

SECTION FIVE

Western Radio and Topical Issues: Six Brief Case Studies

Examining the role played by Western radio and Radio Liberty in forming listeners' opinions on specific events can be instructive in helping to understand the stations' larger impact on their audience. Over the years, SAAOR placed a range of topical attitudinal questions in its traveler surveys. They allow us to take a close-up view of Western radio listening behavior in specific circumstances. Here we will briefly look at the fateful Soviet military involvement in Afghanistan, the *samizdat* phenomenon in the USSR, the downing of the Korean airliner, the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, *glasnost'* and *perestroika*, and the rise of Solidarity in Poland. Each case presents specific aspects of domestic media and Western radio use.

5.1. The War in Afghanistan: 1979–1989

SAAOR began gathering data on the attitudes of Soviet citizens to the war in Afghanistan in the early 1980s, and published its first findings on the subject in 1985.¹ In 1988, a trend report tracing the evolution of attitudes toward the war, and the role that Western radio played in informing Soviet listeners (based on 6,059 data cases), showed that disapproval of the war had risen from one-quarter of the population in 1984 to almost half in 1987, while those who held no opinion dropped from about half to one in three (see Figure 31).² Those who had been uncertain in their attitudes toward the war moved to disapproval, while

48 ■ R. Eugene Parta

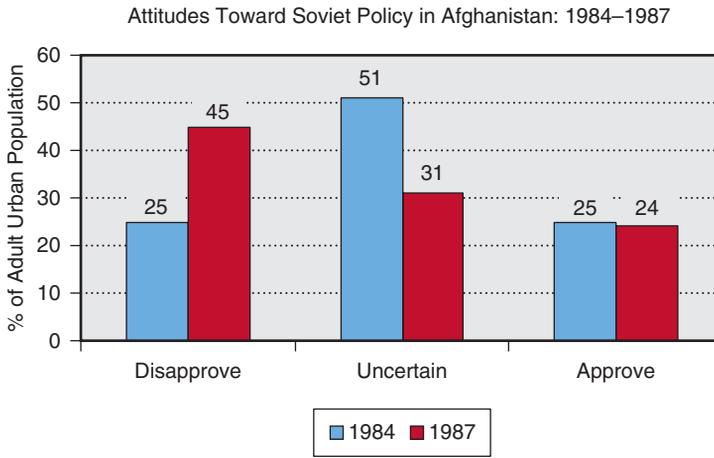


FIGURE 31. Attitudes Toward Soviet Policy in Afghanistan Among Urban Adults: 1984–1987

approval rates held steady. In the early years of the war, respondents tended either to minimize its importance and avoid expressing a viewpoint, or to recite stereotyped responses based on domestic Soviet propaganda. It was only after several years of involvement in Afghanistan that clearly-defined attitudes toward

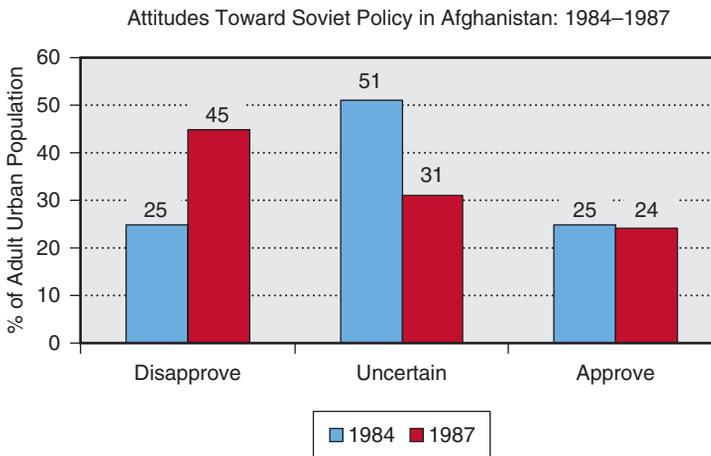


FIGURE 32. Sources of Information on the War in Afghanistan Among the Soviet Adult Urban Population: 1984–1987

Western Radio and Topical Issues ■ 49

the war began to be expressed by a majority of respondents in the traveler survey.

