

Information and propaganda: new sources, new perspectives?

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As we all know, propaganda became before and during World War II a very powerful weapon. This weapon, however, was not so new. It had always been used during wars, especially during World War I. But from the 1920s onwards, a new invention – the radio – produced a revolution in how propaganda could be disseminated. It was now possible to reach millions of people worldwide, to inform them of developments, to convince them of the value of particular causes, to urge them to act. Radio had been used on an unprecedented scale by Nazi Germany from 1933 onwards. But the British also considered it a powerful asset and used it to considerable effect throughout the Second World War. ‘We have here, if we develop it and make use of it, a weapon of war of an entirely new kind. No such power has ever been in the hands of man before’ reflected Donald Ritchie, Head of European Services of the BBC, in May 1941. ‘At a word from London the life of German soldiers or German-controlled police in the occupied countries can be made impossible (...).With the assistance of British industrial experts, the BBC can give instructions on how workers can spoil their work. (...). Tanks can be fitted with faulty nuts and bolts. (...) Towards the end of the campaign, millions of workers all over Europe, at a word from London, will strike and set buildings and factories on fire’¹.

The fact that civilians were – as in the First World War – heavily involved in the war effort, gave particular urgency to ensuring that radio kept up morale. This would both ensure a high level of production in the factories and also help to foster cohesion and thus avoid political and social disturbances. Conversely radio could be used to sow the seeds of disorder among their enemies – it could be used to weaken the will to assist the war effort and thus undermine production. To attain this goal, the British used two main forms of propaganda: ‘white’ (or ‘overt’) propaganda which supported an official and public point of view, and ‘black’ (or covert) propaganda which was not supposed to be ‘recognisable’. As Reginald ‘Rex’ Leeper, in charge of British Propaganda, explained in December 1942: ‘its source of origin has to be concealed both in the news selected and in the way the news is presented’². Black and white propagandas relied on the same types of media – mainly leaflets and radio broadcasts.

The British were of course eager to develop their own propaganda whether white or black; but they were equally eager to learn what they could from Axis outputs. They collected German,

¹ D.E. Ritchie, European News, BBC, ‘Broadcasting as a new weapon of war’, 4th May 1941 TNA FO 371/26583

² R.A. Leeper, Black Propaganda, 17th December 1942, TNA FO 898/61

French and Italian newspapers, often through British legations. And they also listened to the enemy's broadcasts. Summaries and occasionally actual transcripts of thousands of news items and talks were used as a basis for information distributed among the various British services – Foreign Office, SOE, PWE and so on. Through the research network led by IWM, the BBC Monitoring Collection transcripts have been made available to historians, but how can they use this stimulating material?

Two main answers can be given. First, listening to the enemy radio stations gave the British raw information about the conduct of the war and conditions on the home fronts of other countries. Second, it helped them to understand the thinking behind enemy propaganda. Of course, these two planes are interlinked: a piece of information given can be considered as propaganda since it has been selected for broadcast; but we can however make a distinction between information and comment, as follows.

Raw information

During the Second World War, information from enemy or enemy-occupied territories was scarce, for obvious reasons. Generally, the British embassies or the British secret services had collected intelligence, but all diplomatic relations were broken (in the French case, relations were broken on the 4 July 1940), and the SIS (Secret Intelligence Service) had very few spies in occupied Europe. From this perspective, therefore, listening to the French or German radio broadcasts helped those in Britain understand what was happening in France. On 8 November 1940, for example, a French radio programme explained that listening to a foreign station was forbidden and could involve either a fine (from 16 to 100 francs) or a gaol sentence of 6 to 30 days' duration.³ On another occasion, a talk delivered on 18 November 1940 announced that the main Trade Unions in France were to be dissolved.⁴ These included the Confédération générale du Travail and the famous Comité des Forges. Some information was purely and strictly factual: the appointment of Vignerot as General Secretary at the Ministry of Agriculture, the appointment of General Laure as General Secretary to Marshal Pétain on 18 November 1940, the capture of three Communists at Toulouse on 17 November 1940 or the arrest of General de Lattre, who had protested against the invasion of the Free Zone on 11 November 1942. 'His cause as a rebel will have been a short one. Now he belongs to military justice' concluded the Vichy Home Service.⁵ But other broadcasts dealt with higher issues, as when the same station, for example, announced and then described Marshal Pétain's visit to Lyon in November 1940.⁶

³ Paris: in French, 06:15 on 8 Nov. 1940, BBCM E65, November 1940.

