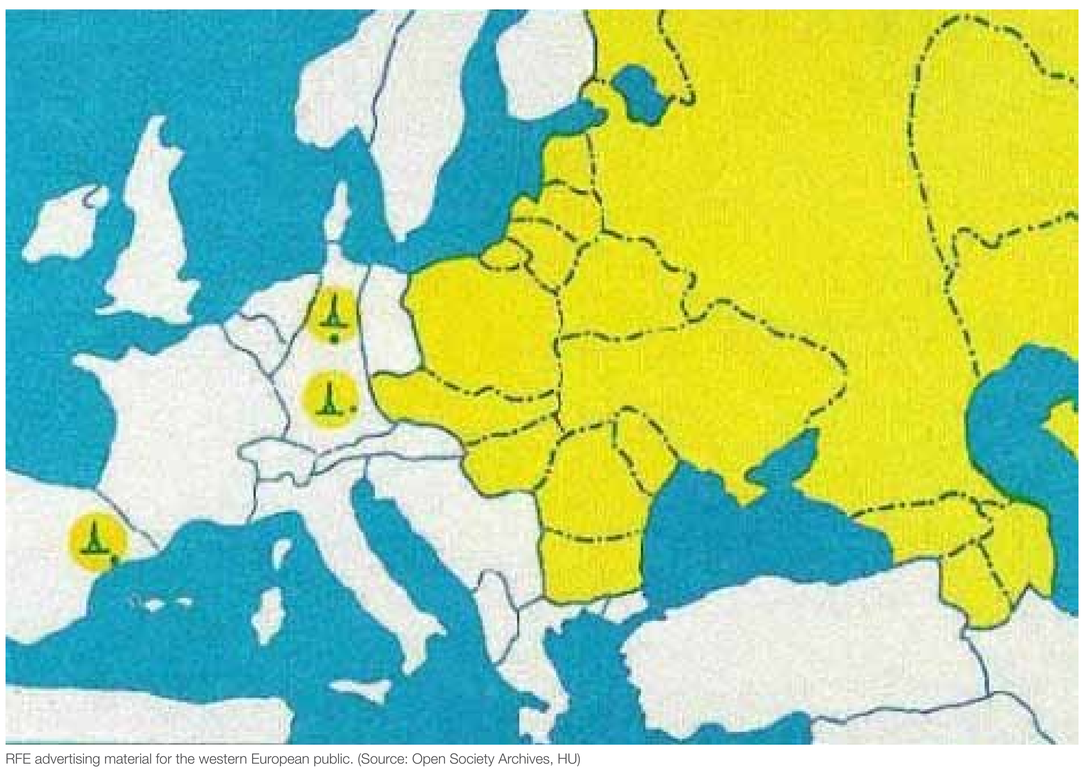
Despite all the threats from the Soviet regime Lászlo László stayed true to his principles and remained loyal to RFE. After the Soviet authorities learned that he was working for RFE, his parents were prevented from leaving Hungary for many years. And, when they were finally allowed to go abroad, his father was asked to persuade him to stop working for RFE. L. László however did not succumb to this pressure.

L. László worked for RFE for forty years. In 1991, after the Communist system and the Soviet Union had collapsed, he retired, convinced that his work had finally been brought to a close.

László László lives with his wife in Munich. They have two children and five grandchildren.



László László in his office, 1957-8. (Source: private archive László László)



RFE advertising material for the western European public. (Source: Open Society Archives, HU)

VII.

The Romanian Service: Radio Europa Liberă

The accession of Nicolae Ceaușescu to the highest office in Romania in 1965 also represented a landmark for RFE. The attempts by Ceaușescu at an autonomous foreign policy were mirrored, to a certain extent, in the structure of RFE Romanian service's programming. The West regarded Ceaușescu with interest, as he had proved capable of holding Moscow at arm's length. For instance, Romania was the only Warsaw Pact state not having to take part in the August 1968 occupation of Czechoslovakia.

In the studio of the Romanian section in the 1970s. (Source: private archive of Mircea Carp)

After the internal political situation in Romania deteriorated in 1971, the station's political commentaries mainly reflected on the dictatorial rule, clientelism, and the growing cult of personality of Ceaușescu and his wife. The tone was sarcastic, biting and personal. The director of the Romanian service Noël Bernard (from 1953 on and off until 1981), an excellent journalist, injected his personal perspective into RFE's broadcasts. The station's Romanian service is believed to have had the highest listener numbers. This was at least partly due to the fact that Romania, in an effort to ingratiate itself with the West, did not jam broadcasts after 1964. At the same time, censorship in Romania was very strict, helping RFE's capable Romanian service to find an audience at home.

