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Review of Fainberg, Cold War Correspondents

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Fainberg, Dina, *Cold War Correspondents: Soviet and American Reporters on the Ideological Frontlines*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021. 376 pp, \$67 (hardcover) ISBN-13: 978-1-421-43844-3.

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In October 2017, representatives from Google, Facebook, and Twitter testified before Congressional judiciary and intelligence committees regarding the extent that Russian disinformation, widespread across each company's online platform, had influenced the 2016 US presidential campaign. Following revelations that extensive Russian interference had taken place during the campaign season and beyond, the Department of Justice required Russian television network RT America to register as a foreign agent. Under foreign agent status, the channel was allowed to continue its US broadcasts, but its Congressional press credentials were revoked. In March 2022 after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the remaining cable streaming providers in the US dropped RT America before its parent company, T&R Productions, ultimately terminated the network. The case of RT America—especially its sanction by Congress—is reminiscent of American and Russian media relations extending back to the Cold War.

Readers of Dina Fainberg's third book, *Cold War Correspondents*, will be familiar with RT America, a "direct descendent" (p. 268) of Soviet international broadcasting agencies launched in the Cold War (as were its Western counterparts, Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty). Each of these communications bureaus functioned as international eyes and ears for their home nations, deploying foreign correspondents who dutifully reported from "the other side" of the Iron Curtain at a time when few others were able to cross that boundary.

Cold War Correspondents helps us place modern communications by and for American and Russian consumers in important historic context. Fainberg has crafted a detailed and powerful study of the international information universe of the second half of the 20th century (1953-1991). It is a rich historical study layered with analysis on how information, news, and knowledge itself are all contextual. Cold War journalism, in Fainberg's constructivist interpretation, was produced by humans operating under the constraints of their own subjectivities and the demands of their geopolitical interests, as she details how Cold War Americans and Soviets came to understand themselves vis-à-vis the other.

Through their own international reporting, the superpowers both defined and othered their respective rival. Foreign correspondents representing either nation were not objective witnesses to life on the other side, Fainberg carefully details, as their reports were influenced by professional standards in the case of the United States, censorship in the case of the Soviet Union, and ideology across the board. Reporters themselves helped define their home country's perception of the enemy in crafting stories to better understand their cultural, social, and political motivations. But in explaining the opposing side to home audiences, Fainberg argues, journalists wrote through the biases of their own national sensibilities. Americans and Soviets alike thought in and wrote through frameworks of socialism or liberal democracy and capitalism, revealing their own perceptions of national superiority on the page.

From Fainberg's research, we can understand how tightly information and even notions of truth are linked to national identity. She convincingly explains how information from "abroad" can be conceptualized as suspicious, as potentially propagandistic and even threatening to one's own identity and broader national interests. *Cold War Correspondents* explains in convincing detail how international journalists—as much as heads of state—shaped the contours of the Cold War through their journalistic work. They captured images of the enemy, refracted those images through their own national lens, and reflected them back to curious, sometimes panicked, audiences at home. Readers learn that representations of "us" and "them" were shaped at multiple levels of the reporting process—not just by journalists, editors, and their sources—but by propagandists, censors, and the demands of domestic readership.

In this way, *Cold War Correspondents* is also a story about people whose lives were personally and professionally intertwined as they lived and worked across the iron curtain. Indeed, to construct their detailed geopolitical reports, journalists were necessarily immersed inside "the enemy's den" (p. 11) to absorb the national ethos of the rival superpower before skillfully translating their findings and experiences to audiences at home. How foreign correspondents navigated this process was key to constructing international propaganda that was intelligible to their target readers. And as we now well know, US and Soviet suspicions of each other's press corps lead to the hunt for "domestic 'fifth columns'" as the press became "a symbol of the nation's virtue and the rival's vice" (p. 11).

