

## Vichy France's Radio Propaganda on Collaboration: Insights from the BBC Monitoring Collection

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### Introduction

On 28 June 1940, Alexis Léger, the former head of the French Foreign Ministry, told Winston Churchill that against a background of growing anti-British sentiment in France following the defeat, Britain might make use of the fact that BBC broadcasting was widely listened to in France and that by 'clever use of the [...] wireless', they might be able to turn French public opinion around.<sup>1</sup> In order to do this, however, they needed to know what was being said on the radio in France.

The Axis powers were quick to realise the importance of controlling the airwaves, ordering the closure of all existing French radio stations as part of the armistice terms. In their place, two new stations were established: Radio Paris under German supervision in the northern Occupied Zone and Radiodiffusion Nationale, known as Radio Vichy, in the Unoccupied Zone. However, BBC radio could be picked up across much of France and evidence suggests that many French people considered the BBC to be the most trusted source of information. Listening to the BBC was outlawed, but the ban was regularly flouted and the Vichy government that came into office after the French defeat resisted German demands to make it a capital offence until the total occupation of France in November 1942.

The BBC Monitoring Service transcripts give historians important insights into how, faced with the challenges of the French defeat and occupation, British and French radio became at once locked in battle and connected in a dialogue. In the struggle for veracity and legitimacy, each shaped the other's agenda and each was compelled to respond to the other's claims. We get an indication of the significance of BBCM's work from Emile Delaveney, Assistant Director of the European Intelligence Department at the BBC. In an interview conducted in the early 1990s, he recalled that one of their main tasks was to use BBCM reports to analyse the levels of counter-propaganda from Radio Vichy and Radio Paris to assess the extent of pro-British sentiment within the French population.<sup>2</sup> The BBCM transcripts gave up-to-date insights into the Vichy government's responses to British actions and British propaganda and provided vital information on where Vichy saw itself going domestically and internationally.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Cornick, "Fraternity among listeners". The BBC and French Resistance: Evidence from Refugees,<sup>1</sup> in Hanna Diamond and Simon Kitson (eds.), *Vichy, Resistance, Liberation: New Perspectives on Wartime France* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), p. 102.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Cornick, 'The BBC and the Propaganda War against Occupied France: The Work of Emile Delaveney and the European Intelligence Department', *French History*, 8:3 (1994), 319.

The key question that arises is what do we gain from having the full translated, and sometimes original language BBCM transcripts, rather than the digests that have been previously available and used by historians? In many respects, the primary interest lies in the detail this archive provides. In a context of complex and delicate international relations in which Vichy sought to use any infelicities committed by the British government or the BBC to legitimise collaboration with Nazi Germany, the transcripts give us greater nuance than the digest sources. We get to see what government departments, the BBC and the Free French in London often did not get to see, what may have been omitted or misrepresented in digest reports, or, in some cases, mistranslated.

### Relations between Britain and France

Between the summer and the autumn of 1940, France went from being allied to Britain to collaborating with Nazi Germany. It was therefore a period of extraordinary sensitivity in Britain's relations with France. The two key assets that Vichy retained under the June 1940 armistices, namely its colonial empire and naval fleet, were the very elements that caused the greatest concern for London. Fearing that they might yet fall into Axis hands, the British government found itself compelled to defend the interests and security of Britain in ways that were damaging to the interests and security of France. These actions gave not just Vichy, but also the Free French, legitimate cause to question British intentions, resurrecting old suspicions about 'perfidious Albion'. The first such incident was the British attack on the French fleet at Mers-el-Kébir on 3 July 1940. The British government claimed that it needed to ensure that the French fleet could not be seized by the Germans or Italians, but many in France saw it as unjustified aggression causing the deaths of almost 1,300 French sailors. The fall-out was significant, but it was only aggravated by a British and Free French attack on Dakar, the capital of French West Africa, on 23–25 September 1940.

The delicate nature of relations between Britain and France during this period meant that it was critically important that British propaganda be precisely framed and targeted. Regardless of any military or strategic justifications, British actions directly affected Vichy's move towards collaborating with Nazi Germany and provoked a wave of anti-British sentiment within many sections of French society. Getting accurate, up-to-date information was therefore vital.

### Translation issues

One of the key problems facing monitors was that even the most experienced translators could not have appreciated all the subtleties or significance of what they were listening to without in-depth understanding of the countries and governments whose radio they were monitoring. Even

then, developments that historians might now regard as having been important may not have seemed so at the time.