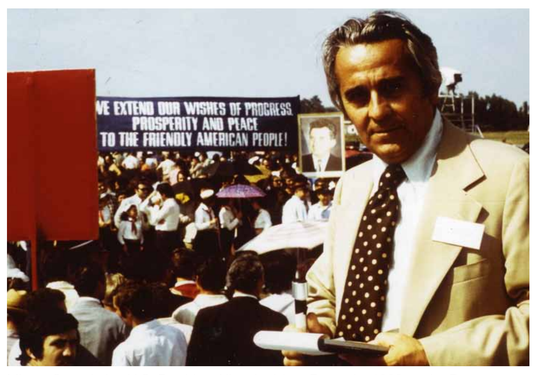
In 2004, the Romanian service transformed itself into a station aimed at Moldova: Radio Europa Libera. It broadcasts in Romanian from Prague to this day and is the longest-serving RFE/RL service!

Mircea Carp

Mircea Carp was born in 1923 in Gherla, Romania. During the Second World War he fought in the Romanian Army. In 1946, however, he was discharged from the army and was arrested one year later. In 1948 he fled to Austria where he began working for the American occupying forces. In 1951 Mircea Carp emigrated to the United States. There he started working for the US foreign broadcasting station Voice of America. He accompanied several politicians during their official state visits in Romania.

This was not without risk as there was still an arrest warrant against him in Romania. However, since he had in the meantime acquired an American passport and was associated with high-ranking American politicians such as President Nixon, he was safe from being arrested a second time.

Mircea Carp, the Romanian King Mihai and the director of the Romanian section Nicolae Stroescu in Carp's office. (Source: private archive of Mircea Carp)



Mircea Carp during U.S. President Nixon's visit to Romania, 1969, at the Baneasa airport in Bucharest. (Source: private archive of Mircea Carp)

In 1978 Mircea Carp became a journalist at the Romanian Service of Radio Free Europe in Munich. There he was appointed associate director and had his own political programme. Mircea Carp was actually supposed to have retired before the regime change in Bucharest in 1989, but the unforeseen deaths of several directors of RFE's Romanian Service at the end of the 1980s caused him to stay on at RFE. As of today it is still unclear whether these directors had been the targets of assassination plots. It is nonetheless assumed that they had suffered radiation poisoning. Mircea Carp worked as associate director of RFE's Romanian Service in Munich until its move to Prague in 1995.

Mircea Carp is the author of a book about Voice of America in Romania (Vocea Americii în România (1969-1978)), which was published in 1997. Today he lives with his wife in Munich and still pays regular visits to Romania.

"Ceaușescu's" Attack on RFE in Munich

Since the 1970s, the Romanian service had become the target of a series of very serious attacks. The initiator, and often the perpetrator, was likely Romania's Departamentul Securității, the secret service commonly known as the Securitate. On 4 March 1975 an unknown assailant stabbed popular music presenter Cornel Chiriac to death. In June 1981, commentator Emil Georgescu was assaulted and stabbed following a series of threat and blackmailing; he died soon afterwards.

RFE offices destroyed in the attack in 1981. (Source: Open Society Archives, HU)

In 1981, department head Noël Bernard succumbed to cancer, a disease that also killed his successor, historian Vlad Georgescu, in 1988. There are numerous indications that the Securitate used radioactive materials to attack the opponents of the Romanian regime.

RFE offices destroyed in the attack in 1981. (Source: Open Society Archives, HU)

The most serious single incident was a bomb attack which took place on at 9. 47 P.M. on Saturday 21 February 1981, when plastic explosives went off by an outer wall of the RFE building at Munich's English Garden. The explosion was devastating, causing marked damage to part of the building. At that fateful moment, three Czechoslovak service employees were in a nearby office; all three were injured, secretary Marie Puldová the most seriously.

A decade later, when archives were opened following the fall of the Iron Curtain, evidence emerged that the attack had been carried out by Johannes Weinrich, a member of the left-wing terrorist group of Ilich Ramírez Sánchez, better known as Carlos the Jackal. It had been probably ordered by the Securitate. Apparently the fact the bombing reached the offices of the Czechoslovak service was due to a mistake. In 2000, Weinrich was sentenced to life in prison for another bomb attack by a German court. "Carlos", meanwhile, is serving life in a French jail.

The Munich Abendzeitung newspaper reports on the bomb attack on the RFE building, 23 of February 1981. (Source: archive of the Polish RFE section)

VIII.

The Bulgarian Service: Radio Svobodna Evropa

The number of post-war Bulgarian exiles in the USA was negligible, reaching only around 2,000 by 1949. This made it difficult to find suitable employees for the launch of RFE's broadcasting in Bulgarian. Nevertheless, test broadcasts began on 11 August 1950. Regular broadcasting was launched on 1 September 1951.

Letters to the Bulgarian RFE editors from listeners in Bulgaria. (Source: private archive of Jenny Keiser)

Their country's geographical location limited Bulgarians' direct contact with Western ideology and values. For this reason, RFE focused on giving them a sense of belonging to the West. This principally involved providing information about Western European intellectual and cultural developments, to which, due to media censorship, Bulgarian listeners had no access. Programmes also highlighted Western European materials, opinions and commentaries that were related to Bulgaria.

