

## **A leap of imagination: BBC audience research over the iron curtain**

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### **Abstract**

By the end of the Second World War, the BBC World Service had grown from a single language (English) service, to the largest multilingual broadcaster in the world, transmitting in over forty languages. This transformation reflected the global ambition of the World Service which maintained a similar scale of activity into the Twenty-First Century. No longer bound by wartime strictures the BBC inaugurated its new Russian language service in the spring of 1946 as it re-equipped itself for a world at peace. However, the emerging cold war soon saw overseas broadcasting back on the frontline of a brutal geopolitical battle.

Unlike Germany in 1939, relatively little was known of the realities of life in Russia and the listening habits of its people at the start of the cold war. And as wartime cooperation gave way to a new era of competition, any hope of an increase in understanding evaporated. In the absence of access to audiences and information about them, BBC officials, journalists and engineers, along with colleagues in Whitehall, embarked on a necessarily imaginative process of audience evaluation. This article assesses this process where broadcasters attempted to piece together, using professional intuition and recent experience, set alongside Britain's diplomatic imperatives, the nature and requirements of its audiences over the iron curtain.

**Keywords:** BBC External Services; BBC World Service; Cold War; Radio; Public Diplomacy; Russia; Audience Research.

### **Introduction**

BBC World Service Audience Research has evolved from a minority pursuit concerned with maintaining an imperial standard in the Empire Service of the 1930s, to its present day status embedded at the heart of an institutional framework deploying complex metrics and delivering

qualitative insights for programme and policy makers alike. In its near eighty year history, the BBC's assessment of overseas audiences has had to meet a diverse range of methodological, strategic, editorial and geopolitical challenges while maintaining a clarity of purpose in order to support both the transient and long term broadcast objectives and values that are the mainstay of a lasting and credible relationship with audiences.

Initially conceived as an Empire Service for all those who think of the United Kingdom as home,<sup>1</sup> the establishment of foreign language services by the BBC on the eve of the Second World War and their very considerable proliferation during hostilities signalled a truly global and multi-lingual revision of the BBC's broadcast mission. The maintenance of over forty languages into the next century subsequently reflected the Corporation's global ambitions as an international broadcaster. In the intervening period, audience research has been vital in knitting together an understanding of audiences with editorial policy, programme-making and technological advances across a wide range of strategic contexts such as the cold war, decolonisation and self-governance and, more recently, ongoing conflicts in the greater Middle East.

One such critical period of transition in this history, which provides the context and temporal frame for this article, is the re-gearing of broadcast practices and sensibilities after the Second World War with the concomitant closing up of Central and Eastern Europe from outside influences and the establishment of a *bloc* of countries about which increasingly little was discernable. Covering the period from 1946 when the BBC established its first regular broadcast service in Russian to the instability in the Soviet system engendered by the death of Stalin and the East German uprising in 1953, the article will consider the practical and conceptual challenges to audience research across the iron curtain and particularly in Russian. It is indicative of those challenges that, even today, so little attention has been paid to this topic in studies of international media and international relations.

The impact of broadcast mass communication and its role as a mobilising tool has been the subject of episodic, though not sustained, analysis over the century of its existence. Nevertheless, bold claims have been made for the efficacy of international broadcasting. Michael Nelson in his history of cold war radio delivered the following valedictory: 'Why did the West win the cold war? Not by use of arms. Weapons did not breach the Iron Curtain. The Western invasion was by radio, which was mightier than the sword'.<sup>2</sup> Seventy years earlier the political scientist and early theorist on the power of propaganda Harold Lasswell suggested that 'most of that which could be done by violence and intimidation must now be done by argument and persuasion'.<sup>3</sup> While the radio did not replace the rifle, indeed World War Two demonstrated the strength derived by combining both, it was clear that broadcasting was becoming an essential adjunct to political and military campaigns where it was

increasingly necessary to engage public opinion in pursuit of sustainable objectives. Yet despite the growing literature on the politics and production of international broadcasting, there remains relatively limited analysis of its impact on audiences. Although some recent publications have begun to evaluate the significance of American cold war broadcasting through analyses of audience research techniques, at present there exist no comparable examinations of the British experience.<sup>4</sup> This extends to the multi-volume official *History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom* by Asa Briggs where the mechanisms of overseas audience research, as opposed to its well mapped domestic counterpart, are barely touched on in this early period of the cold war.