An analysis of information sources on Afghanistan show that Western radio played a significant role in informing the Soviet population about the war. Figure 32 shows that in 1987 ca. 45% of the urban population received information on the war from Western radio, compared with ca. 55% who cited the Soviet press and 50% who cited Soviet TV. Word-of-mouth was indicated by ca. 46% of respondents, roughly the same proportion who cited Western radio. As noted above, there is a high correlation between using Western radio and word-of-mouth as information sources.

Agitprop meetings were cited by ca. 38% of respondents in 1984, but this figure had dropped to 15% in 1987. It may be surmised that, by 1987, as the war began to go badly and the problems encountered began to receive attention in the Soviet press, *agitprop* lecturers were less inclined to confront critical audiences on this thorny topic.

When attitudes toward the war were correlated with information sources on the war, it became apparent that those who received their information from Western radio or via word-of-mouth communication were considerably more critical of Soviet policy than those who relied on official sources (see Figure 33).

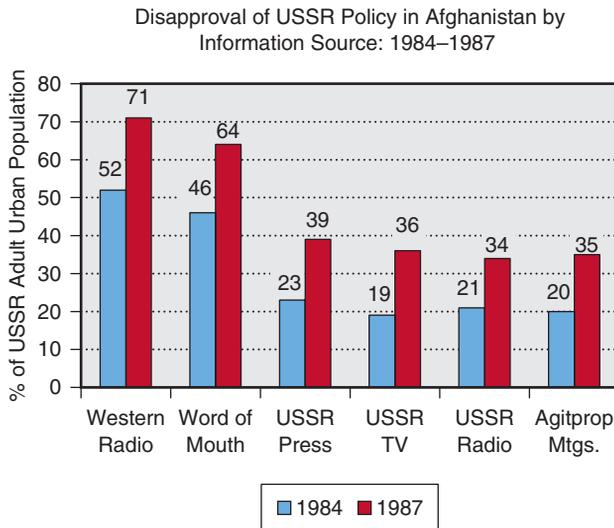


FIGURE 33. Disapproval of USSR Policy in Afghanistan by Information Source: 1984–1987

50 ■ R. Eugene Parta

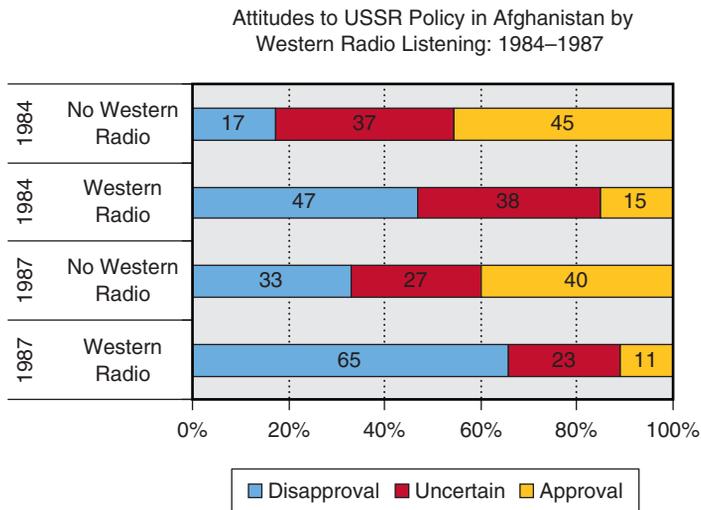


FIGURE 34. Attitudes to USSR Policy in Afghanistan Among Listeners and Non-Listeners to Western Radio: 1984–1987

While users of all information sources saw the war more negatively in 1987 than in 1984, the critical rate for Western radio listeners attained 71%, followed by 64% for word-of-mouth.

In 1984, Western radio listeners in general were roughly three times more critical of the war than non-listeners (see Figure 34).