The Bulgarian Communist regime was regarded as the most repressive in Europe. That made it important for the Bulgarian service's editors to follow such events in other Eastern Bloc states which they showed evidence of a loosening of party control, de-Stalinisation, diffusion of political power, or diversion from the Stalinist model of agriculture. RFE believed that the example of neighbouring Yugoslavia could be important to Bulgaria. Though built on the Communist ideology, Yugoslavia was independent, making it for Bulgarians a possible source of inspiration and a counter-weight to Soviet Union.

The Bulgarian RFE editor Jenny Keiser at work. (Source: private archive of Jenny Keiser)

When interest in RFE began to rise, the security services in turn started paying more attention. "The Bulgarian State Security (DS) issued two bulletins concerning RFE every day. The first was marked 'confidential' and 200 copies were printed. The second was marked 'highly confidential' and was only for the circle around party and state leader Todor Zhivkov," recalled Dimiter Inkiow, a novelist and RFE commentator. RFE became one of the most important Western radio stations in Bulgaria in 1988 when a direct telephone line to Munich started to operate. In addition, jamming of the broadcasts was discontinued at the end of 1988.

RFE's Bulgarian broadcasts came to an end on 31 December 2003.

RFE/RL and the Chernobyl Disaster

One of the reactors at the Chernobyl Soviet nuclear power station overheated and then exploded on 26 April 1986. It was one of the worst disasters in the history of nuclear power and unleashed a radioactive cloud that crossed Europe all the way to Scandinavia.

For propaganda reasons, the disaster and its negative affect on the region went unreported in the Eastern Bloc. Two days after it occurred, the Soviet media had still not mentioned the explosion, an approach echoed in the satellite states.

At the same time, information about the dangerous nuclear radiation was of fundamental importance to the lives of millions of Europeans. Media silence and failure to take adequate measures were unforgivable. As soon as Western monitoring facilities detected radiation, RFE, Radio Liberty and other foreign radio stations began providing information on Chernobyl and what kind of protective measures could be taken. Even after the U.S.S.R. started reporting on the disaster, the Western media covered it in far greater detail.

Bulgaria's government was the last in the Eastern Bloc to inform its citizens about Chernobyl. The country's authorities were totally unprepared for the situation, lacking both radiation measuring devices and adequate crisis planning.

Twelve months later RFE's Bulgarian service was still receiving a stream of calls from Bulgaria looking for information and health advice.

It was not until one year had passed that the authorities admitted that Bulgaria had been partially exposed to nuclear fallout and that three dangerous elements had been detected: radioactive iodine, caesium and strontium. Apparently levels had not exceeded danger limits. In reality, Bulgaria had been one of the worst affected countries and two officials responsible for holding back information on the disaster were later imprisoned.

Ljuben Mutafoff

Ljuben Mutafoff was born in Bulgaria in 1933. At the age of ten he moved together with his parents to Bavaria where he also attended high school. In 1953 – at the age of twenty – he began his career at Radio Free Europe. There his language skills proved particularly useful – apart from his mother tongue Bulgarian he spoke German, English and French fluently. Thanks to his knowledge of the Cyrillic alphabet as it is used in Bulgaria he became a secretary at RFE's Bulgarian Service. In the 1950s the Bulgarian Service broadcast only five minutes of news daily. Ljuben Mutafoff translated the news into English so that it could be monitored by RFE's U.S. headquarters. Later he also participated in the production of RFE programmes. In the Bulgarian Service's music department, where he concentrated on classical and jazz music, he was able to combine his hobby with his job. He also worked in the sports department, where he was able to report from the Winter Olympic Games in Innsbruck in 1976. This was unusual because Radio Free Europe employees were not accredited as Olympic journalists. However, an Austrian station provided him and his colleagues with a studio. In the end they were able to broadcast the results from Austria, though not directly from the Games themselves. Ljuben Mutafoff is also very passionate about sports in his private life. In his youth he played handball for 20 years, among others things as a member of the German national team. While working for Radio Free Europe he founded his own sports club which participated in numerous matches against other journalists' teams.

Ljuben Mutafoff in the music section. (Source: private archive of Ljuben Mutafoff)

All in all, Ljuben Mutafoff worked at Radio Free Europe in Munich for 40 years, from 1953 to 1993. The most important part of his job was in RFE's news department, where he even refused a promotion to a higher-level administrative position. He had a knack for telling a hoax from a true story and was good at picking out the most important news items to present to an audience.

Ljuben Mutafoff still lives in Munich together with his wife. Eight years ago he visited Bulgaria for the first time since his childhood together with his friend, German Journalist Dieter Kronzucker.

Group photo of the Bulgarian editors, taken by Ljuben Mutafoff. (Source: private archive of Ljuben Mutafoff)

IX.

