ESSAY

Radio Baltica

by Olga Zilberbourg



"Radio Waves" by Kelsey Tran

Tint Journal, no. (), www.tintjournal.com

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To listen to the songs that are mentioned in this text, tune in to the Spotify playlist that the author created for you.

Where does your motherland begin? Does it begin with a picture in a primer, with treasured friends who live down the street? With your mother's song? Once upon a time, a painter fell in love with an actress who loved flowers. He then sold his house and his canvases, and spent all the money to buy a million crimson roses. Lavender, the cliffside lavender, many years later I remember the blue flowers of our rendezvous.

These bits of lyrics from the musical hits of the 1980s float around my head like sweet lullabies. My grandfather, a WWII veteran, turns up the radio each morning, waking grandmother, my parents, my brother and me. Get ready to do gymnastic exercises. Stand up straight. Straighten your shoulders. Move your head back, slightly. Take a deep breath. In place, march! That program always ended with an instruction to move on to hydrotherapeutic procedures. Where? What? Beep. Beep. Beep. Our reporter Elena Sukhanova hosts the program "Noon at Work." We are responding to the letters of our many listeners in regards to classical music. At the beginning of our program, we'd like to invite our listeners to listen to one of the romances by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. Beep. Beep. Beep. Moscow is speaking. Moscow time is 7 am. The latest news in Moscow is as follows.

And suddenly into this mix of musical hits of the Soviet TV and radio broke through Like a virgin, touched for the very first time and Imagine there's no countries, it isn't hard to do and We don't need no education and Mama just killed a man and People are strange and I follow the Moskva, down to Gorky Park, listening to the wind of change. On June 12, 1990, the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union, in a legal miracle of the seven-decade old regime, passed legislation that affirmed freedom of the press and mass media, and condemned all forms of censorship.

One day in early spring, my brother and I are getting ready to go to school. In the window, the sky looks interminably gray. Soiled snow is piled high in leaky gray clumps on both sides of the street. To catch a bus, my brother and I will have to wait at the corner, watching traffic in three directions: which bus comes first? This can take up to three quarters of an hour. Once a bus shows up, we have to sprint for the right stop. I'm twelve, my brother's nine. He's fumbling with his coat, dreading the trip to school. I'm standing in the hallway, sweating in my hat and gloves, jittery. Our parents have already left for work, grandmother's in the kitchen, starting to peel potatoes for her and grandfather's lunch. She increases the volume on the radio to hear it over the running water. The sound of a single guitar takes over the apartment. An Englishman's husky voice, as if he's sharing with you his innermost

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secret. All my troubles seemed so far away. La-la-la-la-la. Oh I believe. In yesterday.

I've been studying English for four years, and I hang on to the words I recognize. Shadow. Suddenly. The song, like a powerful magnet, draws me into the kitchen, where my grandmother, too, stops washing the dishes and listens. The song is still lingering, but we're already in the grips of the most powerful nostalgia for the time in history that isn't over yet. La-la-la-la-la. Yesterday.

You've heard a performance by a vocal-instrumental ensemble, The Beatles, the radio's steely voice announces. I'm standing in the middle of the kitchen floor I'd swept only a quarter of an hour ago in my dirty street shoes, my hat in my hands, looking at my grandmother to make sure that I didn't dream that. She shrugs and turns back to the sink.

The country where for seven decades mass media had served as a mouthpiece for the Communist Party doctrine now stood exposed to words, sights and sounds not commissioned, organized, or approved by anyone; language both without ideology and hidden meaning, special effects designed to highlight the blood and gore yet hiding pores and wrinkles, incomprehensible noise of the atonal scale, the saxophone and of the electric guitars and amplifiers. What is this awful wailing? It's music, grandma. Music, music: the only thing that makes sense. Teenagers' escape fantasies aren't supposed to actually come true, but this time the adults are leading the breakout. We aren't even teenagers yet, and all walls are already collapsing around us. The children of tomorrow dream away? But what should we dream about?

It's 1991. In September, the Soviet Union is no more; the ruble falls against the dollar, and inflation wipes clean everyone's savings accounts. Where does your motherland begin? Leningrad is renamed to St. Petersburg. To make any money in the new economy, all engineers go into sales. Once upon a time, the painter did sell his house and all of his canvases to buy a million crimson roses for the actress he loved. This is when the electric guitars really take over the new FM range. The warm smell of colitas rising up through the air. To start a music station, buy, trade, or otherwise acquire a bunch of LPs, bootlegged or legit depending on budget and opportunity. Train the first generation of DJs who will appeal to teenagers.

