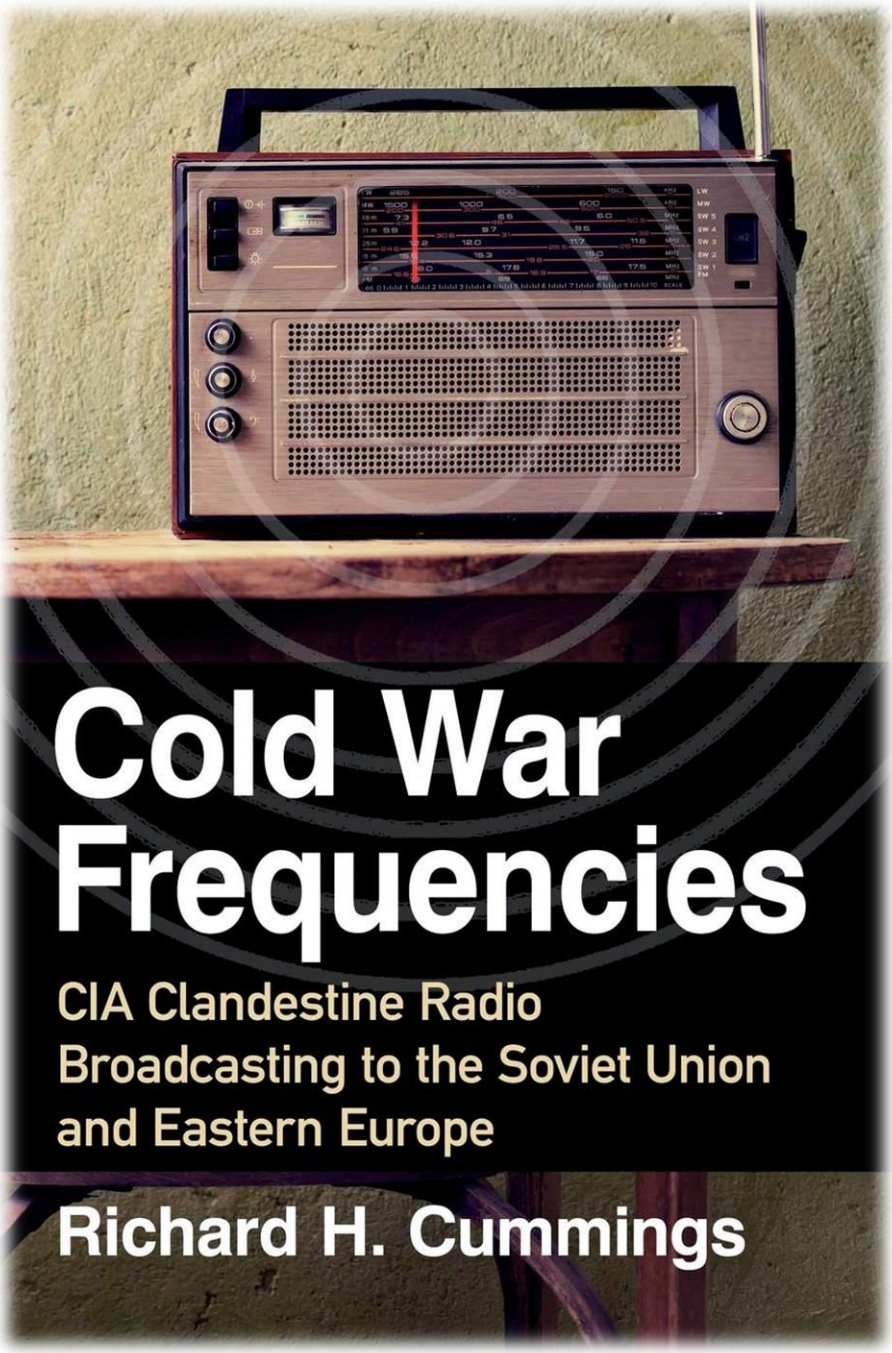
US Cold War Propaganda: The CIA's Ship for Radio Broadcasts to Albania in the Early Cold War

The US had a variety of ways to influence citizens behind the 'iron curtain' during the Cold War. One of those was radio broadcasts.

***Richard H. Cummings**, author of the book Cold War Frequencies (Amazon US | Amazon UK), explains how the CIA got a vessel ready to broadcast in Albania in the early 1950s.*



The best-laid schemes of mice and men
Go often askew,
And leave us nothing but grief and pain,
For promised joy!

From the Poem by Robert Burns, in modern English.

Introduction

The Voice of America began broadcasting to Albania in May 1943; the broadcasts were interrupted in 1945 and resumed in May 1951. Radio Free Europe began broadcasting from Munich on June 1, 1951 and stopped on September 30, 1953.