Radio Liberty

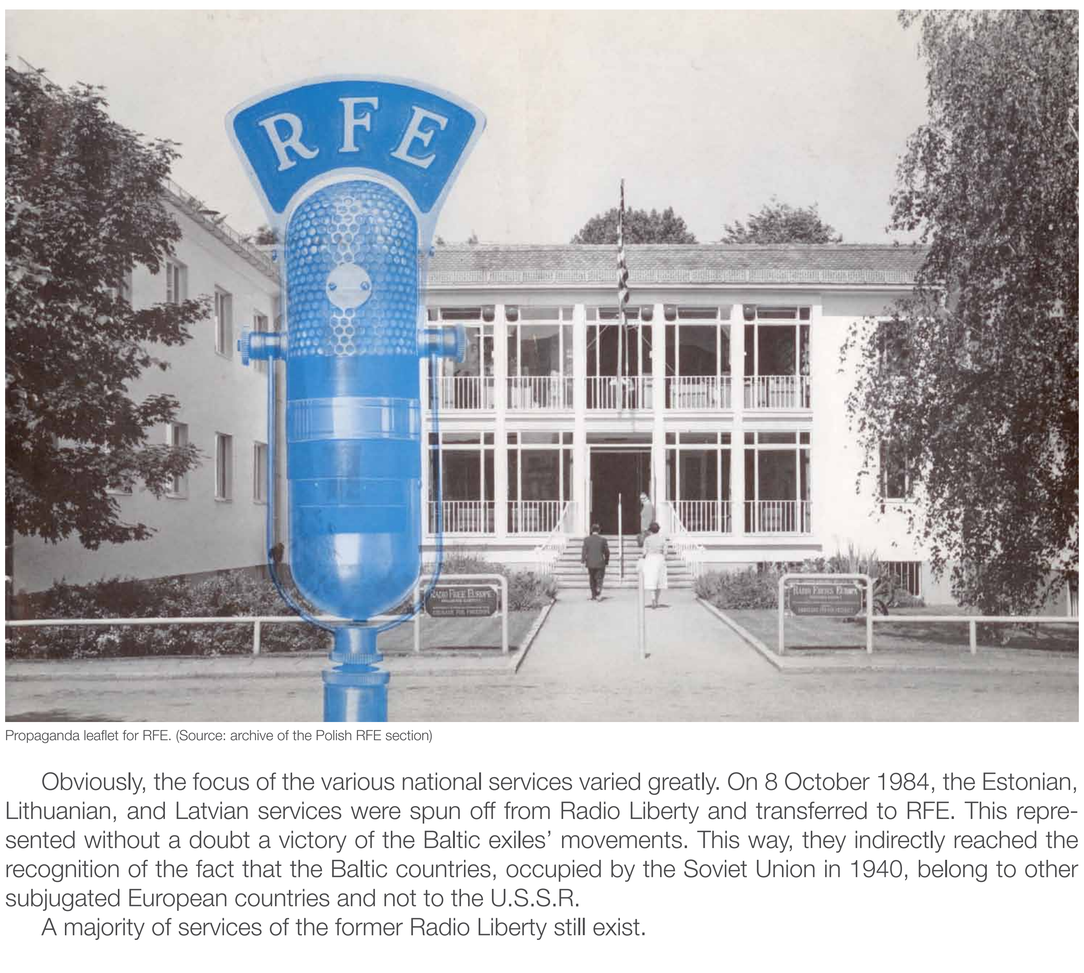
Radio broadcasts were not limited to the states of Central and Eastern Europe. Under the auspices of the U.S. authorities, the American Committee for the Liberation of the Peoples of Russia was officially established on 19 January 1951. After complex negotiations with exile groups, the station Radio Liberation began transmitting on 1 March 1953. It was targeted at the many national groups within the U.S.S.R., so was not limited to Russian; it eventually broadcast in nearly 20 languages.

The aim of broadcasting is clearly indicated in this characterisation at the time: “The radio station of a co-ordinating centre for the anti-Bolshevik struggle”. The fact that it genuinely was a struggle is attested to by the fact that the U.S.S.R. immediately jammed transmissions, and ordered the assassination of several station employees in Munich: In September, 1954 Leonid Karas was killed, while the director of the Azerbijan service, Abo Fatalibey, was killed in November that year. With the passing of time, the original conception of Radio Liberation changed, as was the case with RFE. This was also seen in its renaming as Radio Liberty (RL) on 5 September 1959.

Radio Liberty had broadcasts in the countries of the U.S.S.R. in the mid 1950s. (Source: RFE/RL archive of the Russian section)

Initially its employees mainly consisted of political refugees who had left Russia after 1917 and the U.S.S.R. after 1945. The composition of the staff gradually changed and in the 1970s many employees were linked to the democratic dissident movement in the Soviet Union or came from the growing ranks of Jewish emigres allowed to leave the country from the start of that decade.

A significant moment occurred on 2 October 1976 when Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty were merged into one organisation, RFE/RL Inc. However, each station remained an independent unit, as of course did the individual services.