The 'dark silence of Hitler's...blackout of news' during the war, as the BBC Director-General William Haley characterised it in 1944, had helped construct an eager and loyal listenership for the BBC's foreign-language services Europe.<sup>5</sup> The value of this and the diplomatic and broadcast influence derived from it was well understood in Bush House and Whitehall and both were alive to the opportunities presented by the maintenance of these services. But as world war became cold war how did broadcasters, policy-makers and officials imagine this should be done – how did they conceptualise the relationship between producer and consumer? The imperial model of overseas broadcasting, with London at the centre transmitting to the periphery, was fundamentally challenged by the scale, asymmetry and multiple objectives of wartime broadcasting. While the BBC retained a singular editorial style there was pressure to speak with a range of voices which recognised the different political and cultural contexts in which listeners tuned in. This move from projection to a fuller form of engagement, from a binary relationship to a more complex and nuanced one, reflected changing attitudes towards the needs of specific audiences. In addition, the credibility gap which had emerged in the use of mass communication in Axis-power countries exposed the limits of media manipulation. In future, broadcasters would have to take much greater care to acknowledge in their output the wide range of influences – political, ideological, social, technical – which informed audience needs, tastes and tolerances. To a far greater degree than had previously been the case in international broadcasting, understanding your audience became an essential element of making programmes for them. In this way, the methods employed to determine, measure and assess audiences increasingly became a part of the editorial voice coordinating output.

This widening of the broadcaster's horizon was compounded by a far more practical problem for the BBC's programme makers and analysts after the war as the descending iron curtain made all estimates and assertions about its audiences in Eastern Europe entirely speculative. This broadcast relationship, initially born out of the imperatives of combat, was intended to settle into the rhythms of the postwar peace where transmissions would be accompanied by direct contact with audiences. Instead, the world slide from one war into another leaving the

BBC's listeners there just as distant and inaccessible as before. Looking in detail at the example of BBC Russian language broadcasting, this article will examine the nature and consequences of this knowledge failure in the early years of the cold war and the subsequent construction of hybrid audience research techniques that relied as much on the intuition and experience of the broadcaster as on accessible data. As the possibility of access to these audiences evaporated the BBC faced a fundamental test in the provision of broadcast services to them and the editorial assumptions on which they were based. And with the advent of Soviet jamming of BBC output and the ensuing radio arms race, serious concerns were raised about whether the BBC Russian Service had an audience at all.

### **Knowledge Failure**

The world after 1945 was an extremely challenging environment in which to estimate the size of the BBC's audience and assess the reach and audibility of its services. Not least because of the lack of an internal infrastructure with which to carry out such research. The war had been the motivating force behind the massive expansion in BBC overseas broadcasting, but there had been no concurrent development of a cohesive and centralised system of audience research. In its place emerged a wartime mixed economy of influences reflecting the assessments of the BBC's own language services and Overseas Intelligence and Presentation departments, as well as those of (often competitive) government departments such as the Ministry of Information, Political Warfare Executive (part of which was housed in Bush House), Foreign Office, War Office and other branches of Whitehall. The imperatives of British war aims with its diversity of overseas broadcasting objects – empire, enemy and occupied territories, Allies, neutrals – and the accompanying range of broadcast styles used in BBC output meant that managing the 'maelstrom' of competing forces, as Briggs put it, was a constituent element of engaging with audiences.<sup>6</sup>

It was not until 1947 that a dedicated audience research department was established with a compliment of just five staff under the leadership of Asher Lee as both the BBC and government prepared for the official transition from wartime broadcast controls.<sup>7</sup> The formative experience of war, however, had left its imprint on the Corporation as it reorganised itself for a new world order, and it was to have continued significance in the management and comprehension of audience assessments. In particular, broadcasting into enemy and occupied territories had by necessity been a cooperative endeavour, with information about reception conditions and audiences scavenged from as wide a range of civil and military sources as possible. This wartime precedent of multi-agency input and the practice of government in negotiating, debating and arguing with broadcasters (for example, through the Joint Broadcasting Committee)<sup>8</sup> about how to best approach audiences and to what ends, had become an integrated part of overseas output. The BBC's declaration of editorial independence as set out in its 1947 Charter, Licence and Agreement was intended to bring

about the end of this permissive relationship and, under the rubric of broadcasting in the 'national interest', the observance of a constitutional distance in editorial decision-making. However, the emerging cold war and the recrudescence of belligerent power politics on the continent quickly meant that once again broadcasting, as it had first been noted in 1940, 'is now our only means of addressing a great part of Europe'.<sup>9</sup> Ravaged by six years of war, with severely dislocated services and massively dispersed and displaced migrant populations, Europe represented a major broadcasting challenge for the BBC and confounded simple audience measurements. Moreover, the geopolitical significance of services to Eastern Europe and the difficulty of getting information from behind the Iron Curtain meant that the BBC would remain, for the time being, highly dependent on official sources for audience research insight and material.