The June 30, 1953, report from the President's Committee on International Information Activities defined early Cold War white, gray, and black shortwave radio broadcasts as:

· White -- The first type consists of broadcasts made in the name of the American Government, such as the Voice of America programs, or by an overtly supported station such as RIAS (Radio in the American Sector of Berlin)

· Gray -- The second type includes broadcasts by stations that are overtly supported by unofficial American organizations but to which the Government gives covert financial Support. Such stations are Radio Liberation, supported by the American Committee for Liberation from Bolshevism, Inc., which now broadcasts to Soviet occupation troops in Germany and Austria and selected areas in the Soviet Union; Radio Free Europe (RFE), supported by the National Committee for a Free Europe, which broadcasts to the Soviet satellites; and until recently Radio Free Asia (RFA), supported by the Committee for Free Asia, which has now ceased broadcasts to Communist China

· Black -- The last, or black, the category includes CIA-supported clandestine stations, which purported to speak for groups inside the satellite countries

In the late 1940s, the United States decided to stem Soviet underground subversive operations and create a new clandestine agency. This would have to be a new organization not to operate against the established clandestine collection of intelligence and counterintelligence tasks already assigned to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). On June 18, 1948, the US National Security Council (NSC) directed that the task of confrontation

with the Soviet Union clandestinely to a new Office of Special Projects – the name was changed later to the Office of Policy Coordination (OPC).

The NSC directive gave OPC, "A loose charter to undertake the full range of covert activities incident to the conduct of secret political, psychological, and economic warfare together with direct preventive action (paramilitary activities)-all within the policy direction of the Departments of State and Defense." In October 1949, OPC planned to use a "sea-borne broadcast transmitter" to transmit recorded programs inland with "live spot" announcements.

Albania

It was planned to use a 1000-watt, medium wave transmitter to reach the largest audience in Albania by using a strong enough signal to overpower Radio Tirana's frequency: "It has been agreed that these broadcasts shall be based, for various technical, security, and political reasons, on a ship to cruise in and around the Adriatic and Ionian Seas. [T]his vessel with minor modifications can be converted into a floating broadcasting station capable of sending medium wave broadcasts into all points in Albania. It will be operated in a 100-mile arc at the end of a 300-mile radius from the farthest point to be covered in the country."

The decision to use a vessel carrying a medium wave transmitter was that there were, at that time, no OPC land-based transmitters in Italy or Greece. Medium wave broadcasts were chosen because of an estimate that of the approximately 50,000 radios in Albania, between 30,000 and 37,500 were medium-wave sets. It was also estimated that 10,000 to 12,000 shortwave radios receivers were in Albania, owned mainly by Communist officials.

The idea was that the boat would be purchased in Britain. In November 1949, four prospective vessels were located, with one finally identified as being suitable enough for the operation. The cost of buying this vessel was $56,000 (circa $560,000 in 2021) and OPC was to pay for it. The British Intelligence Service (SIS) was to:

· provide cover for the purchase, refit, and extended operation, plus

· arrange for the transfer of the vessel's title and conceal the ownership through a cover owner

SIS was also to provide the crew and costs of refitting the boat for broadcasting and the operating costs were to be divided "fifty-fifty."

For some unknown reason, this project was not jointly pursued. In April 1950, OPC, using the outline of the British plan for Albania code-name VALUABLE, decided to seek a vessel in the United States to be put into operational use in August 1950. The project was given the cryptonym BGSPEED, a subproject of the OPC Albanian country plan BGFIEND: "A country project to select, train, and infiltrate indigenous agents into Albania to effect and support resistance activities for the purpose of overthrowing the Communist-controlled government in Tirana."

The requirements for this vessel included:

· Ability to support a propaganda staff of five men in addition to a full complement of the crew

· Ability to carry sufficient water, fuel, and food to remain on the station of the heel of Italy for at least twelve consecutive days with a full complement aboard, between return trips to Athens, Greece

· Sufficient stock of engine parts and spares aboard to operate overseas independently for one year

· Sufficient space aboard to permit installation of radio equipment and one compartment to be used as a recording and broadcasting studio

OPC decided to use a "yacht-type vessel" because it was:

a. The more suitable for reasons of the flexibility of operation

b. Private cover potentialities as viewed against commercial cover

c. Height of masts in relationship to size for the accommodation of the radio broadcast antennae

The vessel

By May 1950, two yacht brokers were asked to locate an appropriate vessel. Three yachts were identified: one was in Acapulco, Mexico, one in Miami, Florida, and one in Gloucester, Massachusetts. OPC then used a cleared "cutout" for the purchase of the yacht. The man already owned two yachts and bought and sold yachts for years.

