Cold War-Indifferent Listeners to a Multilingual Ether? Reconstructing Czechoslovak Listening Practices in the 1950s and 1960s:

I am writing a history PhD about Czechs' and Slovaks' radio listening practices during the early Cold War, and the way that Czech and Slovak listeners could and did influence the output of radio broadcasters at the period. As this research is still relatively new, I am yet to tighten up on periodization, and indeed on the central figures or themes which best illustrate these points. I came to the Open Society Archives (OSA) to examine documents produced - largely by the station's Czechoslovak section - from the earliest days of Radio Free Europe (RFE) in 1951 until approximately 1970. My central research question was: what can radio archives tell us about listening practices in Cold War Czechoslovakia?

I found that sources such as information items and listener polling housed at the OSA provided somewhat more anecdotal and disconnected first-person accounts of listening practices than I had anticipated. In the listener polling, most respondents' oral and written testimony was not in fact included, while information items sometimes converged on questions of new jamming stations being spotted or supposed by groups of listeners, but otherwise treated largely one-off events in disparate places (for example, radio programming being piped into a hospital sick ward at all hours of day, or a party functionary in a given locale keeping a lower profile after his/her mention on an RFE broadcast). Information items thus may prove excellent examples of more general phenomena I come to find elsewhere, but I found them difficult to use to *build* a broader picture of who was listening to what, and how, in Czechoslovakia during these years. Working with these sources begs the question; what is the problem with relying upon "anecdotal" accounts of radio listening? I think the answer to this lies in the risk of over-generalisation – using a scenario which is unlike any of the others mentioned in the sources to speak about more than the person in question.

What, then, is it possible to use these same sources to infer? I thought it might be more fruitful to go about thinking about what was available to listen to, when and where. Listener polling both at OSA and at the Czech National Archive suggests that listeners often moved between different stations, and begins to tell us some of the factors affecting listeners' choices. The polls housed at OSA helped me begin to conceptualize the limits of the possible, with reception reports and maps indicating which regions received RFE signal the clearest, tables suggesting which times of day jamming was employed, and analysis on the part of RFE personnel reminding the reader to take meteorological phenomena (like air pressure and solar activity) likewise into account. A good number of information items and Free Europe Committee publications also stressed that the type of radio set a listener owned had a direct effect on the variety and audio quality of programming heard.

If we think of radio signal and its detection by transistors as subject to limits, and if we think of listeners navigating and constantly changing their positions within these limits, then it seems helpful to me to conceptualize the aural environment as an "ether." This is because ether, while conceived as flexible and shifting, is not limitless or boundless, which we have perhaps overstated the penetrative power of radio to be.[1] Ether constitutes a substance, albeit a fiendishly difficult one to pin down. This accords with the conviction that a study of radio can deal in concrete claims, alongside more delicate suggestions and suppositions. Finally, the notion of ether is inextricably bound up with the medium of radio itself, from the time of the technology's development (when radio waves were thought to be transported by a substance called ether) until

[1] "Ether" is actually the term to describe radio's reach favoured by Alexander Badenoch, Andreas Fickers and Christian Henrich-Franke in *Airy Curtains in the European Ether* (Baden-Baden, Nomos, 2013). They choose this descriptor, however, precisely to indicate how radio spilled across national borders and geopolitical blocs during the Cold War. On the potential all-pervasiveness of radio (across geographic distance, and across class), see also the introduction to Bessire, Lucas and Fisher, Daniel, *Radio Fields: Anthropology and Wireless Sound in the 21st Century* (New York, New York University Press, 2012)

the present day in Czech idiom, in which "v éteru" (literally "in the ether") is commonly used by broadcasters and radio listeners to mean "on the air." Ether is by no means, however, an actor's category: the publications and listener polling I studied at RFE much preferred conceptualizing radio broadcasting into and within Czechoslovakia during the Cold War as constituting a "network." To me, this reflects a wish, or a dystopian vision, of how information systems might operate in a Communist country, as it points to centralization and clear planning. While information items do speak of the installation of wired radio (whose programming was chosen by a central employee rather than the listener) in a range of Czechoslovak locations, this network was never total and, when listeners voices appear in RFE information items, they largely speak of the precariousness and interference involved in tuning in, manually, to RFE and other stations.

So why stress the multilingual nature of this ether? This was one of the major points I took away from sources at the OSA. Polling assembled from Czechs' and Slovaks' discussion of their radio listening habits time and again placed Radio Vienna as a favoured foreign station ahead of RFE, Voice of America and the BBC (all broadcasting in Czech and Slovak). Radio Budapest also showed up as a station tuned into by listeners in Slovakia. Listener polling for the Russian-language station Radio Liberation (RL), furthermore, largely drew from mail sent to the station by listeners in Czechoslovakia.[2] Such evidence of Czechoslovak citizens listening to radio in German, Hungarian and Russian challenged assumptions I had of linguistic homogeneity[3] in the country following World War II (when, clearly, listeners did not forget the languages they had grown up speaking and/or had learned during the war). These polling results also refuted my understanding

[2] This, as Radio Liberty researchers noted, was because mail coming from the Soviet Union was intercepted with much more frequency than mail sent from Czechoslovakia and so does not, by any means, reflect listener numbers.

