Harrison, Erica: Radio and the Performance of Government. Broadcasting by the Czechoslovaks in Exile in London, 1939-1945.

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An intelligence report on the BBC's broadcasting to the Nazi-controlled Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia that reached London in 1941 called it "the ELIXIR which keep [sic] us all going" (p.15). Writer Čestmír Jeřábek, who spent the war under occupation, was no less dramatic in his diary: "London is the only thing to feed the soul." In her new book, Erica Harrison explores the making of the performance that preserved the hopes of hundreds of thousands, if not millions of Czechoslovaks amidst their utmost misery and horror. Her study focuses on radio as a comparatively understudied medium that gained momentum during the Second World War due to specific circumstances. It was a perfect instrument (and at the same time the only one) for the powerless exile governments to use for communication with their respective nationals while dwelling in London. Information thus crossed borders effortlessly, and local censorship could do little to stop it from spreading. The key value of Harrison's study lies in its equal treatment of all three parts of the First Czechoslovak Republic – the Czech lands, Slovakia, and Subcarpathian Ruthenia.

The monograph's foremost aim is to enrich the history of the Czechoslovak government-in-exile through close analysis of the BBC broadcasting, which has not previously been examined as a whole. This results in several extremely valuable findings, with the negative propaganda targeting Slovaks or the negligent treatment of Subcarpathian Ruthenians among the most important ones. Yet the book's theoretical depth combined with its analysis of a broad scope of empirical material also has the potential to attract a much wider scholarly audience.

Before embarking on her tour through more than five years of broadcasting, Harrison explains her understanding of the concepts of performance and propaganda. She stresses that performance does not automatically imply insincerity or intentional deception on behalf of the performers (p. 13), instead describing it neutrally as

an attempt to represent a nation, its state, and its government over the radio. The author is similarly clear with regard to her understanding of propaganda, citing John Hargrave and his straightforward "defence" of the term that is often shrouded in pejorative connotations: "Where there is information plus direction, there is propaganda. […] No government has ever been possible without it" (p. 18). This refusal to treat the empirical material primarily as a tool of deception and manipulation allows Harrison to utilize it as a mirror of the exile elites' mental map.

As she shows in chapters one and two, listening to BBC broadcasts was fairly widespread in the Protectorate despite the threat of severe punishment. People were drawn to their receivers not only by the promise of obtaining information untouched by Nazi propaganda but also by the intimate connection with their political leaders. Speeches, talks, patriotic music and poetry aimed at inducing a feeling of proximity reached them at a time when Czech culture faced strict prohibition.

Cultural production accompanied political and ideological material with which the broadcasters obviously tried to influence public opinion at home. A unified interpretation of the distant as well as the recent past was transmitted on a daily basis. It relied on the adoration of Masaryk's democracy and a national identity constructed in opposition to everything German. An easy success with regard to these discourses was secured by way of the charismatic performances of President Edvard Beneš and Masaryk's son Jan, the popular foreign minister at the time. Yet the discursive space they operated in was not boundless: Harrison shows that not all positions of the government-in-exile were met with enthusiastic support at home. For example, while the boycott of the Protectorate press initiated by the London exiles in 1941 resulted in a 70 percent drop in newspaper sales (p. 79), their sudden silence regarding the Czechoslovak-Polish confederation in 1943 was met with surprise and slight annoyance (p. 214). It also seems that the audience was much more attentive early in the conflict when it sought a boost to morale, and a significant drop in listeners' enthusiasm coincided with a decline in broadcast quality: The broadcasts began to become more repetitive and monotonous in late 1943 (p. 251).

There were far more severe cracks in the self-confident presentation of the Czechoslovak exile government, however. Harrison discusses them in chapter three, which focuses on addressing Slovakia from London, and chapter four, which maps the gradual succumbing to the influence of the Soviet Union as manifested in the exile's relation to Subcarpathian Ruthenia. While the communication with the Czech part of the former republic relied on uncontroversial national ideology and was therefore straightforward and successful, contact with Slovaks and Subcarpathian Ruthenians was much trickier.

Harrison documents the failure of the exile government to offer Slovaks a positive alternative to the nationalism that naturally flourished as a result of the inception of the first independent Slovak state (even though it was a client state of Nazi Germany). This failing is epitomized in a quote by Jan Masaryk used in the title of the third chapter: "Anyone talking about an independent Slovakia is either an idiot or a traitor." Instead, reconstruction of the Czechoslovak state within its prewar borders was presented to Slovaks as the only possibility. This argumentation stood on three pillars: The exile broadcasting playing on Slovak affection for America,

Slovaks' religiosity, and the historical and ethnic ties to Russia as a core Slavic ally. This patronizing approach ruled out the much-desired promise of legal decentralization after the war as well as the recognition of Slovak nationhood. The interpretation of the Slovak National Uprising as an expression of Slovak commitment to the shared state represents sad proof of the Czech chauvinistic tendencies of the time.

While Slovak broadcasting was treated as a subsidiary of Czech-centric Czechoslovak broadcasting, communication with Subcarpathian Ruthenia was even more marginal. Irregular programming – initially in Russian and later in Ukrainian – was established in December 1941, but was never broadcast during peak listening slots. This may have been due to the much lower radio density in the region (between 100 and 400 listeners per device compared to 13 in the Czech lands), but more importantly, the neglect reflected the territory's perceived lack of importance within the First Republic. Broadcasting to Subcarpathian Ruthenia ceased abruptly in March 1945 without any mention of it having effectively changed states. Harrison lets the fact that the London government-in-exile had nothing to say to the people it had still happily claimed as co-citizens as late as November 1944 speak for itself.

Erica Harrison's book is meticulously researched and is highly recommended for close study. While her conclusions regarding the exile propaganda targeting the Czech population offer nothing radically new, her account of the propaganda aimed at Slovaks and Subcarpathian Ruthenians sheds light on the war aspects of Czechocentrism, a discriminatory disposition representing a common thread in modern Czecho-Slovak relations. Finally, valuable lessons can also be gleaned from Harrison's careful analysis of radio broadcasts, which often have potential for much greater impact on their receivers than written texts.

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