

The BBC Monitoring Service and the Middle East during the Suez crisis

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My paper falls into three sections. In the first, I will look at the BBC Monitoring Service's importance and how it worked with the British Foreign Office in its coverage of events in the Middle East in and around the 1956 Suez Crisis. Next, I will summarize the significance of the Suez crisis in the history both of the BBC and of propaganda. Finally, I will explore what the material in the BBCMS archive can add to the picture.

1. The BBC Monitoring Service, the Middle East and the British Foreign Office

Ostensibly, during the Cold War, the BBC Monitoring Service monitored broadcast news over much of the world in order to inform the BBC's news and programming, as well as that of certain subscribers. In fact – as all of us here know – the Service provided information on great swathes of broadcasting, both overt and covert, and fed this to various government organs as a provider of open intelligence.

This was particularly important as regards the Middle East. By the time of the Suez crisis in 1956, BBC monitoring effectively covered the full range of broadcasters across the region. As befitting the Middle East's centrality to the Cold War, these broadcasters were many and varied. Thus, the BBC Monitoring Service provided valuable intelligence on everything from clandestine 'black' radio stations during the Suez crisis itself, to the daily output of, among others, Soviet, Chinese, Israeli and Egyptian broadcasters.

During the Cold War, the BBC Monitoring Service built a strong partnership with the British government's chief anti-communist propaganda agency, the Foreign Office's Information Research Department (or IRD). IRD deemed radio *monitoring* to be its main source of material for immediate use in counter propaganda in the Middle East, as well as for background information. Added to this, IRD called radio propaganda 'the most effective propaganda weapon in the Middle East'. The upshot is that it would be hard to overstate how important the BBC Monitoring Service was to IRD, particularly in managing Arab opinion.

Part IV of the daily *Summary of World Broadcasts* that was produced by the BBC Monitoring Service focussed entirely on the Middle East. But IRD was also interested in as much of the 'full raw material' as was available from the BBC. Any particularly virulent propaganda not included in the *Summary of World Broadcasts* would be sent to IRD by bag. These monitoring reports allowed IRD to keep track of Arabic, communist and other broadcasting, and particularly that produced by Gamal Abdul Nasser's vociferously anti-British and exceedingly popular 'Voice of the Arabs' Cairo radio station. The Foreign Office would digest this material and, in theory, adjust its propaganda output accordingly.

For many years, the files of the Information Research Department were closed. Recently, however, many of them have been released at The National Archives. These files offer us important insights into British propaganda during the Cold War. The full records of the BBC Monitoring Service will add greatly to these insights. They will allow us to explore in depth the relationship between the British government and the BBC during the Cold War's battle for hearts and minds. The two sets of archives will shed light on how propaganda was devised, shaped, targeted, monitored and assessed.

2. The 1956 Suez Crisis, radio and propaganda

Two aspects of the crisis are already well known:

First, that propaganda played a central role in the 6-month-long Suez crisis of 1956, and for the British government especially. Prime Minister Anthony Eden secretly sought regime-change in Cairo, not just the re-internationalisation of the Suez Canal. Radio broadcasting in Britain and the Middle East was seen as a vital instrument in effecting regime-change in Cairo – for putting psychological pressure on Gamal Abdul Nasser – especially during the ‘war’ phase of the crisis in October–November. That ‘psy-war’ went horribly wrong, however, undercutting the Eden government’s whole strategy. It might be argued (or at least I have argued) that Eden’s propaganda strategy – especially his demonising of Nasser – was counter-productive, and meant that ultimately Eden could not, for domestic political reasons, compromise with a man whom he had labelled a second Hitler. This, together with other factors, forced the prime minister into colluding with the Israelis.

Second, the Suez crisis is famous, at least among historians of the British media, for the row between the Eden government and the BBC. Indeed, that row, over the Corporation’s right to remain neutral and objective in its reporting of a Britain divided by the Suez crisis, is seen as one of great battles in British broadcasting history. Then and now, the crisis is seen by most commentators as a demonstration of the BBC’s independence.

3. What the BBC Monitoring material adds to the picture

The Suez crisis lasted for roughly six months, from July 1956, when Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal Company, to the resignation of Eden in January 1957. For practical purposes, I am today focusing on the ‘war’ phase of the crisis, from late October to early November 1956. This might distort the picture somewhat. I am also concentrating entirely on the radio propaganda dimensions of that war phase. I have not looked at how the BBC Monitoring material was distributed or used by, for instance, the British government. Instead, I have focused on those broadcasts during the crisis that hitherto have largely been overlooked – among them Eastern bloc broadcasts. I have tried to identify what the BBC Monitoring material either adds to or changes what we know about the Suez propaganda war.

