

Religion as a Weapon: United States Radio and the Cold War

An Interview with Mark G. Pomar, author of *Cold War Radio: The Russian Broadcasts of the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*

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Abstract

The following is an interview hosted by the *Journal of the Oxford Graduate Theological Society* (JOGTS) with Mark G. Pomar in June 2023. We discussed Mark's extensive experiences interacting with Soviet media during his time as Assistant Director of the RFE/RL 1982–1993, experiences which culminated in his recent book: *Cold War Radio* (Lincoln: Potomac Books/University of Nebraska Press, 2022). The interview was conducted by Victoria Phillips.

Journal of the Oxford Graduate Theological Society (JOGTS): Thank you for joining us. Let's begin with some background. Simply put, why radio?

Mark Pomar (MP): First and foremost, Soviet media were under the full control of the government. All national, local, and regional media reported directly to the same Kremlin officials. So, when we sat down at our daily morning meeting at the Munich headquarters of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), the first question we would ask was: "Is there an important event that the Soviet Union is either distorting or ignoring?" And that would often be our lead story.

Generally, we faced two different types of subjects: Ones that were always ignored for ideological reasons and others that were topical, usually relating to a recent event. For example, there would be a Soviet airplane crash and the Soviet media would not report on it. Of course,



the rest of the world media would report on the crash, but the Soviet media remained silent. That would be a topical story of the day, and Voice of America (VOA) and RFE/RL would report the crash, citing the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal* or the news wires. We would often do a press round-up at the end of the broadcast day, citing what the American, British, French, German, and Italian mainstream news outlets were reporting about Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Our aim was to give Soviet listeners a general sense of how Europe and the US were viewing current events.

Along with topical stories, we had what I would call “perennial issues that challenged Soviet ideology.” Often, they were distortions of historical events. For example, the famine in Ukraine in the 1930s was a subject that the Soviet Union avoided or, when pressed to comment, would blatantly deny the very existence of the famine. And for that reason, RFE/RL would report on the famine from time and time, especially if there was an academic conference devoted to this issue or the publication of an important book. Other examples of historical programming would include the Soviet terror of the 1930s, World War II, or the roots of the Cold War. With so many historical issues either ignored or distorted in the Soviet press, we had a field day preparing our programs.

JOGTS: Why religion?

MP: I’d think of this in three broad terms. First, among the major subjects ignored or distorted in the Soviet Union was religion. Kremlin propagandists considered religion a principal enemy, inimical to Soviet values and Marxist ideology. So, for us, religion became a major topic, and we would have extensive reports on practiced rituals, sermons by prominent clerics, as well as discussions of theological ideas and philosophy.

The Soviet press regularly attacked VOA and RFE/RL, most often accusing us of leading Soviet youth astray through religious programming. For us, that was proof that our broadcasts were indeed having an effect. For many Soviet ideologues, religion was the key battlefield of the Cold War.

“The Battle of Ideas” is a popular concept in Cold War studies. Certainly, the opposition of capitalism and socialism was central to the Cold War struggle, but that struggle went deeper, touching one’s core values and beliefs. This meant, above all, human rights, your personal freedom, your unique independent voice, and your very sense of reality. After all, Soviet totalitarianism sought to control not only your actions but your inner thoughts. And for that reason, religious programming to the Soviet Union took on special meaning.

From the very beginning both RFE/RL and VOA broadcast sermons by noted Eastern Orthodox clerics and even entire religious services, primarily because Orthodoxy was the major historical religion of Russia as well as that of Belarus, Ukraine, Georgia, and Armenia. It is noteworthy that

these broadcasts were not ecumenical but intended for co-religionists. To broaden the scope of the programming, Radio Liberty introduced weekly religious programs for interested but sceptical listeners in the Soviet Union. Led by the Reverend Alexander Schmemmann who taught at Union Theological Seminary and Columbia University, it explained how integral Christianity was to the development of Russian culture, literature, and philosophy. Without understanding the basics of Christianity, for example, one could hardly make sense of Dostoevsky or even Pushkin.

Although the official voice of the US government, VOA also had religious programming similar to those at Radio Liberty. Despite the separation of church and state, VOA broadcast Orthodox services and invited theologians to discuss religious concepts. The Russian Service even hired an Orthodox priest, the Reverend Victor Potapov, to anchor the religious broadcasts.

In the 1970s, under pressure from the West, the Soviet authorities began allowing the emigration of Jews. Realizing the need to address the concerns of Jews in the Soviet Union, both VOA and Radio Liberty introduced Jewish programs, modelling them on the Christian Orthodox programs. Jewish rabbis spoke about the traditions, rituals, songs, and values of Judaism. These programs were of such high quality that a major Jewish organization in New Jersey honoured VOA in 1985 with its annual human rights award.

To be fair, some of the religious programs, especially at Radio Liberty, occasionally veered into Russian nationalism. One prominent example that I describe in my book is a series of programs about the thousandth anniversary year of Christianity in Russia (1988). With the full endorsement of senior RFE/RL management, RL devoted hours of airtime each day to this commemoration, becoming in effect a religious broadcaster.