In 1987, about two-thirds of Western radio listeners disapproved of the war and only about one in nine supported it. Clearly, information on the war supplied by Western radio played an important role in spreading anti-war sentiment among the Soviet population. It's also important to note the doubling of disapproval among non-listeners. Under *glasnost*,³ critical coverage of the war began to appear in 1987 in the Soviet press. Information from soldiers returning from Afghanistan was widespread throughout the population, and this, coupled with continuing coverage of the war by Western radio, created a situation where official media had to move beyond a narrow propaganda-based approach to the war if they were to maintain any credibility at all.

Criticism of the war had surfaced in the CPSU ranks by 1987, according to SAAOR data. In 1984 only 8% of party members disapproved of the war but this proportion had increased

Western Radio and Topical Issues ■ 51

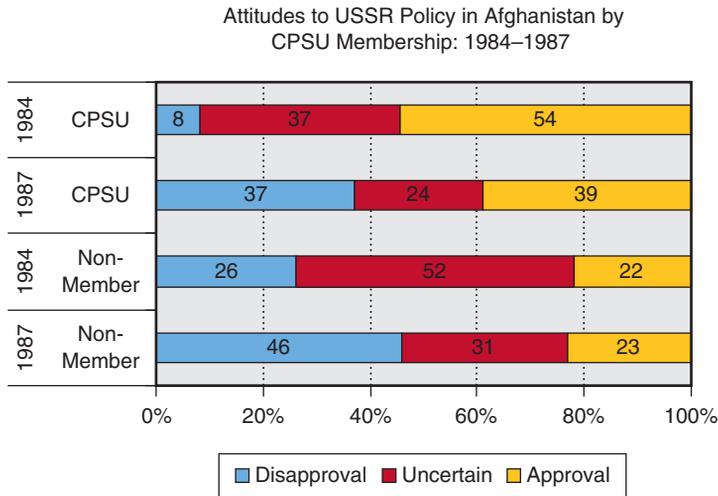


FIGURE 35. Attitudes to USSR Policy in Afghanistan by CPSU Membership: 1984–1987

to 37% by 1987 (see Figure 35). Support dropped from 54% in 1984 to 39% in 1987. When the Party rank and file began to lose faith in the war effort, the Afghan adventure was clearly doomed.

Secretary Gorbachev announced in February 1988 that the USSR would withdraw its military forces from Afghanistan, and the pull-out was completed a year later.

Data gathered by SAAOR in 1988 and 1989, after Gorbachev's announcement, indicated a high degree of disillusion with the Afghan adventure.⁴ While 90% of respondents approved of the decision to withdraw, 69% of those queried felt that the USSR had failed to achieve its goals, and only 15% felt that it had achieved them. Fifty-nine percent of the respondents thought that the USSR's involvement in the Afghan conflict would have a lasting impact on Soviet society, while 29% felt that it would not. Among the effects cited were: diminished trust in the CPSU and the government, problems with veterans, and increased ethnic tensions. Sixty-eight percent of Western radio listeners felt that the war would have lasting effects, compared with 49% of the non-listeners. The listeners especially felt that trust in public institutions had decreased. Their sentiments were prescient for the future.

5.2. The *Samizdat* Phenomenon: 1970s

The *samizdat* phenomenon provided Western radio, and especially Radio Liberty, with one of its central programming themes in the 1970s. *Samizdat* (literally “self-published” materials) in some cases expressed political dissent, but also included literary works that failed to receive the official seal of approval, as well as information on human rights. *Samizdat* was an important part of the Soviet intellectual scene since the Sinyavsky-Daniel trial of 1966.⁵ In the 1970s, it provided the democratic and human rights movements in the USSR with an essential means of expression to convey their message to the outside world, bypassing the narrow confines of small intellectual groups in a few large urban centers, where a limited number of typescripts passed from hand to hand. Western radio stations broadcast *samizdat* materials that reached the West back to the USSR, thus making them accessible to the larger Soviet population. *Samizdat* was a staple of Radio Liberty broadcast fare, but was also carried by VOA, BBC and some other Western broadcasters.

During the period March 1974 to March 1977, SAAOR gathered responses on a battery of questions concerning *samizdat* from 3,821 Soviet citizens traveling outside the country.⁶ The MIT computer simulation methodology was used to project this data on to the adult population of the USSR.