In the spring of 1947 the Director of European Services, Ian Jacob, had laid out the 'intelligence' requirements for services to the continent:

- (a) Knowledge of what is going on in the country concerned – Political, social and cultural developments.
- (b) Knowledge of the distribution of receiving sets, their nature and type, and of the listening habits of the different sections of the people.
- (c) Assessment of size type and distribution of our audience, and of their programme preferences.
- (d) Knowledge of what is being read or heard by our listeners from other sources.
- (e) Collection of systematic and widespread reaction to our programmes.
- (f) Study of and reply to mail received from listeners.
- (g) Advice, based on all the information gathered, to those directing output and to those directing publicity.<sup>10</sup>
- (h)

This was a first attempt to orchestrate the audience research activities of the European Services in support of programme output. Information gathered under these headings was to become an integral part of the Bush House production process. It was estimated there were around 175 million adult radio listeners in Europe in the years after the war, twenty million of which listened to the BBC during the course of a week or a fortnight.<sup>11</sup> By 1949 this annual assessment was the result of polls undertaken in Germany, France, Italy and Belgium,<sup>12</sup> Listener Research Weeks in which competitions offered prizes for letters critiquing BBC programmes, general correspondence, listening panels, questionnaires, Foreign Office reports, BBC staff visits, and interviews with European visitors and refugees.<sup>13</sup> For services to Western Europe this represented the beginnings of a regular process of evaluation and assessment. However, for those beamed across the Iron Curtain, these were techniques which, in the main, could not be systematically applied. There existed, in relation to Jacob's

list of intelligence requirements, a very considerable knowledge gap when it came to listeners behind the iron curtain and the BBC Russian audience in particular.

Britain's wartime alliance with Russia had, at least, engendered some intelligence about population characteristics and the dynamics of radio listening which was eagerly digested by the BBC External Services (as the World Service was then called) when its Russian Service was inaugurated in March 1946.<sup>14</sup> The fact that regular broadcasts in Russian or, indeed, any of the other indigenous languages of the Soviet Union, were not already a part of the BBC's output reflected the diplomatic and political sensitivities inherent in the wartime alliance. With the war now over and the relationship between Britain and the Soviet Union rapidly cooling, the BBC was well prepared to get Russian broadcasting up and running when the Foreign Office submitted a request that it should do so in February 1946.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, the absence of significant broadcast experience in Russian up to this point meant that by the start of the cold war the BBC did not have, as was the case in other countries in the Soviet sphere, an established relationship with listeners.<sup>16</sup> Bush House also faced the difficult challenge of employing, at very short order, Russian speaking staff with an up-to-date knowledge of life in the reception territory. With recruitment direct from Russia out of the question, the BBC had to scout for broadcast talent from the available pool of émigré, dissident, migratory and the displaced Russian-speaking postwar diaspora. As with nearly all the Corporation's foreign broadcasts at the time, services were led by an English head, or Programme Organiser as they were then called. Nevertheless, it was the sound of the service's language staff which listeners engaged with and which contributed so much to the tone of the output. In the case of the Russian Service there was early concern when the British Embassy in Moscow reporting the alienating nature of the 'English and White Russian intonation' of announcers which, it was described, was the equivalent of 'exaggerated Oxford' and quite off-putting for the listener.<sup>17</sup> A reorganisation swiftly ensued with the aim of adding contemporary and vernacular accents to the service and improving the Russian translations of core broadcast material which at that time were centrally produced in English.<sup>18</sup>