The key problem with the broadcasts was the presentation of the baptism of Kyivan Rus as strictly a “Russian” historical event, ignoring the fact that the leader of Kyivan Rus—Waldemar (c. 958–1015)—was a Viking. Furthermore, the program completely ignored the fact that the Kyivan Rus state was the founding state of Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia. In time, the name, Waldemar, became “Vladimir” in Russia and “Volodomyr” in Ukraine, but whatever the case he was not a “Russian Prince” as presented in the Russian broadcasts.

Such blatant nationalist views engendered criticism, most prominently from a well-known human rights leader, Ludmila Alexeyeva. Her main point was that these programs were not so much about religion as they were about “age-old Russian imperialism under the guise of religion.”

Second, Cold War endings. Gorbachev’s glasnost had a profound effect on the Russian broadcasts of both VOA and RFE/RL, which I describe in detail in my book. In 1988, all jamming of our broadcasts ceased and, in 1989, we were able to open bureaus in Moscow. Soviet citizens could now participate in our broadcasts, and we could interview leading Soviet politicians

and cultural figures. In these remarkably freer times, religion ceased to be a taboo subject. Religious programs, on a much smaller scale, continued but they lost the taint of the forbidden.

As a matter of fact, there was a craze in the late eighties of baptisms in the Soviet Union. People told me that they primarily sought out baptisms to show that they were now Russians, Ukrainians, or Belarussians, and no longer just “Soviet.” It is worth noting that the Soviet Union aimed to create Soviet people—the Soviet man and Soviet woman—and not Russians, Ukrainians, or Kazakhs. Now Soviet people were free to choose their identity and, for many, being baptized was the expression of personal agency.

Once the Soviet Union fell apart in late 1991, religious programs were phased out at VOA and RFE/RL. With complete freedom of religion, it made little sense to continue these programs. Indeed, now people find it odd that we had so many religious programs but during the Cold War they were an important part of our overall strategy.

Finally, third, the twenty-first century and the question of whose weapon? One could look at the religious programs of the 1980s and see the roots of Putin’s Russia. During the Cold War, the Munich headquarters of RFE/RL was a kind of microcosm of all Russian political movements, from left to right. We had a few people who were still looking for Leninist democracy as well as liberals who embodied Western values. But there was also a far-right group that was centred on religion. At times, their religious zeal acquired strong imperial tendencies, a phenomenon we see today in Russia’s brutal war against Ukraine.

JOGTS: So how does that reconcile with, or does it reconcile with, the Cold War religious programming? In other words, was there some claim not only to nationalism, but some idea of “universal” ethics promoted by the radios: “Do unto others,” or something like that?

MP: There was clearly an entire gamut of religious programs, ranging from the liberal, ecumenical tone of the Rev. Schmemmann’s programs to the aggressively nationalist tone of the programs devoted to the thousandth anniversary of Christianity in Kyivan Rus.

What’s remarkable is that tens of thousands of RFE/RL programs are now accessible online through the Open Society archives and scholars can access those broadcasts and determine how effective they were.

JOGTS: Has today’s post-Cold War regime hijacked religion and the church?

MP: Perhaps a story may best illustrate this. When I joined RFE/RL in 1982, I tried to get to know some of the older Russian editors. I recall having lunch with several of them and I started telling them what I had heard in a Washington briefing, primarily how the Reagan administration saw Russians as victims of communism, no less than Poles, Hungarians, or Ukrainians. Well, according to Reagan’s advisers, the best way of reaching Russians was by helping them to

restore their culture, identity, and religion. As I was describing this approach, I could see scowls on the faces of the editors. Finally, one editor told me: “Listen, you naïve Americans, don't you understand that communism is dying. Nobody in the Soviet Union will fight and die for communism and no one cares about Africa or world communism. But Russian nationalism, deeply embedded in Orthodoxy, is growing in the Soviet Union, especially in the military and the KGB. And, you Americans will rue the day, when Soviet practice merges with age-old Russian imperialism.”

They were talking about the threat of Russian nationalism. And of course, several years later, how did the Soviet Union fall apart? It rotted from inside. No one supported communism. And now we see the full expression of Russian imperialism. And, unfortunately, the Russian Orthodox Church, hounded by the Soviet authorities for decades, now occupies a vaunted position in Russian society and is the true handmaiden of the State.

JOGTS: What is next for you?

MP: I am interested in writing another book about RFE/RL, this time focusing on the non-Russian broadcasts. The US was the only major country to fund programs in Ukrainian, Kazakh, Uzbek, Georgian, Armenian, and many other languages. This is a story that needs to be told and will contribute to the “decolonizing” of Russian studies. That is now an important concept in western scholarship, and I am eager to make a contribution to that effort.

JOGTS: Well, that's a fabulous place to end.

MP: I enjoyed it. Great fun.