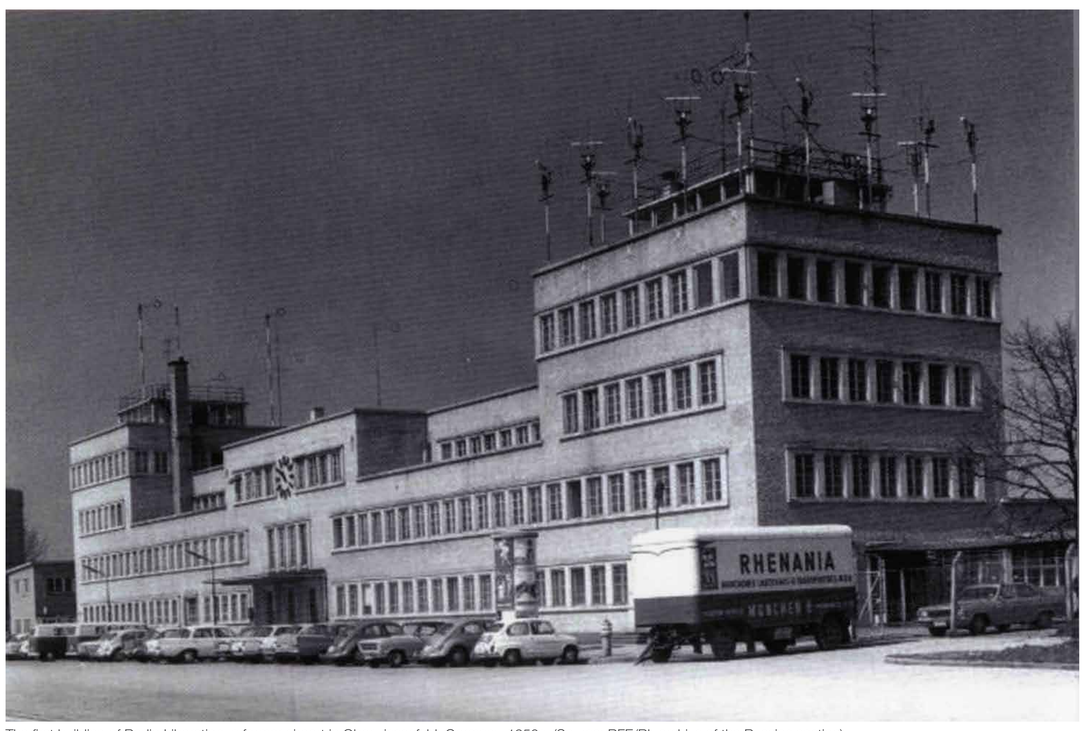


Propaganda leaflet for RFE. (Source: archive of the Polish RFE section)

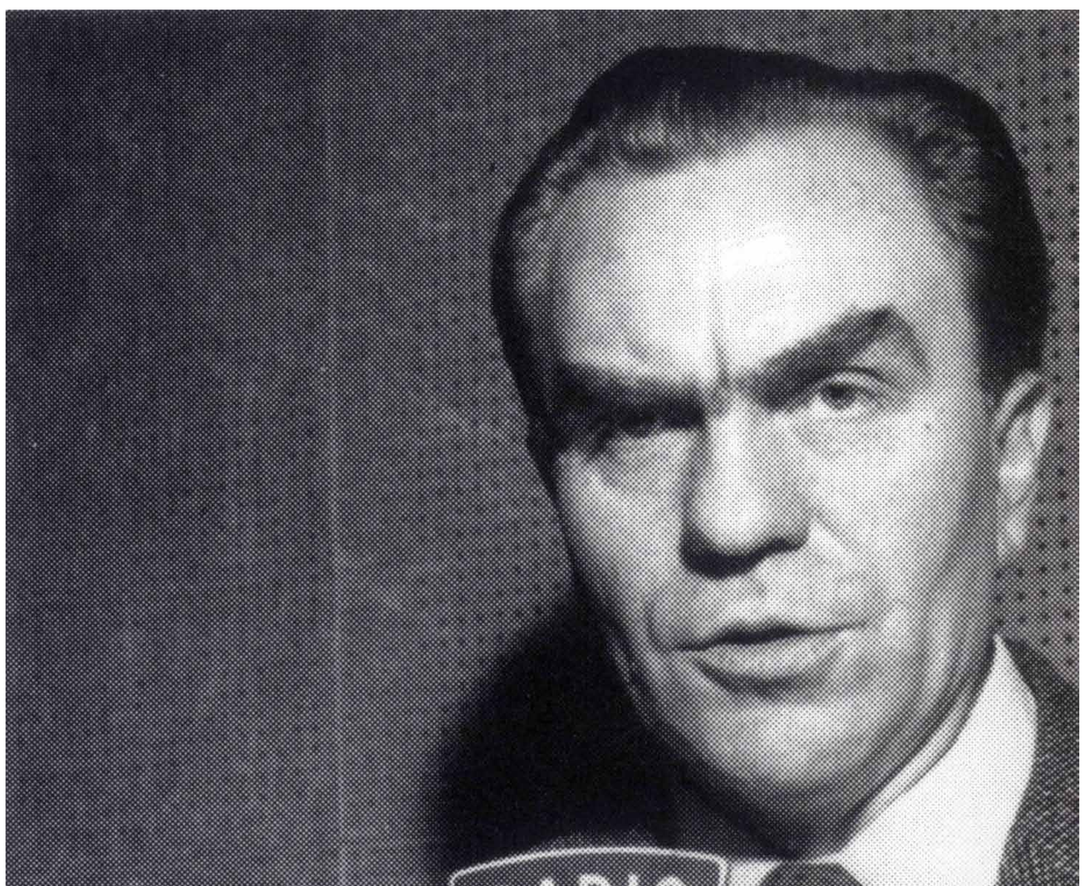
Obviously, the focus of the various national services varied greatly. On 8 October 1984, the Estonian, Lithuanian, and Latvian services were spun off from Radio Liberty and transferred to RFE. This represented without a doubt a victory of the Baltic exiles’ movements. This way, they indirectly reached the recognition of the fact that the Baltic countries, occupied by the Soviet Union in 1940, belong to other subjugated European countries and not to the U.S.S.R.