Guided by projections contained in the Soviet Union's own five-year postwar reconstruction plan it was estimated by the BBC that by 1947 five and a half million radio sets had been manufactured in Russia which were capable of picking up shortwave broadcasts – the long-range wavelength necessary for broadcasting over great distances.<sup>19</sup> This assessment offered the possibility of large scale listening to BBC programmes in Russia. At the same time the BBC received information about Russian audiences from a number of other sources. Letters from listeners were, for example, considered a highly significant form of audience feedback – albeit with limited regard for their inherent biases and the self-selecting nature of correspondents. Although small in number, the 130 letters received from Russian speakers in 1946 and 1947 were poured over for insights into the success and popularity of

programmes.<sup>20</sup> In addition, the British Embassy in Moscow was an extremely valuable source of intelligence, as were all other British Legations behind the Iron Curtain, not just about audiences but also concerning reception conditions. Such was the importance of this information feed to the External Services that it was arranged for Asher Lee, the BBC's Overseas Listener Research Officer, to be put in touch with Information Officers in British Embassies on the question of 'technical reports'.<sup>21</sup> When this arrangement concerning Russia lapsed some time later, it was the BBC and not the Foreign Office who agitated for the reinstatement of a 'listening roster' in Moscow, which was duly instructed.<sup>22</sup>

An additional and very important source of information was the collection and analysis of Russian and Eastern European press output by the BBC Monitoring Service at Caversham in Berkshire. Established on the outbreak of war,<sup>23</sup> the Monitoring Service quickly became a vital feed of open source intelligence for the BBC, British government and, from the end of 1941, the United States government. The production of a daily *Digest* with regional breakdowns was accompanied by additional client specific requests for information and 'flash' news updates which could be wired directly to the BBC Newsroom, Downing Street and other Whitehall departments, as well as stakeholders in Washington. One important cold war task performed by the BBC's monitors for journalists in the European Services and officials in the Foreign Office was the regular analysis of 'Trends in Communist Propaganda' and the production by a small Research Section of a *Weekly Analysis* of foreign broadcasts as well as 'intake reports' and 'Studies in Broadcast Propaganda'.<sup>24</sup>

In the diplomatic world, the continued failure to reach agreement on postwar treaty settlements between the former allies boded ill for the stability of Europe and officials in London and staff at the BBC began preparing for a new and potentially belligerent phase in relations with Russia. The subsequent Soviet-sponsored communist ousting of the Czechoslovakian National Government in February 1948 and the imposition of a blockade on allied West Berlin that summer signalled the beginning of the cold war in the consciousness of the public at large. It also brought about the virtual end of information concerning listening habits within the Soviet sphere reaching the BBC and an appreciation of the extent to which overseas broadcasting continued to play a part in the lives of Russian listeners. While estimates continued to be made concerning the potential size of Russian audiences, eight million wireless sets by 1951, there was no scope for qualitative assessments of the BBC's listenership as the evidence base rapidly evaporated.<sup>25</sup> For example, intelligence about listening in 1948 was based on a British Information Officer in Moscow asking questions of people he met while on holiday on the Volga. In 1949, eight members of the Soviet Occupation Force in Germany were questioned about listening habits, whereas in 1950, to quote a BBC report,

The only real indication of continued listening occurred during a conversation between a member of the British Embassy in Moscow and a young Russian. The Russian said that he did not know much about England, only what he had learned from the BBC. When asked whether the broadcasts could be heard now because of jamming, he said: 'Oh, yes! They come through occasionally'.<sup>26</sup>

By the early 1950s the pattern of active Russian audience research was well characterised by the comment made in a 1954 BBC review. 'Sources,' it wearily noted, 'have been rather sparse'.<sup>27</sup> As a consequence, the absence of direct audience research encouraged a reliance on contextual knowledge where core broadcast assumptions about audiences and reception condition were built on peripheral sources. One such discreet mechanism was the provision of Foreign Office telegrams for consumption by the BBC.

The 1946 White Paper on *Broadcasting Policy*, the precursor of the new Charter, established the postwar principle of constitutional independence from government control: 'The BBC would remain independent in the preparation of programmes for overseas audiences'. Nevertheless, the Foreign Secretary retained the right to authorise which languages the BBC broadcast in, for how long and on which frequencies. The White Paper also pointed out that the BBC would 'obtain from Government departments concerned such information about conditions in these countries and the policies of His Majesty's Government toward them as will permit it to plan its programmes in the national interest'.<sup>28</sup> It was through this guidance mechanism that the Foreign Office derived access rights, at the policy level, to External Services editorial considerations with the *quid pro quo* that Bush House was able to access confidential and highly valuable diplomatic on-the-ground assessments of conditions in reception countries.