[3] Or, more exactly, linguistic duality, given that Czech and Slovak were both official languages of the postwar Czechoslovak state.

of language politics in Czechoslovakia following World War II: it came as a surprise to read letters written by Czechs to RL saying they enjoyed studying Russian and could the station arrange a pen-pal for them? My surprise derived from a prior over-adherence to popular narratives which posited compulsory Russian learning at school as a chore, and difficulties in this subject, and when communicating in Russian more generally, as a small act of resistance.[4] OSA sources present instead Russian programming as one possibility or option of which Czech and Slovak listeners availed themselves, at various times for various reasons.

Radio Free Europe analysts painted Czech and Slovak listeners to Radio Vienna as "persons largely satisfying entertainment needs."[5] While Radio Vienna provided "entertainment," it was RFE, Voice of America and the BBC which constituted "the dominant voices of the West in Czechoslovakia."[6] In this and other sources, entertainment was contrasted with political significance and, with stations such as Radio Vienna discounted as apolitical, RFE emerged as the prime station squaring off against Czechoslovak state media in a two-sided (rather than multivocal) debate.[7] Historians such as Ute Poiger have started to unpick ideas of culture being apolitical in Central Europe in the 1950s and 1960s by exploring the behaviorist assumptions underpinning such claims. Sources housed at the OSA show me the mechanisms by which entertainment came to be contrasted with politics in the context of RFE, and suggest that listeners themselves may have understood radio listening somewhat differently (with certain listener answers having to be discounted by RFE pollsters in order to conduct the sort of analysis they desired). But I believe it

[4] This idea is articulated very nicely by Vladimir Maule in an oral history interview with the National Czech & Slovak Museum & Library. See http://www.ncsml.org/exhibits/vladimir-maule/ - last checked 17.8.2016.
[5] *Listening to Western Broadcasts in Czechoslovakia Before and After the Invasion (January 1969)*: 5 in HU OSA 300-6-2 Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute: Media and Opinion Research Department: East Europe Area and Opinion Research, Box 3
[6] Ibid.
[7] Maybe something here about the promotional video suggesting there were two sides?

will be through further reliance upon oral histories, memoirs and diaries that I can approach an understanding of listeners' own views on a supposed culture/politics divide. My findings at OSA have expedited my research into such a topic, which I plan to begin this autumn.

To test the language of resistance and anti-Communism which permeates both OSA sources *and* Czech popular memory about the everyday activities of non-elites during the socialist period,[8] I wondered if it might be helpful to adopt Tara Zahra's concept of "indifference" to recover listeners' intentions when tuning in to both Czechoslovak and Western radio.[9] Zahra develops this concept so as to interrogate the language in which historical sources written by nationalist activists come clothed. Considering indifference also serves to somehow empower or recover the agency of individuals who are discarded by the authors of highly ideologically-charged sources for not being ideological enough. Radio Free Europe polling regularly split its respondents into "Communists" and "anti-Communists" and did not incorporate those who did not fit into one of these two categories into its final calculations. This gave an impression of a somewhat bipolar world, into which listeners with opaque allegiances did not fit. A similar, although reconfigured, bipolar world of Communists versus anti-Communists has also been evoked in popular representations of Communism and some Czech historiography following the fall of Communism in 1989.[10] I wonder, then, if Cold War indifference might present us with a means of understanding the motivations of listeners who did not fit easily into pollsters' categories? Does indifference open

[8] For good examples of Czechs' and Slovaks' everyday actions being understood through a binary of resistance versus collaboration, see the educational programme and accompanying volume *Naše normalizace* (edited by Adam Drda and Karel Strachota - Prague, Člověk v tísni, 2011) or, in literary form, Petr Placák's *Fízl* (Prague, Torst, 2007)

[9] See Tara Zahra, "Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis" in *Slavic Review*, Vol. 69, No. 1 (Spring 2010) pp. 93-119

[10] See footnote 8 for starters. Also, see the output of oral history initiative Post Bellum, which largely sorts its historical subjects into the categories of anti-Communist and Communist: https://www.postbellum.cz/english/ - last checked 17.8.2016.

a space for us to consider other ideologies espoused by radio listeners when making listening decisions in the 1950s and 1960s?