A majority of services of the former Radio Liberty still exist.

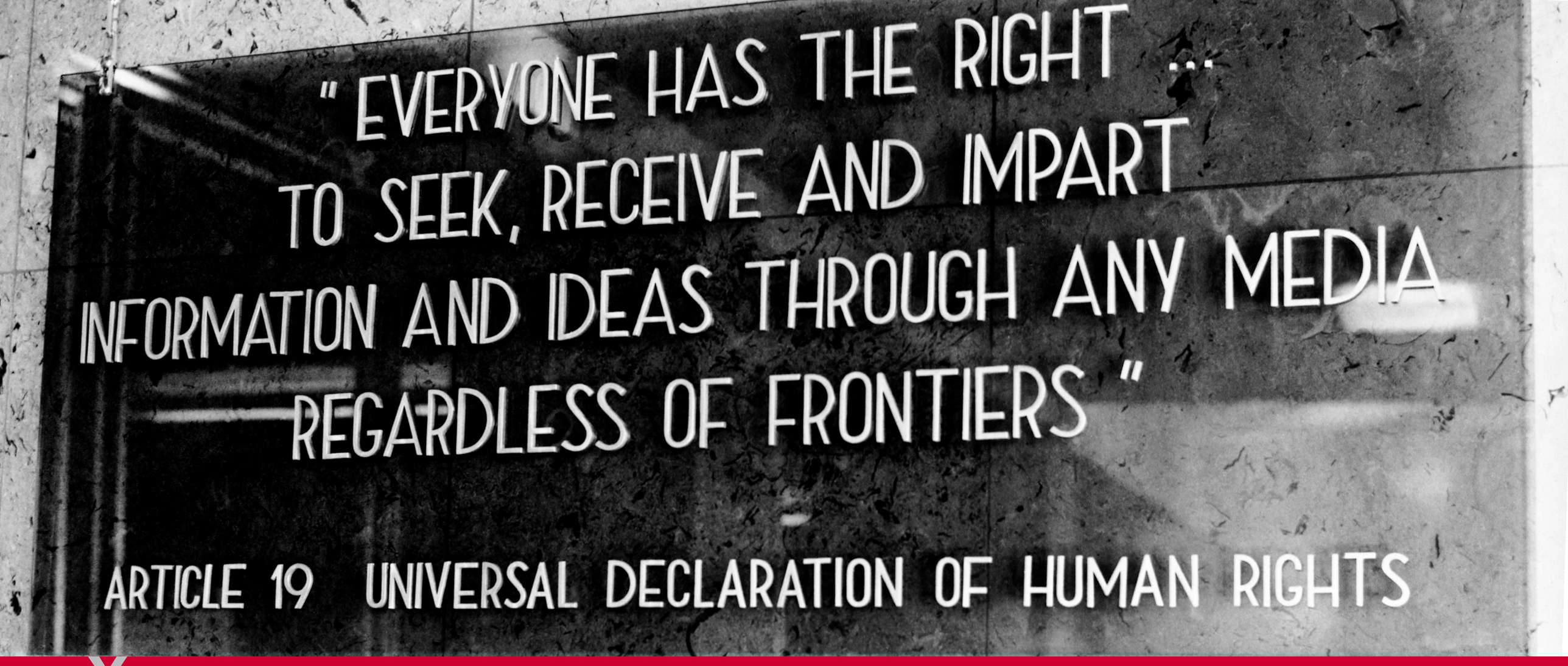
The composer Vernon Diuk (real name Vladimir Dukelskij) talks to Radio Liberation presenters Viktorie Semjonova and Michail Korjakov at the apartment of actor Marlon Brando. (Source: RFE/RL archive of the Russian section)



The first building of Radio Liberation, a former airport in Oberwiesenfeld, Germany, 1950s. (Source: RFE/RL archive of the Russian section)



Vasilij Frank, employee of Radio Liberation, responsible for interviews with emigrés and for news agencies. (Source: RFE/RL archive of the Russian section)



X.