The use of Foreign Office, military and other government telegrams in the business of broadcasting had become an essential part of output during the Second World War. Unsurprisingly, when other sources were often simply not available, these telegrams were vital to the production of news – especially to the European continent. However, the management and conduct of this transfer of information was revised in the summer of 1946 in preparation for the Charter and in light of BBC concerns about the independence of its output and anxieties about the secret or sensitive nature of the content of these telegrams. The BBC's new Director of European Services, Ian Jacob, established a Political Information Section as part of his office to act as the processing centre through which information from the Foreign Office would pass. Here government documents would be used to draft 'background notes and guidance directives' as well as to produce summaries in order to provide, first the European and then the whole External Services, a 'complete picture of the international scene'.<sup>29</sup> In this way British Missions behind the Iron Curtain, especially in the



absence of other forms of feedback, became a critical ear with an important part to play in advising both the Foreign Office and the BBC on the requirements of broadcasting to these territories.

Foreign Office telegrams of 'general importance or exceptional interest' were passed by the Political Information Section to Tangye Lean, in his capacity as Editor of the European Services, in time for his daily meetings with senior service chiefs. It would then be up to Lean to decide what elements of these documents would be passed on. The BBC's decision, at the end of November 1948, that 'sight of the FO telegrams must be greatly restricted', and the subsequent overhaul of handling arrangements was intended to provide both an increased degree of security and a more candid distribution of information.<sup>30</sup> From then on, telegrams received by the Political Information Section 'will in future be summarised in this office and sent to the interested individuals under some such title as 'Regional Gleanings'. There will be no mention in these Gleanings that they are based on FO telegrams, but the source will, of course, be understood...and we shall feel able to write somewhat more freely if Service Heads are not permitted to retain them.'<sup>31</sup> The addition of the BBC to the distribution lists of certain British government telegrams (and access to the institutional attitudes they represented) consequently became an integral means of framing the outlook of Bush House towards its cold war audiences.

Constructing a minds-eye picture of its Russian speaking audience, their tastes, expectations and tolerances, when traditional methods of audience research were unavailable was a complex problem for the BBC. This was further compounded by shifts in the geopolitical atmosphere of the late 1940s and the crystallisation of a cold war between East and West. In this context, BBC broadcasts in Russian took on even greater significance, not just for the British government, but also for Soviet authorities fearful of the United Kingdom's use of broadcasting to access the minds of ordinary Russians. The Iron Curtain could be made into a physical land barrier, but control of the ether would prove to be far harder. Meanwhile, policy makers in London were embarking on a radical shift in policy towards its former ally at the start of 1948 when the British Cabinet agreed, at the behest of the Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, to 'adopt a new line in our foreign publicity designed to oppose the inroads of Communism, by taking the offensive against it'.<sup>32</sup> This declaration of a non-shooting war with the Soviet Union suddenly put the BBC Russian Service on the front line of the cold war and radically altered the calculus and significance of audience assessments.

### **The Imaginative Leap**

In keeping with this shift in the significance of broadcasting over the iron curtain, so the locus of debate about the Russian Service's audiences moved from being an internal and interdepartmental dialogue within the BBC to a hotly contested discourse between the

Corporation and Whitehall. A primary consideration in all of this was to determine who listened to the BBC's Russian programmes and what they wanted, or perhaps needed, to hear from the voice of Britain abroad. The BBC's own continent-wide assessment was that although audiences were drawn from 'every manner of person in every age group from children to septuagenarians', the dominant sections of listening populations were male middle class professionals.<sup>33</sup> The Foreign Office, which funded the BBC External Services via Parliamentary Grant-in-Aid, considered Russian audiences to be being largely composed of the intelligentsia and it was thought profitable to exploit 'the uneasiness of the intellectuals over the growing regimentation to which they have lately been subjected'. Accordingly, they argued the time was right for seizing the 'opportunity of increasing the doubts they already feel about the correctness of the Party line as well as the reliability of Soviet propaganda'.<sup>34</sup> The Assistant Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, Christopher Warner, suggested certain criteria for this new approach to the BBC's Director of External Services, and future Director-General, Sir Ian Jacob:

attacks on the Russians as a people would obviously be absurd; but we agree that even attacks on Stalin, and to some extent on the Soviet Government, would be likely to defeat our object. But Soviet publicity is evidently the Achilles heel of the regime, and as such is an obvious target.<sup>35</sup>

