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## The Lowest Ebb

“Do you read much poetry?” It was hardly a question I expected to be asked in my first two minutes at Radio Free Europe. It was put to me, not in the Radio proper, but in its reception space just inside the main entrance.

I noticed that my questioner had a book of verse in his hand. I had come in and taken the chair next to his, probably disturbing him. He was American, a nice man and obviously not too hurt by my philistine shrug in response to his question. He was escorted through reception before I could explain this lacuna in my education. The next time I saw him he was behind a desk in the Central News Room. Radio Free Europe, I soon learned, was a place of diverse culture.

This was July 1957 and I was at RFE’s portals for two reasons. My presence in Munich was the result of a successful response to an advertisement in the *Manchester Guardian* several months before for a deputy editor of *Historical Abstracts*, an English-language historical journal based in Munich. Almost no sooner had I arrived in Munich than both *Historical Abstracts* and I realized that we had both made a serious mistake. My wife Margaret and I were resigned to returning to England with burdened brow and tails between our legs. But just a few days before we were scheduled to go home we went to a party at the home of the British consul general in Munich to celebrate the Queen’s Birthday. There a sympathetic American elicited my hard luck story from me.

“Have you thought of Radio Free Europe,” he asked. I had not. I had only heard of Radio Free Europe for the first time in 1954. One of its propaganda balloons, meant to be heading for Eastern Europe, had blown far off course and landed on a Scottish farmer’s land in Perthshire. He had its message translated and then wrote an irate letter to the *Manchester Guardian* demanding to know what the devil was going on. (In fairness to Radio Free Europe I should say that the sponsor of this lunatic balloon scheme was a smaller associate organization separate from it.) Later, I heard about RFE during and after the Hungarian Revolution.

My sympathetic American immediately marched me off to meet another American who worked at Radio Free Europe. Then the briefest of conversations was followed by an invitation to come to the Radio next morning to meet the “Head of Information.” Hence my presence — a rather nervous one — in RFE’s reception.

My nervousness only increased when I met the Head of Information. He was obviously more nervous than I was. I answered three questions, and then he signaled that the interview was over by producing a comb and passing it through his far from plentiful hair. It was apparently his way of ending interviews. I waited briefly in his outer office, and then his secretary took me up to my first Radio job. I then met my first RFE boss, a Scotsman named Iain MacDonald, who in the 1970s covered the early stages of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. He was to prove a true colleague and a journalist of real analytical ability.

My job was mainly correcting the written English of RFE’s East European staff. I certainly improved my own English in doing so, and I met a large number of the staff concerned. It was excellent preparation for my long Cold War career. I was fascinated by the backgrounds of the East European staff, deeply impressed by their basic honesty, and humbled by the breadth of some of their backgrounds.

### **Radio in Crisis**

I soon realized that Radio Free Europe was in deep crisis. It was only just over eight months since the Hungarian Revolution. The attacks on the Radio’s mishandling of the revolution—in Germany, Western

Europe generally, and in the United States—were still continuing. There were strong demands in Germany that the Radio leave, in West Europe and in the United States that it be totally discontinued or drastically reformed. Within the Radio itself the Hungarian staff were divided, fearful, and listless. The others shared their sense of foreboding.

What particularly depressed most RFE Hungarians was the widespread criticism of them inside Hungary itself. And among the large number of Hungarians who left their native land when the revolution was put down there was not a good word for the station.

### **Enemies at the Outset**

But it was not long before I realized that, prior to the Hungarian Revolution, in fact right from its earlier beginnings in 1951, RFE had been the object of numerous attacks in both the United States and Western Europe. The attacks had come from right, left, and center. The right was convinced it had too many communists, the left too many fascists, the center too many of each. Fulton Lewis Jr. was its most persistent American tormenter. But, from my days at the University of Michigan in 1951–52, I had always believed that Fulton Lewis's enmity must be a badge of honor. I was therefore not too worried about this. As for some of the other detractors in the United States and Germany, I felt the same about them too. Whatever faults RFE had in those days, at least it stood for something better than most of its enemies.

The attacks on the Polish Service from West German organizations speaking for Germans expelled from Poland, "*die Vertriebenen*," were even exceeded in volume by the attacks on the Czechoslovak Service from Sudeten German expellees. And since these expellees had considerable support in the Bundestag, the West German parliament in Bonn, even more support in the Bavarian parliament in Munich, as well as considerable media support in Bavaria, as a whole these were onslaughts that could not be ignored.

But the Czechoslovak Service also had to stand virulent attacks from the United States. The main target there was Ferdinand Peroutka. Peroutka had been one of the most famous journalists

in the history of Czechoslovakia's First Republic, perhaps best remembered for a series of journalistic duels with President Thomas Masaryk in the 1920s. Peroutka was a Social Democrat. That was enough for his American critics. But most RFE Czechs held him in great respect. I remember him striding the Radio corridors in 1960, when he was "imported" from New York to help restore order in a Czechoslovak Service collapsing from petty feuding and mismanagement. Peroutka had by then survived the onslaught of the 1950s. He was now very much the elder statesman, acting the part naturally and impressively.