According to the SAAOR study, slightly less than half the population of the USSR (44%) was aware of the *samizdat* phenomenon (see Figure 36). Of these, over half were aware from

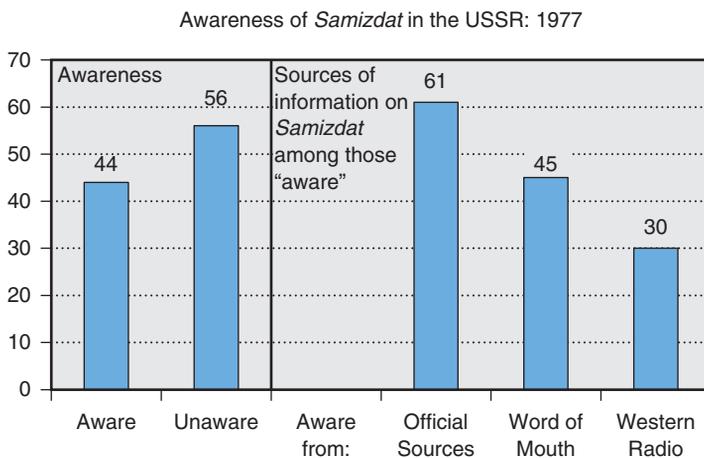


FIGURE 36. Awareness of *Samizdat* in the USSR: 1977

Western Radio and Topical Issues ■ 53

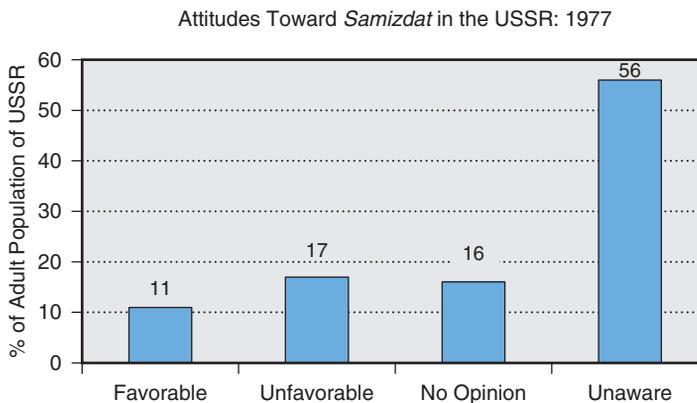


FIGURE 37. Attitudes Toward *Samizdat* in the USSR: 1977

official sources, while about three in ten knew of *samizdat* from Western radio broadcasts. Word-of-mouth, not surprisingly, was also an important source, being noted by almost half of those aware of *samizdat*.

Only about one in nine Soviet citizens had a favorable opinion of *samizdat*. Among those aware of *samizdat*, about a quarter approved of it (see Figure 37). This finding was no doubt colored by the relatively high number of respondents who had heard about *samizdat* from official sources, which would have cast it at least in a negative light, at most as a treasonous activity. Once again, the “favorable” figure of one in nine comes close to the estimate of the proportion of “liberals” in the Soviet population already cited (see Figure 20).

Attitudes of Western radio listeners to *samizdat* put the phenomenon into a certain perspective (see Figure 38).

Radio Liberty listeners, already cited as the most “liberal” audience to Western radio, were in a large majority favorable to *samizdat* (about 7 in 10) while only 8% were negative. The favorable rating dropped to one in three for the composite audience to other Western radio stations (excluding Radio Liberty listeners). Among non-listeners to Western radio there was little sympathy for *samizdat*.

In the 1970s the *samizdat* phenomenon and the related human rights movement in the USSR was a major topic of Radio Liberty broadcasting. There is a strong correlation between listening to Radio Liberty and approval of this form of dissident activity, decried by a majority of the Soviet population.

