

Memories of BBC Monitoring

Karl Lehmann, BBC Monitoring 1942-1981

The BBC Monitoring Service I joined in December 1942 at Wood Norton near Evesham, was a wartime operation without a previous existence or – at that stage – a long-term future. Monitoring counted as auxiliary war service and that is why I joined. My contract stated that I was not entitled to membership of the Corporation's permanent staff. The initial salary was five pounds a week with a wartime bonus of seven shillings, six pence. Newcomers at Wood Norton were advised that after dark they might be challenged by the military guard. They should stop, reply "Friend" and advance singly when told to do so and show their passes. As the Service was due to move to Caversham near Reading only three months' later, I was assigned a bunk in a changing room instead of the usual billet. After the move I was given a billet. It was five miles away and transport to and from work after hours was by BBC bus or BBC bicycle. Bicycles had to be applied for and, as an enemy alien, I also had to request permission from the police to be allowed to be in charge of a bike. Life was sparse, but I was only twenty-one and the atmosphere at Monitoring was so helpful and friendly that I was happy from day one.

Monitors hailed from a huge variety of British and continental backgrounds: there were businessmen and housewives, academics, international tennis players, persecuted trade unionists, Russian monarchists and ex-army officers from Poland. They all had two things in common: they had never been monitors before and they wanted to help win the war. We were convinced we were doing just that. After El Alamein and Stalingrad the picture of the war improved, but it did so with many ups and downs. At the beginning of 1943, the Battle of the Atlantic had reached a climax of German successes, only to subside quite quickly during the summer. I remember monitoring what must have been one of the last triumphant *Sondermeldungen* – special broadcasts introduced by fanfares – in which the German Navy claimed to have destroyed vast tonnages of allied shipping. The allied invasion of Italy raised hopes, but progress was painfully slow. Most monitors were refugees and so there were many different personal aspects to their experience of war. In my case for instance, I totally approved of the allied air raids on German cities, including my home town of Cologne. But I also hoped that my grandparents had been evacuated beforehand (indeed, they had). The most disappointing German broadcast in my memory was Hitler's message at about midnight on 20 July 1944 in which he told the German people that he had survived an assassination attempt and was more determined than ever to go on fighting. The broadcast announcing his death on 1 May 1945 was naturally one of the happiest. By this time life in Caversham had settled down. Staff had made more permanent living arrangements – billets

had been replaced by flats and houses, shared or even owned. Relationships had developed. As we monitored the Yalta conference and witnessed Stalin's behaviour in conquered Poland, it began to dawn on us that BBC Monitoring might have a post-war existence after all and that our services might be needed for far longer than originally thought. Indeed they were: after a brief interval, the hot war transformed itself into the Cold War, a conflict that lasted much longer. In a refocused Monitoring Service, the Russians became the most important team and the Germans had to learn the language of Marxism to monitor the Soviet zone in Germany. On 1 January 1954 I became a permanent member of BBC staff.



Karl Lehmann moved to England from Germany in 1936 and went to Leighton Park School in Reading, and subsequently to Queen's College, Oxford, where he studied German and French. He began working as a German monitor in December 1942 and retired thirty-nine years later as Editor of News and Publications.

Image courtesy of BBC Monitoring