### **The Charges over Hungary: How Genuine?**

But these charges were as nothing compared with those that inundated the Radio over the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. RFE was accused both of fomenting the revolution and encouraging it to continue by promising the revolutionaries American military help. Most damagingly, these charges originated with the revolutionaries themselves. Psychology can best explain them: scapegoat syndrome! RFE was, after all, an instrument and a symbol of an America on which Hungarian hopes and dreams had centered. American troops were also close at hand in West Germany. RFE, born of the Cold War, was seen as part of the American offensive against Soviet communism and Russian imperialism. During the revolution it undoubtedly had a large and anxious audience. After defeat, this audience irrationally but understandably presented its list of charges.

Objectively there was little to support any of these accusations. But revolutions are not objective: they are intensely subjective. There is no truth about revolutions, just versions. In 1956 people heard what they wanted to hear and then put the most hopeful twist on it. But the charges against a few RFE programs, once the fighting had begun, do carry some weight. There was one rogue program about making Molotov cocktails and one or two about the proximity, though not the intentions, of American troops. But what the Hungarian broadcasters at RFE could be comprehensively criticized for was the excitement, the shrill partisanship, even the near hysteria of some of their presentations. Small wonder that what they did say was wrongly and tragically misconstrued. RFE's

broadcasts were misquoted and distorted, and as such they spread like a prairie fire.

This is not an attempt to exonerate Radio Free Europe. Serious mistakes were made, but they were exaggerated for different reasons and from different motives. Any examination of these mistakes must also center on the situation within the radio itself. Was it equipped to meet the biggest crisis in its history? No, it was not. In the Hungarian Service itself the leadership, though not without some intellectual ability, was aged, enfeebled, and ineffective.

Nor was it psychologically prepared for such a crisis. Its members were conditioned by the context of the Cold War that had created Radio Free Europe. Their thinking about the Cold War was being conditioned from many sources, not only within the Hungarian exile community itself, but also by an American administration that was sponsoring Radio Free Europe, which many saw as speaking for it. There was also the feeling that this Cold War would soon be over—a couple of years at the most. Communist rule would be deposed as quickly as it had been imposed. It was American might against a primitive Russian barbarism that was trying to keep down populations superior to it, alien from it, and disdainful of it. Radio Free Europe had only begun operating in 1951. Now in just over five years came the Hungarian Revolution and an almost similar crisis in Poland. Events seemed to be conforming to expectations.

This mentality also largely explains the policy divisions among RFE's Hungarians that the revolution brought to the fore. Many of them were indeed convinced that it was signaling the demise of communism itself. As to the future this meant returning to the past, to precommunist Hungary, hopefully even to pre-Trianon Hungary. The struggle, therefore, of the Imre Nagy revolutionary regime against the Soviets and their local allies was basically irrelevant. Cardinal Mindszenty was the hero for many RFE Hungarians, certainly not the communist Nagy. A reform communism under Nagy, or anybody else, was the last thing they wanted. And for a few hallucinatory days what they wanted was what they thought they could get.

But it was not just RFE's Hungarians who must take the blame for what became a fiasco. The American management should take even more blame, specifically its policy director, William E.

Griffith. There was neither crisis leadership nor policy direction from the center. This may have been because there was none from Washington, caught as ill prepared as Munich was. The role of the American management was a shabby one, and subsequent efforts to explain, excuse, or defend it only added to the shabbiness. Griffith was a brilliant man, although his relentless intellectual posturing often caused irritation and outright derision. He subsequently left the Radio in 1958, became a professor at MIT, a consultant to a medley of American government agencies, and a globetrotting advisor to the *Readers Digest*.

### **The Polish Contrast**

Immediately preceding the crisis caused by the Hungarian Revolution in November 1956 was what became internationally known as the "Polish October." The way RFE managed this crucial episode was totally different from its bungling over Hungary. This was partly because everything moved in its favor. First, the situation there in Poland: all three sides, the Polish, the Russian, and the Polish people, showed statesmanship. The Polish Communist Party was provident enough to recall Władisław Gomułka, disgraced in 1949, to its top position. Stalin had seen Gomułka as a dangerous nationalist, and Gomułka was lucky to survive with his life. This now gave him a strong appeal among even anticommunist Poles. The Polish people showed determination tempered by restraint. As for its leadership, the contrast with Hungary was all too clear. The Poles had Cardinal Wyszyński, the Hungarians Cardinal Mindszenty. The former showed himself a statesman; the latter was always a reactionary cleric. Wyszyński set about arranging a peace-saving *modus vivendi* with Gomułka. It didn't last long, but it was long enough. It saw the immediate crisis out and saved Poland from a Soviet invasion.