The tape recorder my father had smuggled from Hungary in the 1980s, hidden for several years under my parents' bed, settles on a bookshelf in my room. I no longer listen to the kitchen radio: I have Radio Baltica. I've figured out how to record songs to a tape directly off the radio. The sounds, as everything else about the nineties, are fleeting. Who knows if a song once heard on the radio will ever be repeated? The wind of change blowing in one direction today can change to the opposite tomorrow.

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I work the Hungarian machine overtime to record music for my classmates, make copies of copies from tapes my friends' older siblings borrow from their friends or friends of friends. Mixes compiled off the radio lack all logic, they don't cohere. One Beatles tape opens with Penny Lane and Strawberry Fields, then jumps back in time to She Loves You and Eight Days a Week before flash forwarding to Paperback Writer and Taxman. We start with The Beatles, then add Elvis, The Doors, The Beach Boys, Queen, Abba, Metallica, Modern Talking, Army of Lovers, Scorpions, Nirvana. Pop rock of the fifties, sixties, seventies, eighties and nineties, all rolled into 1992. Not understanding much of the lyrics — isn't it all love and heartbreak? — and yet transported. Frequently-reused tapes get chewed up by the heads that need cleaning, they tear and are glued together. At some point, the lid of one of the tape decks breaks off and has to be fitted back with a paper clip.

In August 1996, when I'm getting ready to go to college in the United States, my best friend spends a night at my apartment making a mixed tape. I'd hosted a good-bye party that evening, and empty beer and champagne bottles still occupy every flat surface of my room. I'm passed out on the couch, but my friend stays up at the tape recorder. She starts with an almost blank tape previously recorded with a song from Andrew Lloyd Weber's "Starlight Express" and fills the rest with Scorpions and Metallica. In her neat cursive, she labels the spine: "L. Weber / Scorpions 'Golden Ballads.'" (It will take me years to sort out Metallica from the Scorpions.) On the back cover, she writes: "Olka, remember us like we remember you. Hurray! We love you. Your friends."

Fifteen years later, I'm in Concord, CA bawling at a Scorpions retirement concert. I'm sideswiped by that hackneyed hit, "Wind of Change." The world is closing in. Did you ever think that we could be so close, like brothers? The future's in the air. I can feel it everywhere, blowing with the wind of change. Klaus Meine wrote the song in 1990, following the band's first visit to Moscow, and a year later the song made top five on the charts in Europe and America. We heard it on Radio Baltica in 1992 and then my friend copied it to a tape for me. Take me to the magic of the moment on a glory night.

Take a deep breath of possibility; then march in place. Just two years later, in 1994, Radio Baltica became the first radio station in Russia to feature exclusively Russian music. Nothing so naïve as "The Ditty about Good Mood" — although why not sing about good mood once in a while? Let the smile of a young man, a passerby, touch your eyes and lift your spirits. Russian pop rock is no worse than any other pop rock, or well, hmm, we can do just as well as the Germans and the Swedes mimicking the English pop rock copied off American jazz and blues. I've seen the secret maps, I know what Titanic's destination is. The rats are disembarking at the next port.

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And before you can count to three, radio stations are divided, compartmentalized. Baltica — Russian; Europa Plus — well, European. TV programming, newspapers, bookstore shelves follow suit. Ours and theirs, ours and alien. The radio hosts begin climbing the career ladder. From radio station to TV, then more radio stations and TV stations, to controlling a Moscow-based media holding company. Yeltsin to Putin, Putin to Medvedev, Medvedev to Putin. Radio Baltica becomes a Putin mouthpiece before we can count to four. Some easily excitable teenagers are spewed out into the world in the meantime. The Iron Curtain is a thing of the past, but the wind of change keeps on blowing. Stop, stop, enough, I shout, but the change is relentless.

And all of us, I, in California, my best friend in Dublin, our peers in South Africa, Israel, Thailand, Australia, Japan, Ukraine, Russia, raised by the radio stations of the nineties, are still confused and disoriented, and like children, dreaming. Where does your motherland begin? Imagine there's no countries. But don't imagine that Russia is bombing Ukraine. This is where we are today, and this is where the music ends.

We could be so close, like brothers. Yesterday, there's a shadow hanging over me. I've seen the secret maps, I know what our destination is. None of the dancers want to think of death while Titanic is still afloat. Million, million, million crimson roses.

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