The "cutout" was to be financed by OPC, receive the title to the yacht and deliver it to the Smith Boat Yard in Baltimore, Maryland, for refitting and

conversion to include "decking, placing of copper sheathing on the hull, …broadcast studio, and other repairs necessary for extended operations." The "cutout "owner then was to transfer the vessel to Panamanian registration. With an OPC security clearance, a Panamanian-licensed master named Leslie Holmes would then choose the crew. $150,000 ($1,500,000 in 2021)was budgeted for the purchase.

After inspection of two of the vessels, the "motor sail /ketch" IRMAY was chosen as the most "adaptable from the point of view of broadcast requirements, maneuverability, accommodations for the crew and staff and can be outfitted in the least time and expense." The IRMAY was purchased for $80,000 (circa $880,000 equivalent in 2021).

The captain of the IRMAY and crew were experienced and reportedly were involved in several scientific expeditions in the Caribbean and South America.

The operational cover included the chartering of the vessel to a non-existent "Institute"-- the Marine Biological Research Institute (MBRI), Inc, which was incorporated in Maryland as a non-profit organization engaged in research of Marine biology. The Charter included in the articles of incorporation was:

To promote generally the accumulation, analysis, and dissemination of scientific knowledge in the field of Marine Biology by undertaking, sponsoring, participating in studies, research projects, and field expeditions in any part of the world – making loans and gifts for such purposes – and to make such knowledge available through articles, lectures, books, letters, motion pictures, etc.

Four Directors of the "Institute" were listed, three of whom were pseudonyms.

Funding came from a "fictitious person purportedly of eccentric habits and keenly interested in this field of science." In reality, OPC's finance office sent a cashier's check to a Baltimore bank. Other cover activities included the printing of the letterheads, issue of bona fide stock to the Directors, chartering of the vessel (including the actual transfer of funds", and the establishment of a bank account in Baltimore for "Mediterranean Marine," through which funds to pay personnel aboard and to operate the vessel would be transferred regularly to a bank account. OPC hired a part-time trusted bookkeeper to keep "double-entry bookkeeping of both the overt and covert expenses.

The "Institute" also made a letter of endorsement to the Chief OPC officer on board the vessel, indicating that he was employed in "scientific explorations in the Mediterranean."

Approval & Set-up

OPC Assistant Director for Policy Coordination Frank Wisner approved the project on June 14, 1950. However, he wrote this handwritten comment on the cover sheet: "This project has been approved, with much trepidation… I have seen this kind of thing tried twice during the last war with eventual project abandonment in each instance."

Final arrangements for the cover "Institute" were made. A lawyer in Baltimore was cleared to set up the articles of incorporation in the State of Maryland. His office was listed as the official address of the "Institute" for any correspondence. Four Directors of the "Institute" were listed, three of whom were pseudonyms. The printing of the letterheads, issue of bona fide stock to the Directors, chartering of the vessel (including the actual transfer of funds", and the establishment of a bank account in Baltimore for "Mediterranean Marine," through which funds to pay personnel aboard and to operate the vessel would be transferred regularly to a bank account.

In June 1950, a joint Bulgarian-Albanian propaganda center was set up in Athens, Greece. The Albanian broadcasts were to be prepared there, based on a joint propaganda policy-directive approved with the British. However, the British were not involved on the operational level. One of the Athens central radio stations would transmit to the vessel a daily teletype broadcast of the next day's program. Spot broadcasts would be transcribed on the boat.

The IRMAY left Baltimore for Miami, Florida, in December 1950 with OPC engineering personnel on board. There were tests conducted of the medium (sky-wave) transmissions on the way. Rough seas off Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, seasickness, and mechanical problems ensued, but the tests were generally positive. The conclusion: "It can be seen that there are no technical radio factors which might limit the effectiveness of BGGIEND project as originally planned."

While in Miami, Captain Holmes made an unknown security violation. The Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) became aware of the OPC connection to the IRMAY. The Miami office of the Bureau of Customs wanted to inspect the vessel, but OPC contacted the Assistant Deputy Commissioner of Customs with the request to stop the inspection. ADPC Frank Wisner sent a message to Navy Rear Admiral Leslie C. Stevens giving some details of the BGSPEED operation. Admiral Stevens, coincidently, would later become President of the American Committee for the Liberation of

Bolshevism – the parent organization for Radio Liberty. Wisner promised Stevens and the Bureau of Customs that any future operations having any bearing on those agencies would be advised by OPC.

OPC decided to let Captain Holmes continue to hold his position until the first port of call in Europe when he would be replaced and returned to the United States, possibly to face prosecution.