Calling radio listeners "indifferent," of course, may downplay the risks involved in listening to western radio stations at various junctures during the Cold War, and potentially undermines the role radio played in facilitating pro- and anti-government protests, demonstrations, and rallies. But I wonder if it is a way of understanding the more quotidian response to radio listening (if for every one day of radio-instigated eventfulness, there were 364 in which no such protest occurred). And it seems that I could still do more reading about the *indirect* effects of radio appeals, as the "magic bullet" theory of communications, positing that a message can be directly transmitted, received, and acted upon by the listener, seems largely at odds with the findings of my research to date, in which the story of 1950s and 1960s Czechoslovak radio is much more one of misunderstanding, partial understanding, (mis)appropriation, deliberate mystification, ironization and unsuccessful attempts at persuasion than it is of radio constituting a slick medium for the smooth relay of messages from A to B.

All of this research is quite preliminary and clearly needs to be interrogated a lot further. But I thank the scholars at OSA for guiding me through their invaluable and extensive collections, and for pushing me to consider my points in some more depth. I would like to thank Professor Ivan Szekely in particular for providing me with guidance throughout, and for taking a considerable amount of time to devise protocols for publishing RFE personnel files at my request. Csaba Szilagyi also offered helpful assistance and provided useful secondary reading. Both Istvan Rev and Andras Mink provided extremely helpful and thought-provoking feedback, for which I am very grateful. And Robert Parnica and Judit Hegedus made the archives a pleasure to navigate, use and work in. OSA proved a tremendously stimulating environment in which to think through some

of the knottier theoretical issues which will underpin this project as it develops. I thank OSA for providing the resources and support to undertake such research.

Sources used at OSA:

HU OSA 298-3-2 Box 1 Records of the Free Europe Committee/ East Europe Publications/ News from Behind the Iron Curtain (January 1952 – December 1953)
HU OSA 298-3-2 Box 2 Records of the Free Europe Committee/ East Europe Publications/ News from Behind the Iron Curtain (January 1954 – December 1956)

HU OSA 300-6-1 Box 1 Records of Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty Research Institute/ Media and Opinion Research Department/ Administrative Files/ Analysis Reports 1956 – 1962
HU OSA 300-6-1 Box 2 Records of Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty Research Institute/ Media and Opinion Research Department/ Administrative Files/ Analysis Reports 1963 – 1967
HU OSA 300-6-1 Box 3 Records of Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty Research Institute/ Media and Opinion Research Department/ Administrative Files/ Analysis Reports 1968 – 1979
HU OSA 300-6-2 Box 1 Records of Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty Research Institute/ Media and Opinion Research Department/ East Europe Area and Opinion Research (1962 – 1965)
HU OSA 300-6-2 Box 2 Records of Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty Research Institute/ Media and Opinion Research Department/ East Europe Area and Opinion Research (1966 – 1967)
HU OSA 300-6-2 Box 3 Records of Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty Research Institute/ Media and Opinion Research Department/ East Europe Area and Opinion Research (1968 – 1970)

HU OSA 300-30-13 Box 1 Records of Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty Research Institute/ Czechoslovak Unit/ Information Items (Items 1965 – 1968)

HU OSA 300-30-22 Box 1 Records of Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty Research Institute/ Czechoslovak Unit/ Czechoslovak Monitoring (March 12 – May 8, 1951)
HU OSA 300-30-22 Box 2 Records of Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty Research Institute/ Czechoslovak Unit/ Czechoslovak Monitoring (May 9 – June 16, 1951)
HU OSA 300-30-22 Box 27 Records of Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty Research Institute/ Czechoslovak Unit/ Czechoslovak Monitoring (March 1 – March 24, 1953)
HU OSA 300-30-22 Box 67 Records of Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty Research Institute/ Czechoslovak Unit/ Czechoslovak Monitoring (December 1 – December 19, 1956)

HU OSA 300-30-30 Box 8 Records of Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty Research Institute/ Czechoslovak Unit/ Miscellaneous Records of the Czechoslovak Unit (Correspondence, September 1966 – April 1969)
HU OSA 300-30-30 Box 17 Records of Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty Research Institute/ Czechoslovak Unit/ Miscellaneous Records of the Czechoslovak Unit (1951 – 1955)
HU OSA 300-30-30 Box 21 Records of Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty Research Institute/ Czechoslovak Unit/ Miscellaneous Records of the Czechoslovak Unit (Assorted programming 1958 - 1970)

Information Items (I've only browsed through those generated in 1951, using this search: http://catalog.osaarchivum.org/catalog?utf8=%E2%9C%93&f%5Bdigital_collection%5D%5B%5D=RFE+Information+Items&search_field=dummy_range&range%5Bdate_created_facet%5D%5Bbegin%5D=1951&range%5Bdate_created_facet%5D%5Bend%5D=1952&commit=Apply)

Ferdinand Peroutka's Personnel File (how do I cite this?)

A Survey of the East Europe Research and Analysis Department (EERA), May 1966 (from Csaba)

Books consulted at the OSA Library:

Josef Josten, *Oh! My Country!* (London, Latimer House, 1949)

Gary D. Rawnsley, *Radio Diplomacy and Propaganda: The BBC and VOA in International Politics, 1956-1964* (London, MacMillan, 1996)