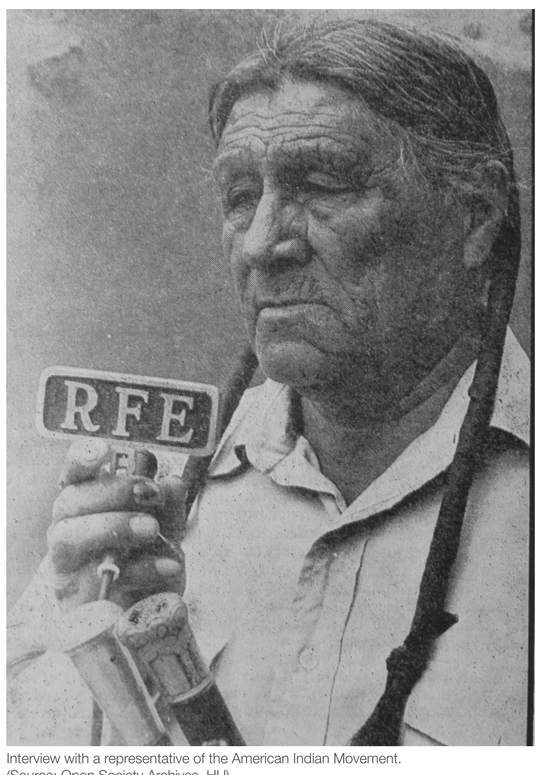
American Policy

The history of RFE reflects the various phases in Western policy over the decades: "containing Communism", "the emancipation of subjugated countries", gradualism (efforts to support natural liberalisation within Eastern Bloc states), detente (relaxation of relations after accepting the fixed status of the other side), the New Cold War, and its conclusion.

RFE/RL wanted to show its listeners real life in the U.S.A. and broadcast many interviews with American personalities, including the civil rights activist Martin Luther King. (Source: RFE/RL Inc. Archives)

The very birth of an independent media organisation with the reach of RFE was a unique event, and the fact it carried out its mission throughout the following decades remains remarkable from today's perspective. The West saw three possible paths of resistance to the threat of Communist expansion: economic, military and ideological. The first path was the Marshall Plan for post-war renewal, the second the establishment of NATO, and the third was support for the foundation of the National Committee for a Free Europe. Therefore it is not possible to regard RFE and later Radio Liberty as mere radio stations, but as a significant tool for disseminating diplomacy and policy.

Interview with the singer Tom Jones. (Source: RFE/RL Inc. Archives)



Interview with a representative of the American Indian Movement. (Source: Open Society Archives, HU)

After 1956, RFE and RL were transformed into professional and flexible alternative news organisations. They subtly registered changes in the fields of politics and the economy behind the Iron Curtain. The radio stations' dedication to considered public communication with the citizens of Central and Eastern Europe and the U.S.S.R. was without parallel in the West.

Any belief in gradualism was snuffed out when Warsaw Pact troops entered Czechoslovakia. In the following decades, RFE´s principal vision became that of an alternative radio station, substituting for the non-existent free media offerings in the countries of the Eastern bloc. This did not involve propaganda, after all, if RFE/RL was just a propaganda tool of the U.S. or the C.I.A. the question must be asked: Could the Soviet Union have used such an instrument to push its politics in the West?

Interview with American President John Fitzgerald Kennedy. (Source: RFE/RL Inc. Archives)

Interview with American Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. (Source: RFE/RL Inc. Archives)

XI.

The Influence of Foreign Broadcasting on the Collapse of Central and Eastern European Regimes

As soon became apparent, means more sophisticated than mere force were needed if democracy was to be renewed in the countries behind the Iron Curtain.

Soldiers of the Romanian People's Army watch a televised speech by Nicolae Ceaușescu. (Source: Military History Institute, Prague)

How much influence broadcasts had on societal and political developments in target countries and on the fall of their Communist regimes is a question that remains unanswered. There was no way of measuring listener numbers. Certain indications could be seen in the information provided by the scarce legal visitors and refugees. The communist governments did not carry out objective research. However, the huge number of calls received on a special RFE telephone number from 1985 on merits attention. Public interest in RFE/RL's staff and transmissions was (perhaps surprisingly) high after 1989, attesting to the station's popularity and authority. Furthermore, dissidents turned politicians were quick to acknowledge its worth. At the end of the day, the fall of the regimes of Central and Eastern Europe can be interpreted as evidence of a mission accomplished.

Anti-war demonstration at the Berlin Wall, which was also aimed at RFE. (Source: RFE/RL Inc. Archives)