The British Ambassador in Moscow, Sir Maurice Peterson, agreed and told colleagues in London that 'the main attack should not be on the Soviet Government, leaders, policy, or outlook – the defences around these are too strong – but on Soviet sources of information'.<sup>36</sup>

In Bush House (the home of the European Services since the Second World War, and subsequently all overseas broadcasting) there was little disagreement with the view that 'it must...be one of the main objects of our broadcasts to Russia to drive a wedge between the people and the regime,' as the BBC Head of East European Services (a future Director-General), Hugh Carleton Greene, put it. There was, though, a more nuanced appreciation of the BBC's audience in Russia:

It seems, however, unnecessarily pessimistic to assume that our audience stands solidly behind the regime and resents any criticism of its present Government. I am speaking of *our audience* (which, it should not be forgotten, includes the armies of occupation outside Russia: the morale of the army is inclined to be rather shaky) and not the Russian people as a whole.<sup>37</sup>

In addition, although listening to the BBC was not forbidden, evidence of Communist Party members being expelled for doing so meant that there must have already been a sense of

'committing a misdemeanour' by those tuning in: 'In such circumstances,' Greene continued, 'listening is by itself evidence of doubt and becomes more and more the first faint sign of opposition'.<sup>38</sup> This was underlined by news of the implementation through the Cominform of a Defence of the Peace Act in a number of satellite countries from 1950 which made it a crime to pass on information picked up from listening to western broadcasters.<sup>39</sup>

In arriving at his conclusion – that the process of subversion had already started, in however small a degree, by the time the listener sought out the BBC's transmissions – Greene was able to argue that rather than concentrating purely on the 'weak spot' that was the Soviet information services and running the risk 'of thinking too exclusively in terms of counter-propaganda' the BBC should be engaged in 'attacking the Marxist-Leninist ideology and the whole basis of the Soviet regime'.<sup>40</sup> This holistic approach had the advantage of creating a wider broadcast menu on which to hook relevant programme opportunities than the rather limited approach advocated by the Foreign Office. And it is possible to see, in this context, the first hand experience of broadcasting to tightly controlled closed societies during the Second World War (when Greene had been in charge of German language output) at play in the idea of forcing your opponent to feel compelled to reply to your lead and not the other way round.

By the spring of 1949, a year on from the British Cabinet's call to arms against Soviet communism, there was broad agreement in the Foreign Office and in Bush House that the tone of the BBC's output in Russian should be toughened in light of cold war concerns. There was, however, no consistent line on what this meant in practical and editorial terms, or on whether certain sections of the BBC's Russian audience should be targeted differently. In general, the BBC programmes to Europe had three main objectives: '(1) to present the news objectively, impartially and accurately (2) to give a balanced British viewpoint on world affairs and British politics, and (3) to project the British way of life in all its aspects, cultural, economic and social'.<sup>41</sup> The process of editorial honing embarked on a year earlier had already seen the beginnings of an expansion of (1) at the expense of (2) and (3) alongside the development of a more regional and locally focused news, comment and current affairs agenda.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, it remained the case that this re-engineering of Russian Service output was taking place against a backdrop of increasing uncertainty about the efficacy of these changes and audiences reactions to them.

These twin challenges for the BBC Russian Service, a strategic reorientation of British official attitudes towards the Soviet Union and the opaque nature of its audience, made the projection of a single recognisable editorial voice ever harder for the BBC. The intention in 1946 had been 'to build a large and friendly audience' through an amicable tone of engagement.<sup>43</sup> In particular, Russian listeners were to be presented with 'a straightforward, honest News Bulletin, a comprehensive review of Britain, Parliament, and other British

institutions, scientific and cultural achievements and sporting events (particularly football and chess) which we know to be of interest; and to elucidate in a varied manner and from as many fields as possible the British way of life.<sup>44</sup> Accordingly, when a Delegation of the Supreme Soviet visited the BBC on the first anniversary of the Russian Service in 1947, it was considered as an 'admirable opportunity for the projection of Anglo-Russian friendship'.<sup>45</sup>