Then there was Khrushchev. He originally wanted to avoid invading Hungary, too. But Nagy's declaration of Hungarian neutrality and his withdrawing of Hungary from the Warsaw Pact left Khrushchev no option. Poland, for once, opted for realism, not romanticism, and was saved. Two invasions in two months could have led to World War III. It would certainly have cost Khrushchev his job.

Inside RFE these developments made life much easier for the Polish broadcasters. But it was the leadership of these broadcasters that made the real difference, leadership given by Jan Nowak, the Polish broadcasting director. During his entire RFE career, which ended in 1975, Nowak, a hero of the wartime Polish underground, could sometimes be wrong, even petty, in everyday matters. But when “it counted”—and it certainly counted in 1956—he was a statesman. He was, in fact, the one man in RFE’s history with a touch of greatness about him. There was a nervous excitement in the Polish Service broadcasts during the October crisis, but generally it was a cool calm. The service showed strong support for Wyszynski and a quiet respect for Gomułka. The crisis was soon over. The Polish Broadcast Service not only helped to save Radio Free Europe, but it helped save Poland, too.

The Polish Service (and Jan Nowak) had had a kick-start when Colonel Józef Światło, a senior officer of the UB, Poland’s security service, deserted to the West in December 1953. Światło was privy to, or had participated in, the worst excesses of this thoroughly Stalinist organization. He seemed also to know everything about Soviet penetration of the UB and the luxurious living of UB officials. He gave a series of interviews to RFE’s Polish Service in 1954 that created a sensation in Poland, shook the communist regime, and established RFE’s reputation throughout the country. A reputation it never lost! There was considerable opposition within the Polish Service to using a man like Światło, but Nowak, aware of both the political and journalistic opportunity, would have none of it. It was probably Radio Free Europe’s greatest ever coup.

A brief note typifying Nowak. He had many admirers in the West, several prominent journalists among them. None admired him more than the journalist and writer David Halberstam, then of the *New York Times*. It was Nowak’s streak of nineteenth century Romanticism that really got to Halberstam. When he asked Nowak when he had left Poland, the answer could have been straight out of Mickiewicz: “I never left Poland.”

The first decade of Radio Free Europe’s history—the first few “cowboy” years, the Polish October, the Hungarian Revolution, ended with a mixed record and a mixed reputation for the Radio. But it had at least survived. Its job now was both to regain and strengthen confidence, internal and external.



### Changes and Chances

Staff changes at RFE were only to be expected after 1956. There were important changes in the head offices in both Munich and New York, in the Munich policy directorate, and in the Hungarian Broadcast Service itself. But in all five Broadcast Services a long lean look was leveled at past approaches, methods, and mindsets. The essential changes occurred within the Broadcast Services themselves, and they happened quite quickly. A comparison between RFE's programs in 1957 and those in 1965 show a stark difference. The Hungarian Revolution itself was enough to make RFE's cold warriors less fervent. So was the distinct possibility that they would lose their jobs if they weren't. Good sense and resilience played their parts, too. RFE was responding and maturing.

One new appointment deserves special mention: that of István Bede as Hungarian Broadcast Service director. Bede had been Hungary's ambassador in London before the communist takeover. As service director for some fifteen years, he tended sometimes to use backstage diplomacy when up-front directness would have been better. But he brought high intelligence, political *nous*, and personal presence to what for several years was the most difficult job in the Radio. And he put the Hungarian Service back on its feet, behaving properly and broadcasting sensibly and successfully.

But there were two more post-1956 factors that determined the Radio's future course. One was the wise Washington decision, resisting strong pressure, *not* to turn RFE into a news and information radio only. *Comment* continued to play the *defining* role in RFE's broadcasts, as it had always done. It is discussed later in this book (see chapter 5), but its very survival after the trauma of 1956 must obviously be noted in passing.

The second factor was the emergence of a diverse and totally new situation in Eastern Europe itself. Under Stalin there was grey, oppressive uniformity. For three years after his death both the Soviet Union and its satellites were trying to recover from this uniformity and were unsure how to. Then came the explosions of 1956 in Hungary and Poland. After that came Khrushchev's brave decision to opt for reform communism, aimed at securing "communist legitimacy." This meant domestic change for those satellites that might want it. Parameters were still there, of course, but they were widened.

Very soon a patchwork quilt appeared in Eastern Europe. There were movers and nonmovers. Gomułka's Poland lapsed into stagnation. Bulgaria stepped out of its shell and then almost immediately stepped back into it again. But in the other three "RFE countries" things really did move. Hungary quietly began a broad movement of reform. A little later Czechoslovakia began an even broader movement of reform. Romania battened down the hatches at home then surprised everyone by striking out for as much independence as it could get.

This was RFE's new challenge and opportunity. Now it had something in Eastern Europe to respond to and interact with. Now it was called to its historic mission. Now it was necessary more than ever to comment, discern, and appraise. Now it also became an enviable place to work.