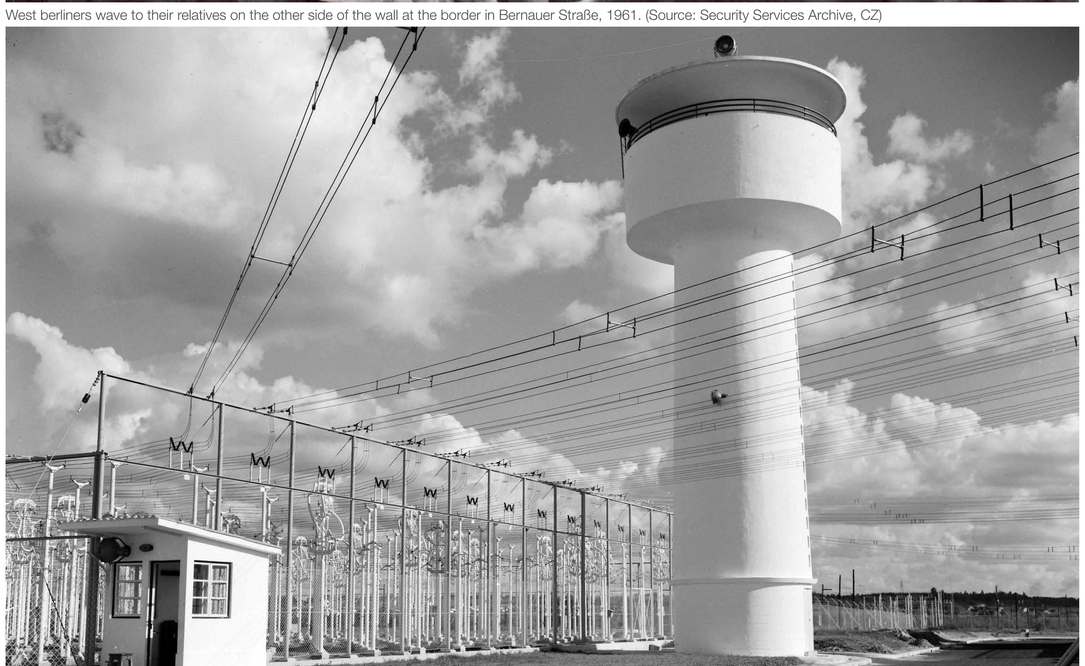
On the other hand, this one instrument could not have brought about fundamental political change on its own. It was just one factor which played its part. And not just in terms of actual transmissions. The very existence of RFE, the fact it carried out its role as an alternative media source, day in, day out, made RFE in itself a symbol of freedom.

Radio Free Europe has no equal in terms of either reach or length of service. For the rulers of its target countries, RFE was the enemy personified, while for the persecuted it was a distant light at the end of the tunnel. It became a shelter for refugees from Communism and a place for free culture and independent thought.

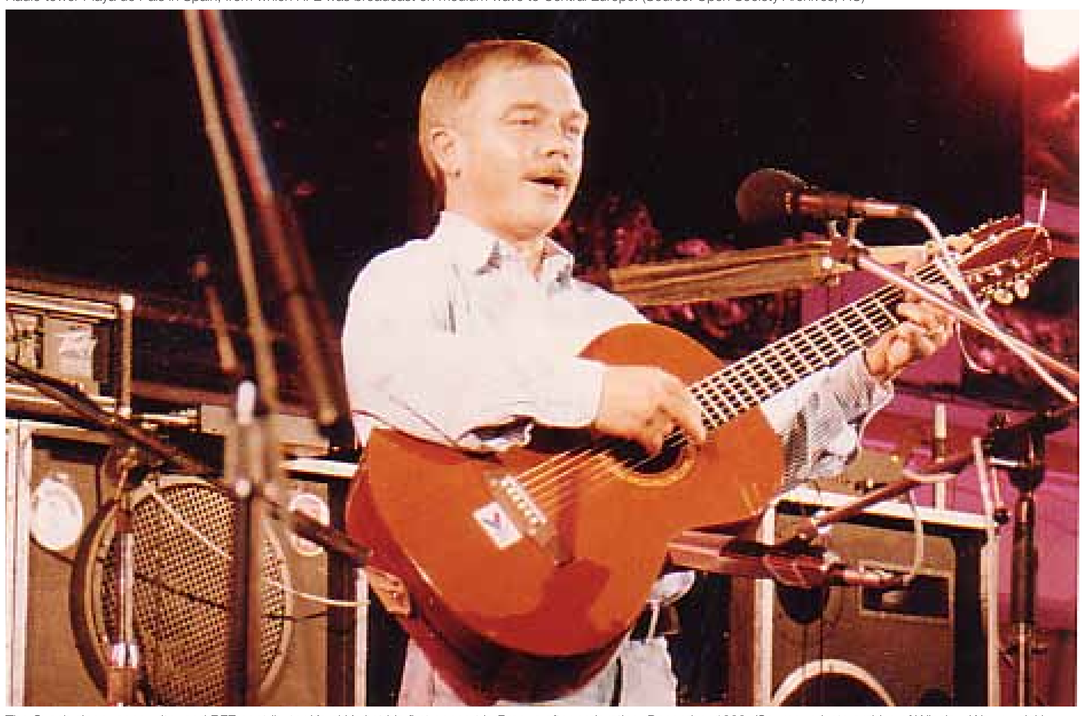
Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev in a propaganda photo with the people. (Source: Military History Institute, Prague)

The general staff of the Romanian People's Army at a ceremonial handover of new military equipment, first half of the 1970s. (Source: Military History Institute, Prague)

West berliners wave to their relatives on the other side of the wall at the border in Bernauer Straße, 1961. (Source: Security Services Archive, CZ)



Radio tower Playa de Pals in Spain, from which RFE was broadcast on medium wave to Central Europe. (Source: Open Society Archives, HU)



The Czech singer-songwriter and RFE contributor Karel Kryl at his first concert in Prague after emigrating, December 1989. (Source: private archive of Wiesław Wawrzyniak)