In St. Thomas, American Virgin Islands, the name of the yacht was changed to "JUANITA," and the registry changed from the United States to Panama. JUANITA departed from Barbados on February 1, 1951, for Europe and arrived in Patras, Greece, on March 25, 1951.

The JUANITA arrived in Greece on March 25, 1951, to perform the following mission under Project BGSPEED:

The JUANITA was equipped to broadcast on the medium wave band into Albania, utilizing the skip wave technique. When the JUANITA was purchased, there was no certainty that any country would grant permission for her to operate within that country's coastal waters. Therefore, it was understood that the broadcasts might have to be conducted from the open sea, that the vessel obtained for this role would have to be sufficiently seaworthy for open sea operations, and the equipment capable of broadcasting from a considerable distance at sea.

This skip wave, which exists both day and night, becomes effective as darkness falls and the ionosphere descends and becomes ineffective as the sun rises and the ionosphere ascends.) During the night hours, the beam from the antenna strikes the ionosphere. It bounces back to earth, permitting reception much farther from the transmitter than is normally possible by ground wave--which follows the ground sixty or seventy miles or so, depending on terrain, and grounds out.)

Problems

After the JUANITA arrived in Greece, serious problems began; below is a summary of these problems, extracted from declassified OPC and CIA reports -- in no particular order of importance.

· A contract engineer was sent to Greece to review the JUANITA operation. He wrote: "The JUANITA was intended to broadcast medium wave--skip wave into its target from 175-300 miles, came to light during a meeting with Washington communications men two days before my departure to Athens. On arrival in Athens, I found that the men (operations and communications) had been unacquainted with this intention. They expressed surprise that Washington intended to depend on

skip wave, for they believed skip wave had never been depended on before for medium wave broadcast.”

· The Albanian area is greater than the noise level off the U.S. east coast. Radio stations in the Balkans make a Babel of voices, move up and down the dial, and operate with many times the power the JUANITA was given

· A chance, ever-present in open sea operation, of a wave through the wheelhouse door or the hatch over the transmitting room threatened to fry the communications men at their posts and disable the equipment permanently

· There is no ventilation in the transmitting room. The heat and smell when the equipment in operation is intense enough to cause sickness, a condition aggravated by semi-tropical weather and the violent movement of the ship

· The vessel was delivered in the U.S. with its original wiring, which is of the house type and unsuitable for marine use. The vessel's house-type wiring causes repeated fires. This is evidenced by numerous minor fires which have occurred onboard and the extreme difficulty that the engineer has had in maintaining electric current throughout the vessel

· At anchor in a sheltered island cove, one finds oneself a few hundred yards from village dwellings. After the fall of darkness, the large white yacht, whose presence has brought excitement to the otherwise dreary existence of the islanders, lights up (when transmitting) like a Christmas tree. Spreader and running lights glow, and brilliant flashes play about the rigging.

Conclusions

One conclusion of the JUANITA'S history was: "It was not necessary to buy a yacht, equip her, operate her, sail her across the Atlantic, and maintain her in Greece for half a year to demonstrate that her transmitting equipment would not work."

In one OPC report, there was this commentary:

I wish to reiterate my belief that there need be no apologies by anyone for a decision now to liquidate this particular experiment. It has provided some people with valuable experiences and has taught several lessons that could not have been learned without the basic proposition being tried out in actual practice. It has, however, taken up a great deal of time that might better now be directed to more pressing and fruitful activities.

In March 1952, Acting Assistant Director for Policy Coordination wrote a memorandum to the Assistant Director, Office of Communications, in which he summarized the principal failures of Project BGSPEED, part of which read:

Many things have gone wrong in the implementation of this project, and it was terminated in October 1951. No actual broadcasting ever took place. Much of the onus for the failure can be attributed to shortcomings within OPC. These include lack of seasoned judgment from various OPC officers concerned with the project, lack of continuous, adequate supervision, unfortunate selection of a vessel: etc. On the other head, the communications equipment provided proved inadequate for the contemplated operation. This constitutes an expensive lesson for OPC.

The JUANITA, purchased for $80,000 in 1951, was sold in May 1953 for $10,000.

Although Project BGSPEED was considered a failure, that did not stop OPC from beginning clandestine psychological warfare broadcasts into Albania as the Voice of Free Albania (often interchanged with Radio Free Albania) from the CIA radio transmitting site near Athens, Greece at 10 p.m. local time on September 18, 1951.

This article is based on Chapter 5 of Richard H. Cumming's book:

***Cold War Frequencies: CIA Clandestine Radio Broadcasting to the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe,* published in 2021 by McFarland & Co.**

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