These difficulties can best be appreciated by exploring the example of a translation of French Prime Minister Pierre Laval's statement at a press conference on 31 October 1940. It followed the famous meeting between the head of the Vichy government, Marshal Pétain, and Hitler at Montoire-sur-le-Loir on 24 October 1940 which heralded a new policy of collaboration between Vichy France and Nazi Germany. Pétain had spoken about the meeting on Radio Vichy on 30 October, but as the widely-acknowledged chief architect of the policy, Laval's views were equally significant.

The BBCM archives contain three versions of Laval's statement. The first is a flash taken from the Lyon transmitter of Vichy Radio, timed at 8am. The second is a longer version of the flash which uses the same wording as the first and is also timed at 8am. The third is a still fuller version timed at 17.45 and, like the first two, is dated 1 November 1940. The key differences are between the flash and the longer version broadcast later that day.

The flash translations have Laval stating: 'Henceforth France will know how to protect herself against foreign interference and will take the responsibility for her actions alone and freely'.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, the later transcript has him declaring: 'From now on France will be protected against foreign interference and will take alone, in complete freedom, the responsibility of her actions'.<sup>4</sup> The key difference between the two versions lies in the phrases 'France will know how to protect herself' and 'France will be protected'. The first version suggests an affirmation of Vichy's determination to retain its sovereignty against all external powers and that Laval did not see this as being inconsistent with collaboration. Given that the statement was being made in the context of a new phase in closer French relations with Nazi Germany, the second version, with its use of the passive, might be interpreted as implying that Germany would assist in protecting France against foreign interference. Here the 'foreign interference' would seem to imply British interference, especially in the French colonial empire, in the wake of the British attacks on Mers-el-Kébir and Dakar.

The differing versions can be checked against the original French text held at the diplomatic archives in Paris and that published in the French press at the time. These reveal that Laval's words in French were: 'Désormais, la France saura se protéger contre les ingérences étrangères et prendre seule dans la liberté, la responsabilité de son action'.<sup>5</sup> This can be translated as:

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<sup>3</sup> BBCM F13 Vichy France in French, November 1941. Lyons in French for France - 0800, 1.11.40. Laval statement to press – amplification of short version in Flash, 13.14, 31.10.40.

<sup>4</sup> BBCM F13 Vichy France in French, November 1941. Lyons: in French for the French: 17.45 BST (22 minutes) 1.11.40 – Pojidaeff (part I), Stucken (part II).

<sup>5</sup> Déclaration de M. Pierre Laval à la presse en date du 31 octobre 1940, in Ministère des Affaires Etrangères Commission de Publication des Documents Diplomatiques Français, *Documents*

'From now on, France will know how to protect herself against foreign interference and to take alone, in freedom, the responsibility for her actions'. In another part of the same statement, the later translation more accurately reflects what Laval said than the earlier flash, so a combination of the two versions is needed to achieve the best overall translation. To monitors in 1940, the differences might have seemed minor or purely linguistic, but they had significant political implications.

The severing of diplomatic links between Britain and France in 1940 left a vacuum which heightened existing suspicions and negative preconceptions. Laval's statement was published in the French press on 2 November 1940, but it took many days for French newspapers to reach the UK, as they had to be microfilmed at the British embassy in Lisbon before being sent to Britain. At a time when the British government, the Free French and the BBC needed to respond promptly to Vichy's shift towards collaboration with Nazi Germany, they had to rely heavily on the BBCM transcripts for information on developments in France.

#### Propaganda and the French public

It is generally acknowledged that to have any real impact, propaganda needs to have a receptive audience, and that to be credible it needs to have some grounding in reality.<sup>6</sup> The problem for the BBC and for the Free French was how to counter the fact that many of the claims made by Radio Vichy seemed to ring true with many French people. A 1940 official document on British propaganda to France therefore stated that the primary task of radio propaganda for France was to counteract Anglophobia and to rebuild confidence in Britain's ability to continue the war. Following a strategy proposed by Maurice Schumann on 9 July 1940, French service broadcasts on the BBC sought to insist upon the continuing close connections and shared ordeals of the British and French people and to combat suspicions that Britain did not wish to see France restored to its former standing. The BBCM transcripts help us to gain a greater understanding of these strategies.

From its establishment in June 1940, Radio Vichy regularly refuted the claims made by the British government. Yet it was somewhat slower to respond systematically to the Free French broadcasts on the BBC, only beginning to do so in earnest in mid-April 1941. Radio Vichy tried to claim that the 'stupidity of this propaganda' had 'seemed so obvious' that it did not need to be refuted.<sup>7</sup> But a more plausible explanation is that the shift in Radio Vichy's strategy was a

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*diplomatiques français: 1940 Tome II (11 juillet – 30 décembre)* (Peter Lang: Brussels, 2009), p. 793; *Le Figaro*, 2 November 1940.