A central theme of the book is the oil-and-water nature of the two superpowers. American and Soviet correspondents alike were committed to truth in reporting to counter the apparent lies of the enemy. But as Fainberg carefully articulates, the two

adversaries saw truth in fundamentally different and opposing ways. American journalists provided a sense of relativism in their reporting as they sought out multiple perspectives while still delineating analysis from fact. For the US press corps overseas, no matter how many perspectives were represented in their writing, the absolute truth remained that liberal democracy and capitalism were superior systems of social and economic ordering.

On the other side of the globe, Soviet correspondents instead blurred the lines between fact and interpretation. Conceiving of themselves as educators as much as reporters, they wrote to shape readers' consciousness and to reinforce socialist superiority. American relativism and capitalism were unquestionably immoral for Soviet reporters (and the state censors they needed to appease) who understood truth to be singular, absolute, and tangible. As such, domestic consumers of Soviet reportage were often required to read between the lines, to parse out ideology from the texts before them.

Another phenomenon Fainberg presents us with is the degree to which US and Soviet readers scrutinized international reports from their own writers. American readers, for instance, took their correspondents' reporting at face value and uncritically accepted the superiority of their own social and economic conditions. By implication, US readers understood from international reports that they should pity Soviet civilians who, through their own great misfortune, happened to live on the wrong side of the iron curtain. On the other hand, Soviet readers had a unique ability to ignore ideological interpretations inherent in their home reporting, which they understood was necessary to pass the inspection of state censors. Soviet audiences hungry for information about the United States read past journalists' moralizing to seek out answers to questions of the most basic interest: What do American buildings, cities, and people look like? Fainberg highlights how many readers were able to brush aside ideology in the story simply to pick out details about how the Western world functioned. Soviet readers thus interpreted their news subversively and read more critically than their American counterparts.

The crucial intervention *Cold War Correspondents* makes in the field of media studies lies in Fainberg's deep analysis of mass communication theory, especially from an international perspective in the unique geopolitical context of the postwar decades. She explores implications regarding how news is created, and how, once produced, it affects more than the impressions of domestic readers, but the larger international political order. In her meticulous detail, she reveals how journalists' previous experiences influenced their reporting interests, and how they in turn wrote about which phenomena they elected to cover. Readers come to understand just how much the personality of a given journalist

dictated what became news and the extent that readers in Washington and Moscow accepted reports from their own information specialists as fact.

These considerations are, of course, unmistakably relevant in the present. The information we consume today is still investigated, recorded, edited, produced, and consumed by people, and we all insert our own biases into each level of the experience. With the advent of social media, we now have an entirely new domain of mass communication produced by citizen voices, which has been especially helpful during times of social unrest in the former Soviet satellites, the Middle East, and in China. Similar to Cold War censors, today's government crackdowns on Internet traffic are a frequent punitive response to this type of critical native reporting. Today, professional journalists who produce critical reports of regimes around the globe face threats to their own lives, as has been well documented in infamous cases like the slaying of Jamal Khashoggi and others.

Cold War Correspondents is meticulously researched, making the long span of the book all the more impressive. It covers a remarkable half-century of international events from the end of World War II to the end of the Soviet Union. She periodizes these five decades in four parts—the end of the war until Stalin's death (1945-1953), the era of Khrushchev's "peaceful coexistence" with the West (1953-1965), decades of social unrest and remaking (1965-1985), and the collapse of the Soviet Union (1985-1991). The book features an impressive collection of newspaper accounts, political cartoons, photographs, and oral history interviews with key international correspondents, comprising a rich source database that represents the Eisenhower administration to the Yeltsin presidency across 376 pages. This work is without doubt of interest to media historians, political historians, and anyone interested in understanding mass media theory, propaganda, and the Cold War.

Dina Fainberg is a lecturer in modern history and the Director of History BA in the Department of International Politics at the City University of London. Her expertise is in modern Russian society and international politics. She has written widely on the Cold War, Russian socialism, and Russian geopolitics.