54 ■ R. Eugene Parta

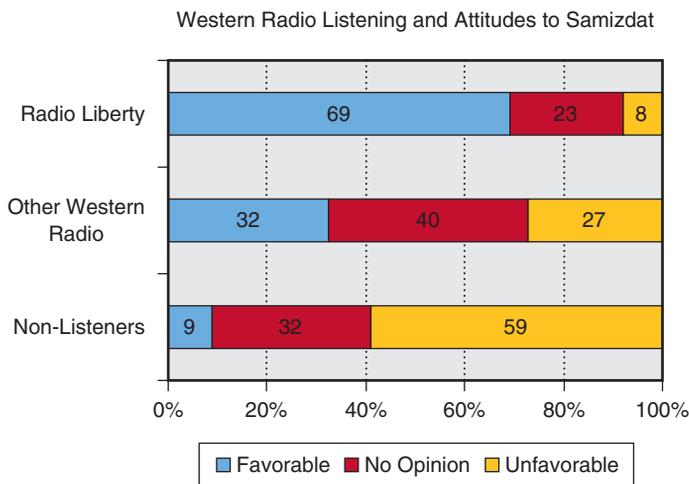


FIGURE 38. Western Radio Listening and Attitudes to *Samizdat*

5.3. The Korean Airliner Incident: 1983

The Soviet downing of flight KAL 007 on September 1, 1983 provided a clear test of the efficacy of Western radio. The version of events communicated to Soviet listeners was almost diametrically opposed to that of official Soviet sources. In the two months immediately following the tragic incident, SAAOR, in the course of its normal survey program, queried 274 Soviet citizen travelers on their reactions to the incident and their sources of information on it.⁷

From the outset, Western broadcasters to the USSR gave heavy coverage to the KAL incident. Soviet media, however, during the first week of September, restricted their discussion of the affair to cryptic hints that a foreign plane had violated Soviet airspace. Not until September 7 did *Pravda* acknowledge that the Korean Airliner had been shot down by Soviet air defense. This signalled the launching of a full-scale media and *agitprop* campaign aimed at mobilizing domestic opinion in support of the government's position. In view of the sheer volume of commentary on the incident, it is not surprising that almost all respondents claimed to be aware of the event. In fact, 62% of them said they had heard about the KAL incident from *agitprop* meetings (see Figure 39). It's quite possible that many of the respondents had been briefed before traveling abroad so that

Western Radio and Topical Issues ■ 55

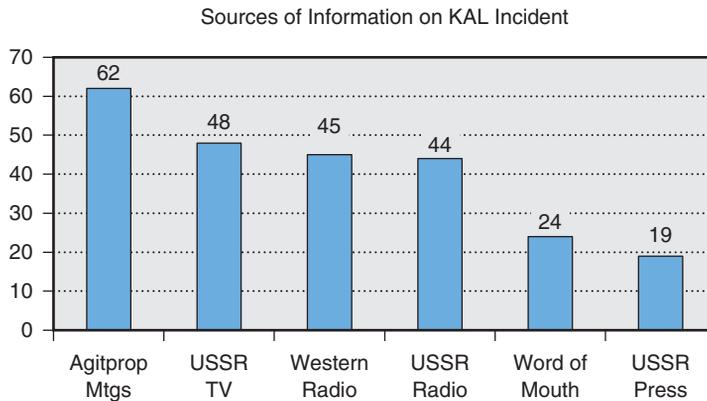


FIGURE 39. Sources of Information on the KAL Incident

they would know how to respond “correctly” to questions on the topic.

Western radio, mentioned by 45% of respondents, compared favorably with Soviet TV and domestic radio as an information source. However, a striking dichotomy in attitudes was found between those who had heard about the incident on Western radio and those who had only heard the official Soviet version. About eight in ten of the non-listeners to Western radio accepted the official Soviet version of events, while only 18% of the Western radio listeners found the Soviet version credible (see Figure 40). Over half the Western radio listeners believed the version of the incident they had heard on the broadcasts, while another 30% were uncertain which version to believe. The relatively large percentage of “don’t knows” among the Western radio listeners may stem from the fact that they had been exposed to two conflicting versions of the incident and found it difficult to reach a conclusion. But their readiness to express uncertainty indicated a reluctance to accept the official version in the face of contradictory information.