<sup>6</sup> Kay Chadwick, 'Our enemy's enemy: Selling Britain to occupied France on the BBC French Service', *Media History* 21: 4 (2015), 426-442.

<sup>7</sup> BBCM F18 Vichy France in French April 1941. Flash from Lyons in French, Monitor Weiss, 0800, 19.4.41 (Reception poor).

measure of the headway that the French broadcasts from London were making with the French public. The conscious and explicit nature of the responses from Radio Vichy was striking. One broadcast from late April 1941 conceded that ‘hundreds of thousands of people’ had indeed been ‘taken in’ by General de Gaulle’s words. The response from Radio Vichy revealed an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the strategies employed on BBC radio. Its claims that the attacks on Pétain were conducted with ‘infinite precision so as not upset public feeling’ suggested an awareness of how the BBC was mindful of many French people’s loyalty towards the marshal, even if they did not feel the same towards the Vichy regime.<sup>8</sup>

### Reacting to British actions at Dakar

The British and Free French attack on Dakar on 23–25 September 1940 was obviously very helpful to Vichy’s propaganda narrative that Britain was only interested in seizing defeated France’s colonies and that De Gaulle was a traitor implicated in Britain’s crimes.<sup>9</sup> With the BBC depicting Vichy as the puppet of Nazi Germany, so Radio Vichy portrayed De Gaulle as ‘England’s servant’.<sup>10</sup> Addressing De Gaulle’s adherents directly, Radio Vichy dramatically accused Free French supporters of complicity in the deaths of French servicemen. On 25 September 1940, the broadcaster declared: ‘Frenchmen [...] some of you remained attached to De Gaulle. You have remained deaf to the cry for help of our soldiers who were burned, drowned, crushed without defence. [...] Frenchmen... every one of you must become a judge. Those dead at Dakar united to those at Mers-el-Kébir demand justice. Hear them, answer them, as otherwise their blood will be on you’.<sup>11</sup>

With the attack a failure, within days Vichy was able to send reporters out to Dakar to refute directly the claims being made by the BBC.<sup>12</sup> A number of BBCM transcripts are highly evocative in describing the background noises included in the broadcasts, including the sounds of a plane at Dakar airport, crowds on the streets and a market scene. The sounds, as described in the transcripts, conveyed an impression of life carrying on defiantly despite the actions of the British and Free French. The level of detail, on-location reports and eye-witness accounts lent the Dakar broadcasts a directness and credibility with which the BBC could not compete. They highlight

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<sup>8</sup> BBCM F18 Vichy France in French April 1941. Lyons (Vichy Home Stations) in French for France 19.00 (15 ms), 24.4.41, Pojidaeff, D &TR.

<sup>9</sup> BBCM F10 Vichy France in French for France, August-October 1940. Radio Lyons, 1900, 26.9.40.

<sup>10</sup> BBCM F10 Vichy France in French for France, August-October 1940. Flash from Lyons, in French for France, Monitor Pettinati, 1845, 3.4.41 – ‘The Truth about De Gaulle and the De Gaulle Movement’ (second talk) (full summary).

<sup>11</sup> BBCM F10 Vichy France in French for France, August-October 1940. Lyons in French for France, 0800, 25.9.40.

<sup>12</sup> BBCM F10 Vichy France in French for France, August-October 1940. Toulouse Unoccupied France – Special Report on Dakar in French for France, 10.10.40.

how, despite its reputation for trustworthy reporting, the BBC's task of countering Vichy's radio propaganda was far from simple.

### Conclusion

While the BBCM transcript archives might not provide comprehensive coverage of all wartime radio broadcasts in France, the French archives do not either. The Archives Nationales have the Radio Paris news scripts, editorials and transcripts of military developments from 1943. For Radio Vichy, the transcript records are somewhat limited. The Archives Nationales possess the records of André Demaison, the director of Radio Vichy from April 1942 to January 1944. For the period 1940 to 1943, the BBCM archives therefore provide us with many transcripts that we otherwise would not have, including, in a number of cases, in the original French.

Above all, however, the significance of the BBCM collection on France lies in having access to the detail and nuance in the full transcripts at a critical moment when Vichy's relations with Britain and Nazi Germany were in flux and when public support for De Gaulle and the Free French was far from assured.