⁴ Paris: in French, 06:15 on 18 Nov. 1940, BBCM E65, November 1940.

⁵ Vichy Home Service, via Radio Lyons: in French, 06:15 on 14 Nov. 1942, BBCM (file number not recorded), November 1940.

⁶ Lyons: in French, 08:00 on 17 Nov. 1940, BBCM E11, November 1940.

Thanks to the BBC Monitoring Collection transcripts, we can see what the British knew about the French situation and guess how they could very likely have used this information. For example, the French radio could help the secret services to prepare their agents' cover. Agents sent into the field could be briefed about the situation on the ground – be it the state of politics or the latest reactions to rationing. Agents could improve their cover story, knowing, for example, that the Mayor of Evreux had been fired from his post on 19 November 1940. On a more general plane, British authorities could understand what the Vichy French policy really was – a matter which was not totally settled in 1940-1941. In fact, some British circles – the Foreign Office – favoured an indulgent policy towards Vichy whereas others felt less comfortable with this benevolence – or indeed actively opposed it – as in the case of the Special Operations Executive (SOE). The radio transcripts provided vital background information and gave those in charge of operations – be they air-dropped missions or broadcasts – the confidence that they 'knew the territory'.

Historians can therefore use the BBC Monitoring Collection in two ways. They can gauge what information the British were able to use and how they deployed it. Equally, they can see how this information was used by London to shape both their policy and their strategy. The fact that listening to foreign radio was forbidden explains, for example, the stress put on air-dropped leaflets. A particularly profitable line of enquiry therefore would be to link the transcripts with other sources, such as the series of papers relating to SOE, the Foreign Office and the War Office.

Propaganda

But the BBC Monitoring Collection can also be used to understand French and German propaganda. The first was mainly delivered by Radio Paris; the second was broadcast by various stations, either official, such as Radio Sarrebrück, or unofficial, such as NBBS, a 'black' German radio unit pretending to be broadcast from inside the UK.

In 1940, German and French stations developed common schemes. For example, they stressed the British 'betrayal' of 1940. According to Radio Paris, the felony of perfidious Albion was certainly not a new phenomenon for it had very deep roots. The Crimean War, the struggle over the Suez Canal, the Fashoda Incident, the policy towards Italy... all showed that Great Britain had never been a faithful ally. 'For a century,' explained the speaker on 18 November 1940, 'every time that England had need of France, she made use of her for her own interests, and, if necessary, left her in the lurch afterwards.'⁷ Playing on a traditional French Anglophobia, this scheme equally stressed two main points. England – and not Germany – was the nation responsible for the war. And the Axis was not waging war for the same reasons as their enemies.

⁷ Radio Paris: in French, 16:00 on 18 Nov. 1940, 5, BBCM E11, November 1940.

'Whilst France and England went to war for imperialist ideas, Germany, now joined by Italy, are struggling for the new order of tomorrow. Their aims are based on well-tryed experience in the social domain' explained a German station in July 1940.⁸ The British attack on 3 July 1940 against the French fleet at Mers El Kebir, near Oran, was particularly severely judged. 'What she had been doing is nothing but pure murder which cannot be cloaked by any military reasons' stated Radio Paris on 5 July 1940.⁹

The two regimes did not always develop the same propaganda schemes however. The French were anxious to praise Marshal Pétain's Révolution nationale and collaboration – which were both due to the French defeat of 1940, according to Pierre Nicole. In the same way, the Vichy regime was keen to de-legitimise de Gaulle and the resistance, quite quickly perceived as a danger. 'England has opened wide her arms to all traitors, Generals, ministers and others who undertook for financial reasons to drag the official French government through the mud' explained Radio Paris on 5 July 1940.¹⁰

The Germans seemed to be much more interested in criticising the UK. They stressed the latter's responsibility in declaring war in the first place and were eager to emphasise the undemocratic nature of the British regime. 'The British Parliament does not truly represent the English masses. It only represents a minority of great capitalists' explained a German station in July 1940.