The attitudes expressed by respondents to the Soviet action are consistent with the version of the incident to which they had been exposed, and which they had found more credible. (See Figure 41).

70% of the non-listeners approved the Soviet action in downing the Korean aircraft while only 22% of the Western radio listeners did so. Conversely, almost half the listeners

56 ■ R. Eugene Parta

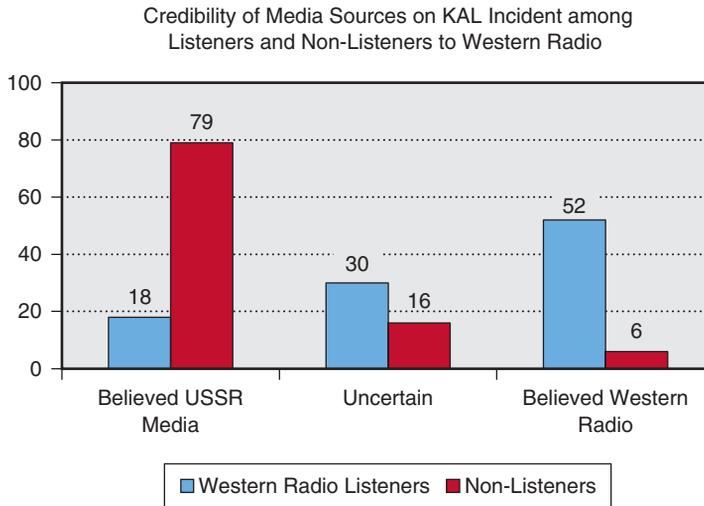


FIGURE 40. Credibility of Media Sources on KAL Incident Among Listeners and Non-Listeners to Western Radio

disapproved of the Soviet action and another third were unsure.

While the sample size in this spot survey was relatively small, the dichotomy that emerged between listeners and non-listeners was instructive. Some skepticism of the Soviet

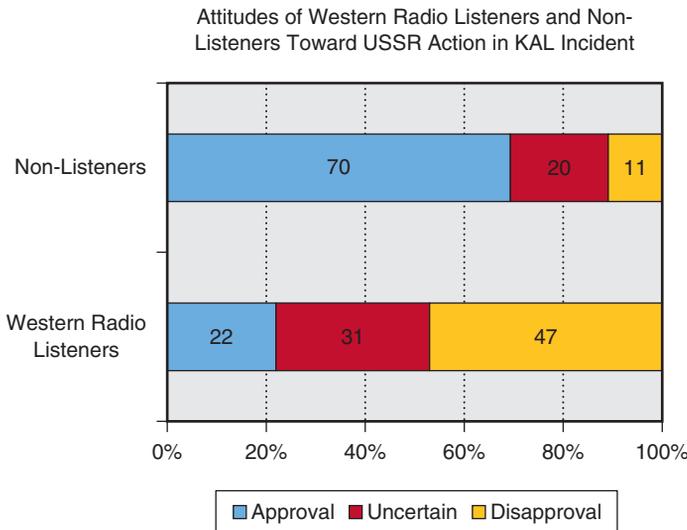


FIGURE 41. Attitudes Toward the USSR Action in the KAL Incident Among Listeners and Non-Listeners to Western Radio

Western Radio and Topical Issues ■ 57

version of events may well have existed without Western radio information sources. But it is questionable that an 'alternative opinion' could have been formed. For this, outside information was necessary. It's interesting to note that, in the first week or so after the downing of the aircraft, most respondents showed a good deal of confusion over the matter. At that stage, their natural response was to voice support of their government. Only after enough time had passed to allow the Western radio version of events to be repeated in a consistent manner, while the Soviet version emerged in a halting, and at times contradictory, form, were clear opinion changes noticed.

5.4. The Chernobyl Disaster: 1986

In the two months immediately following the Chernobyl disaster on April 26, 1986, SAAOR put queries about the incident to 528 Soviet citizens in the course of its regular surveys.⁸ This study provided an unusually good opportunity to assess the impact of Western radio broadcasts because of the inept manner in which the catastrophe was handled in Soviet media.

