

May 1, 1957

Ambassador Bohlen's Views of Radio Liberation

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Summary:

Cord Meyer forwards to Richard Helms his account of Ambassador Charles E. Bohlen's views of RL provided to a Committee on Radio Broadcasting Policy (CRBP) meeting on April 24. Minutes of the meeting are provided in a State Department memorandum dated April 25

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MEMORANDUM FOR: Deputy Director (Plans)

VIA:

SUBJECT: Comments by Ambassador Bohlen

This memorandum is for information only.

Ambassador Bohlen and also Howland Sargeant attended a special meeting of the Committee on Radio Broadcasting Policy on 24 April to discuss the role of Radio Liberation as a voice of emigres speaking to the population of the Soviet Union. He made the following points:

1. The more straight news and the less polemics used, the more effective the station will be. Radio Liberation can and should emphasize a different type of news than the official Voice of America.
2. Thinking people in the Soviet Union do not like to be told by any kind of a "foreign" voice about the shortcomings of the Soviet system. There are strong emotional ties and elements of patriotism which cause them to resent this; but they are avid for hard news about world events which they know their own government withholds from them.
3. For Radio Liberation to indulge primarily in argumentation and all-out attacks against the Soviet system merely plays into the hands of the Kremlin by giving substance to its contention to its own people that foreign interference in their affairs is an ever-present danger. Jamming and the regime's efforts to discredit Radio Liberation by attacks on it in domestic Soviet media are part of the official campaign to dangle this danger continuously before the Soviet people.

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4. The average Russian does not distinguish between VOA and Radio Liberation. The Ambassador viewed with skepticism specific evidences, primarily from defectors, that Radio Liberation is identified explicitly for what it is -- a voice of free people from the Soviet Union speaking from the outside to their fellow countrymen in the listeners' interest. He said such testimony from defectors could not always be believed because they are prone to say what they believe their interrogators want to hear.

5. Since World War II when it came into common usage, the word "liberation" has been associated in the minds of Soviet citizens with military intervention. Some of this connotation may have rubbed off in recent years.

6. There are great areas of discontent in the Soviet Union but no evidence of rebellion. There is no possibility of triggering off a revolt within the country from outside.

7. The average Soviet citizen, since the disappearance of Stalinism, has been encouraged to believe that changes are possible within the system. Generally the approach of the average Soviet citizen is to try to effect changes to his advantage; he does not aspire to destroying the system itself.

8. Emigres as such have never been very popular within the Soviet Union, but we don't really know enough about this to come to any clear decision as to whether the emigre character of Radio Liberation is effective in appealing to listeners within the Soviet Union.

9. There are areas in which Radio Liberation undoubtedly could encourage and assist the Soviet citizen in his desire for change. This is particularly true in the economic and cultural fields. He also should not involve total opposition to everything in the system but to increase the citizen's desire to push for better housing, more food and consumer goods and a general rise in the low standard of living, which is the chief source of discontent now. The latter theme could be exploited effectively by renewed attention to the aims of Khrushchev, demonstrating that his theories were economically achievable but were killed by an exclusively political decision. In other words, we should try to play on this discontent with a low standard of living by showing that a betterment of things within the present framework is

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quite possible. Comparisons with free world living standards are for the most part counter-productive. Instead, we should try to show the listener how he might improve his own lot in terms related to his own experience pattern and to the framework of his political environment.

10. Decentralization of the country's economy will produce new problems for the regime leadership. Politically we can play on this theme by pointing to contradictions as between economic growth and educational development and the antiquity of current political forms which has voided Marxism of any persuasive power. Radio Liberation could capitalize on this by getting a first-class Marxist mind to expose the emptiness and sterility of present political practices as compared with the realities of economic and social development.

11. In cultural matters the entire approach can be very useful provided speakers and authors of real distinction -- those with names well-known and respected in the Soviet Union -- can be utilized; and provided, further, that the ideas they reflect are not "foreign" ideas as such.

12. The ferment among students reflects more a resentment against regime suppression of information and discussion than outright political opposition to the Soviet system. It is, nevertheless, susceptible of exploitation.

13. The Ambassador summed up by stating that as the Soviet Union develops there will be less and less room for the Party structure in the future. Short of a real crisis threatening the regime, he does not believe it is possible for the leadership to return to the methods of Stalinism, even though the current process of evolution may not always be smooth.

CORD MEYER, JR.

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Chief

International Organizations Division

44-8851

[Redacted] (24 April 1957)

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4. It should be mentioned that any those bearing a foreign label is suspect, and because of the label otherwise sympathetic persons will be likely to shy away from it.
5. To mark to wary of the danger of being so closely tied to the organization that any political agreement with the USSR would be regarded by them as an act of black betrayal--as was the French feeling among many emigrants.
6. While a non-official radio can do things an official radio cannot do, under present circumstances in the USSR the possibility of disseminating effectively is greatly limited. The Soviet Union's interest in foreign broadcasts points a definite line for information. A broadcast which goes beyond the provision of information will probably be treated as propaganda, for the Russians are experts at recognizing propaganda, of which they have had so much from their own government.
7. Though under present circumstances Radio Liberation may be desirable, on the other hand to close it down could produce a negative effect and risk the charge of retreating before Soviet Communism.
8. Themes that might be used effectively are as follows:

- a. The average Russian is not concerned with the Soviet political system or possibilities of changing it. He is concerned with improving his living standards, and the Minister might concentrate the government has it within its power to improve the Soviet standard of living. It might be possible by pointing out certain themes to show the demand for better housing and more consumer goods. For example, in view of the severe housing shortage it would be useful to have built the same standard with a capacity of 100 thousand when they already have in Moscow houses with a capacity of 20 thousand.
- b. It might be possible to do something with the cultural education, for there is a great interest in cultural matters generally, and in the accomplishments of Russians, including those outside the USSR.
- c. It would be useful to have a first class student of Russian go to work on the ideological standing of several Soviet Nations, which is largely confined to repeating empty questions from Lenin.

II. The Committee decided to meet with Dr. Johnson on May 3 to discuss the forthcoming conference.

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