This theme was developed by the German 'black' propaganda unit NBBS in order to demoralise the British. In 1940, NBBS tried to prove to the British people that the war was lost. According to their broadcasts, supposedly originating in England, 'bombardment of our cities continues and our armament production declines.'¹¹ The German broadcasters pointed to Britain's isolation – no help could be expected from the USA 'as she intends to devote her attention to her own rearmaments' explained NBBS in October 1940.¹² Germany and the Soviet Union, by contrast, were bound by strong ties, as shown by the agreement concluded in August 1939 by Molotov and Ribbentrop – 'another diplomatic defeat'.¹³ The conclusion was easy to draw: 'Revolt for peace and save Britain from destruction. Churchill has cost us an empire; let us not allow him to cost us

⁸ Stuttgart: in French, 22 :30 on 7 Jul. 1940, BBCM (file number not recorded), November 1940.

⁹ Radio Paris: in French, 00:30 on 5 Jul. 1940, 3, BBCM (file number not recorded), November 1940.

¹⁰ Radio Paris: in French, 00:30 on 5 Jul. 1940, 2, BBCM (file number not recorded), November 1940.

¹¹ New British Broadcasting Station, Somewhere in Europe: English, 20:30 on 11 Oct. 1940, BBCM E191, October-November 1940

¹² New British Broadcasting Station, Somewhere in Europe: English, 20:30 on 11 Oct. 1940, 2, BBCM E191, October-November 1940

¹³ New British Broadcasting Station, Somewhere in Europe: English, 17:30 on 17 Nov. 1940, BBCM E191, October-November 1940

the soil of Britain and the lives of the people who live on it. Revolt for peace' said NBBS in October 1940.¹⁴

This material is of course interesting by itself. It can offer a very strong tool for analysing the enemy propaganda broadcast from Vichy France as well as from Germany. It equally reveals the fears of these two powers. It is quite surprising for example to realise that de Gaulle and the resistance he seemed capable of inspiring were considered as a danger as early as 1940. 'Exploits of de Gaulle have made us enemies in Vichy and all these diplomatic failures have had a serious effect on American opinion' stated NBBS in November 1940.¹⁵ 'You are allowing your sons to be corrupted by the embittered propaganda which is aimed at them at school and in the cafés of the Quartier Latin' echoed Radio Paris the same month.¹⁶ In 1940, however, neither de Gaulle nor the resistance represented a real risk.

Historians, however, could use this material to understand the way the British used it. Did British propagandists 'reply' to that put out by Germany and the Vichy regime? Or did they, on the contrary, ignore it? The answer is not obvious, and requires the use of other sources, mainly SOE, PWE and BBC written archives.

To conclude, the BBC Monitoring Service Collection is very impressive. The transcripts of enemy broadcasts can help to understand both the information available in the UK, and the propaganda policy followed by the Third Reich and the Vichy régime. However, a more promising way forward could be to link these archives to other sources. We could then understand how the knowledge obtained through listening to broadcasts shaped British policy towards Vichy France on the one hand, and how the knowledge of the enemy's propaganda tactics influenced those adopted by the British. Thanks, then, to Imperial War Museums for offering the historians involved in this research network such stimulating perspectives – and so much work.

¹⁴ New British Broadcasting Station, Somewhere in Europe: English, 20:30 on 28 Oct. 1940, 3, BBCM E191, October-November 1940

¹⁵ New British Broadcasting Station, Somewhere in Europe: English, 17:30 on 17 Nov. 1940, 2, BBCM E191, October-November 1940

¹⁶ Radio Paris: in French, 16:00 on 20 Nov. 1940, 3, BBCM E11, November 1940.