I would like to make 6 points:

1. *Suez was a Cold War ‘hot war’, less between USA and USSR, and more between Britain/France and the Eastern bloc, and fought not on the military battlefield but in the sphere of propaganda. Suez was a ‘hot war’ that went beyond Britain, beyond the Middle East even. Monitoring shows how so much of the radio output during and over Suez was infused with Cold War rhetoric – the language of ‘freedom’, ‘democracy’, ‘colonialism’, ‘imperialism’, ‘communism’.*
2. *Monitoring output shows us the differences in propaganda style (sometimes subtle differences, sometimes radical differences) between the key warring and observing parties during the Suez crisis – principally Britain, France, Israel, Egypt and the Soviet Union. Egyptian broadcasting, for instance, appealed more to street opinion compared with the British and French. Soviet broadcasts were more emotional, less factual than Chinese broadcasts. Scholars of linguistics and communications would perhaps learn as much as historians or international relations scholars by conducting a case study of radio output during the Suez crisis.*
3. *Not surprisingly, the Communist bloc had a field day with Suez. The Communist bloc radios shared many anti-western propaganda themes but there were also some interesting differences. **East German** radio in German smelled collusion from the outset, accusing London and Paris (‘the imperialist robbers’) of using Israel as a catspaw against Egypt. East German radio also accused Britain and France of hypocrisy in defending Hungarian rebels’ fight for independence and democracy. By contrast, **Radio Moscow** in*

Arabic reported on demonstrations of support for Nasser taking place in Soviet and other Eastern bloc cities. It quoted Soviet factory workers' support for a 'Hands off Egypt' campaign. Moscow Radio sought to bolster Egyptian resistance to the British and French military by falsely claiming Nasser's air force had downed British planes and destroyed British ships in the Red Sea. Radio Moscow claimed Moscow's pressure on London had forced Eden to agree to an early cease fire. At the same time, Radio Moscow in Arabic failed to say anything about the Kremlin's famous threat in early November 1956 to use nuclear weapons against the Western powers unless they stopped their actions against Nasser. This was potentially valuable intelligence for the British government and just might have helped quell Eden's fears that this nuclear threat was genuine.

4. *Clandestine/black radio stations*: Among monitored output is that of one of the black radio stations which the British operated in Arabic during the Suez war. This was called the **Free Egyptian Broadcasting Station** and its output was designed to inspire opposition to Nasser from within Egypt itself. The Free Egyptian Broadcasting Station claimed that that the British and French had come to free Egypt, to 'liquidate' the 'traitor', Nasser, who was referred to either as 'Gamalov' (i.e. a Russian stooge) or 'Haim Gamalov' (a closet Zionist). The station called on Egypt's soldiers to protect the Suez Canal lest it fall into the hands of atheistic 'communist gangs'. One broadcast ended by threatening to 'erect gallows' for Nasser. BBC Monitoring output also gives us a flavour of another semi-clandestine radio station operated by the British, the so-called **Arab News Agency**. This station was based in Cairo and distributed Reuters material to scores of Middle Eastern newspapers. The station was ostensibly independent but connected with MI6 and IRD. Extant output shows the Arab News Agency's straight reporting of events during the Suez crisis might have acted as some sort of counter to Nasser's more outwardly partisan Voice of the Arabs.
5. *What of the Colluders?* Monitoring does not reveal any great surprises in this regard, though some **Israeli broadcasts in English** are interesting. Such broadcasts were presumably aimed at the Jewish Diaspora, including in the US. The broadcasts include commentaries about Israel's long-term hopes for peace with the Arabs by Walter Eytan, a veteran of Bletchley Park and now spokesman for the Israeli Foreign Ministry. Other broadcasts by the Israeli Army's spokesman and one of Israel's most prominent cultural diplomats, Moshe Pearlman, talked of the skill of Israel's citizen-soldiers, of Egypt's long terrorist (Fedayeen) campaign against Israel, and of finding Arabic version of *Mein Kampf* on the Sinai battlefield.
6. *Egypt*: Nasser's chief propaganda tool during the Suez Crisis, the Voice of the Arabs, was much less one-dimensional than we might think. Its output amounted to a lot more than just hysterical appeals to the Egyptian people and other Arabs to fight the 'imperialist invaders' – though there is a lot of that (Port Said compared to Stalingrad, speeches by Nasser used to prove that he is still in control and has not fled). The Voice of the Arabs was also adept at citing international media for news from overseas, e.g. for evidence of Parliamentary opposition to Eden in Britain. The station cheekily called on the Leader of the Opposition, Hugh Gaitskell, to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace. It notified Arabs of several high-profile resignations from Eden's government, such as Eden's press secretary William Clark. It helped bolster Egyptian resistance to the invaders by telling the people that the Chinese government was sending volunteers to help and broadcast speeches by Algerian nationalists fighting French colonialism in their own country. The Voice of the Arabs was in many ways exactly that, the voice of the Arabs.