Soviet media did not report the accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant on the day it took place, but waited until two days after the disaster occurred. In the ensuing weeks, some information, often contradictory, trickled out from official Soviet sources, but no complete account was given to the Soviet population. (Soviet officials eventually gave a sober account of the accident to a meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency in August 1986.)

In this information vacuum, many Soviet citizens sought out other information sources for an account of what happened. The first source of information on the tragedy among SAAOR respondents was Western radio, indicated by 36% (see Figure 42). This was followed by Soviet TV at 28% and word-of-mouth at 15%.

Even after Soviet media began to report on the accident, Soviet citizens continued to turn to Western radio for further information. An additional 13% used Western radio as a supplementary source after first hearing about the disaster from USSR media, making a total of 49% of the survey group to turn to Western

58 ■ R. Eugene Parta

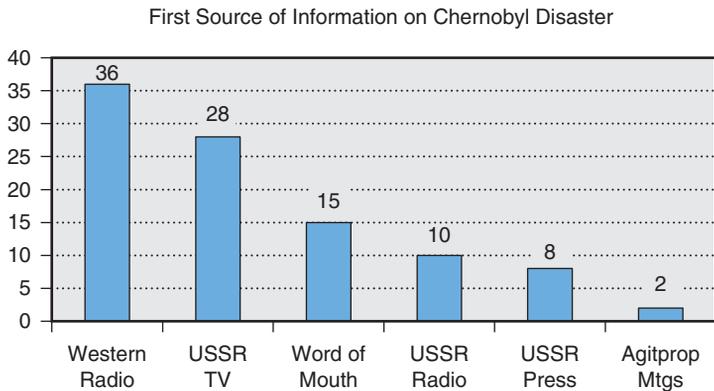


FIGURE 42. First Source of Information on the Chernobyl Disaster

radio. VOA was cited most frequently among Western radios as a first source of information on Chernobyl (18%), followed by Radio Liberty at 8% and BBC at 7%. In all, 28% of the respondents had heard information about Chernobyl from VOA, 18% from Radio Liberty and 16% from BBC.

When Soviet media was either slow or unforthcoming in reporting on a major issue, Western radio often filled the gap, as the case of Chernobyl clearly demonstrates.

5.5. *Glasnost'* and *Perestroika*: 1985–1990

The impact of *glasnost'* on Western radio listening has already been noted. Listeners to Western radio had different priorities from non-listeners in the area of reform and consequently had a somewhat different perspective on the government's approach to *perestroika* and its chances of success.⁹ Although both listeners and non-listeners felt that the need for economic reform was the USSR's most pressing problem (32% and 28% respectively), listeners were far more concerned than non-listeners that the problems were rooted in the very nature of the Soviet system itself (24% versus 10%).¹⁰ It might be inferred that the detailed analyses of *perestroika* carried on Western radio may have been a factor in prompting listeners to seek the roots of the problems in the system, while non-listeners gave higher priority to more immediate goals such as higher living standards and security issues.

Western Radio and Topical Issues ■ 59

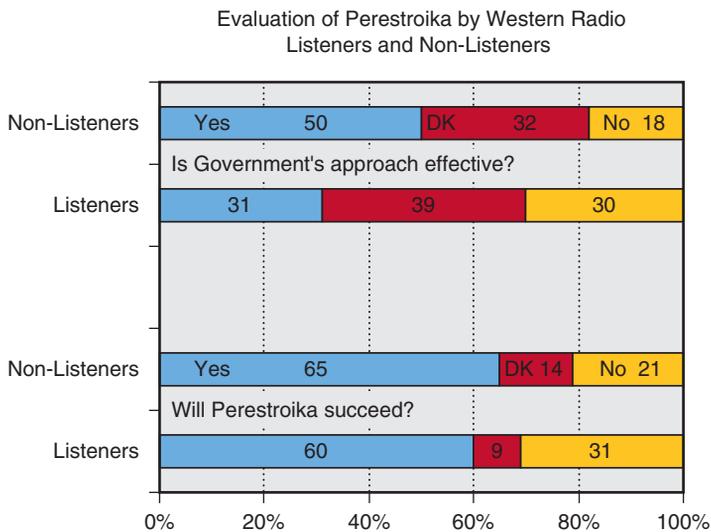


FIGURE 43. Evaluation of Gorbachev's Approach to *Perestroika* and Its Chances of Success by Listeners and Non-Listeners to Western Radio¹¹

With a different perspective on events, Western radio listeners were considerably more skeptical of the government's approach to reform. Whereas half of the non-listeners felt that the government's handling of *perestroika* was effective, only three in ten Western radio listeners shared this view (and another 30% contradicted it). A majority of both listeners and non-listeners felt that *perestroika* would eventually succeed, but here again listeners were more skeptical, with ca. three in ten convinced it would be less than successful.

By and large, Western radio broadcasts were favorable to the concept of *perestroika* and reform in the USSR. But their coverage of the process was more critical than that of Soviet media, and this appeared to resonate with its listeners who supported reform, but were concerned that *perestroika* had more to do with words than with concrete deeds.

5.6. The Solidarity Movement in Poland: 1980–1981

The Solidarity labor movement in Poland was a complex issue for Western radio to explain to their Soviet listeners. The development of attitudes among SAAOR respondents over three time periods in 1980–1982 is shown in Figure 44.¹²

60 ■ R. Eugene Parta

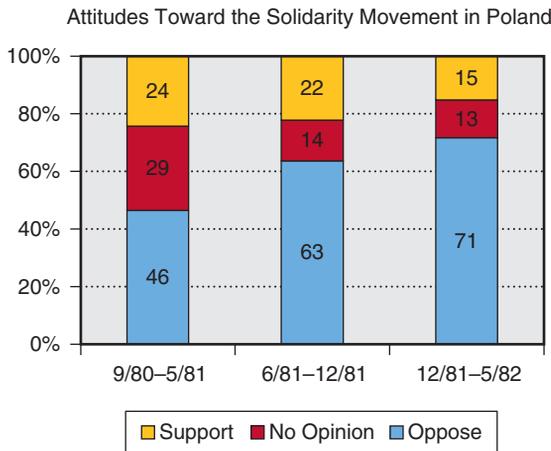


FIGURE 44. Trend in Attitudes Toward the Solidarity Movement in Poland: 1980-1982

In 1980, as the situation in Poland was heating up, opinions were already fairly negative, with almost half opposing the activities of Solidarity. This increased to almost two-thirds between June and December 1981, as the situation grew increasingly tense. After the imposition of martial law in December 1981, and during the following months, opposition grew to 71%, with only 15% expressing support of Solidarity. Again, this corresponds roughly to the proportion of “liberals” in the urban USSR shown earlier in Figure 20.

During the first year of the Polish developments, Western radio listeners showed more inclination to support liberalization in Poland than non-listeners (by 26% to 14%). Radio Liberty listeners were more favorably inclined than others (42%), a finding which is doubtless linked to the more critical (or more “liberal”) orientation of the Radio Liberty audience. These general tendencies continued into the post-martial law period, although Western radio listeners were not immune to the rise in anti-Solidarity feeling. Most striking of all was the finding that, during the martial law period, virtually none of the non-listeners to Western radio were favorable to Polish liberalization (3%).

Although a high correlation has been shown between “liberal” attitudes and Western radio listening, the data in this case suggest that Western information on Poland failed to strike a responsive chord outside any but the most critically-oriented

Western Radio and Topical Issues ■ 61

stratum of Soviet society, and that even there it most likely did little more than reinforce previously held viewpoints. Official Soviet information on Poland seems to have successfully mobilized opposition to Solidarity around three major themes which appealed to the emotions and perceived self-interest of Soviet citizens: the danger of strikes, portrayed as a counter-revolutionary activity leading to social breakdown or chaos; the latent mistrust of Poles shared by much of the Slavic population of the USSR; and the perceived threat to national security. The lesson to emerge from this case study is that Western radio was less able than domestic media to influence the Soviet population when the direct interests of the average Soviet citizen were made to appear threatened.