Within the space of a couple of years, and echoing the shifts in the wider geopolitical context, Russian programming faced a much tougher challenge. But how to reflect the aims of friendship and solidarity with the ordinary Russian listener, on the one hand, and a critical appraisal of the Soviet Union's international ambitions and its authoritarian domestic controls, on the other? The solution, arrived at as much by the intuition of specific broadcasters within the service as by editorial design, was to speak with a modulated, as opposed to a single, editorial voice. Emblematic of this difference were the tones employed by the senior regional commentator in the European Services (and later Head of the Russian Service), Anatol Goldberg, and the Assistant Head of East European Services David Graham. In his press reviews and weekly commentary, *Notes By Our Observer*, Goldberg employed an approach to the microphone which was 'always a friendly one, the note being one of regret at the strained relations between East and West rather than of reproach for Russian behaviour'.<sup>46</sup> By way of contrast, Graham spoke as an 'indignant outsider' rather than a 'disillusioned friend' which allowed for material of a far harder nature to be broadcast.<sup>47</sup> This evolution of tone within the Russian Service, while a necessary reflection of the mixture of competing editorial voices and professional broadcast sensibilities, nevertheless reflected an unresolved tension between Bush House and the government on the perpetual question of the purpose of the service. Whitehall's immediate political and cold war objectives required a robust voice of Britain as part of the escalating radio arms race, while longer term public diplomacy aims, as the Suez crisis of 1956 was to prove, were better served by maintaining an editorial detachment from British geopolitical objectives. Striking the right balance between the twin-tongues of the BBC's Russian output was to remain a hotly contested debate throughout the 1950 and beyond with particular venom reserved for Goldberg who, among other things, was accused on moral compromise and appeasement'.<sup>48</sup>

Meanwhile, the advent of Soviet jamming of BBC Russian broadcasts from April 1949 (jamming of BBC services to the satellites began with Poland in December 1951) provided perhaps the biggest test of the broadcasters imaginative powers of persuasion in relation to both audiences overseas and the British Foreign Office. Such was its scale that alone the BBC's response would be relatively ineffective. Instead a cooperative reply was needed. Broadcasting in Russian by the US State Department funded Voice of America had begun in 1947. But, it had been made clear by the British Foreign Secretary that 'any system of collaboration which would commit us to following a common Anglo-American policy in anti-

Communist propaganda' was not envisaged.<sup>49</sup> However, it was considered that 'there would be advantage in aiming at the same targets from somewhat different angles'.<sup>50</sup> Accordingly, a plan of counteraction which focused on technical, as opposed to editorial, cooperation between these broadcasters was soon worked up between them. In July 1949, after a period of experimentation, a new extended schedule for the BBC Russian Service was introduced, synchronised with Voice of America transmissions using a multiple array of US and UK transmitters across the globe and using as wide a range of frequencies as possible.<sup>51</sup> However, even with these counter-measures in place, the relative success of the Soviet jamming operation over the coming months and years continued to raise serious questions in Whitehall and at the Bush House about the continued viability of BBC Russian services.

As a result, the government felt it necessary in the summer of 1949 to reconsider whether 'it would be wiser to abandon our broadcasts in Russian'.<sup>52</sup> A subsequent internal review concluded that 'on balance, these broadcasts should be maintained'.<sup>53</sup> The reasons for this, however, are particularly interesting not because they suggest that jamming was ineffectual, they don't, but for highlighting the contingent factors considered important in reaching the decision. In the first place, a simple calculation revealed that there was little redistributive gain to be made from the money and transmitter time saved by cancelling broadcasts to Russia which would 'provide at most for only about an hour's broadcasting a day in one other language which we are using already, or perhaps three quarter-hour extensions to three existing programmes'.<sup>54</sup> In the more intangible arena of audience reaction the effects of broadcasts to a country where the political importance of public opinion was negligible was difficult to calculate, but it was considered inevitable that jamming would result in a significant loss of listeners. Nevertheless, experience had shown that it was precisely in those 'countries deprived of freedom of information by their own governments' that the BBC was most listened to and that, in the long run, 'results might be achieved'. Certainly, it was felt that if the transmissions were stopped, 'minds which are being kept just open would be completely closed and cut of from the West'.<sup>55</sup>

Meanwhile, a further deterioration of listening conditions in Russia, the result of enhanced jamming activities and the point reached in the sun-spot cycle (which had a particularly bad effect on short-waves), precipitated a subsequent re-evaluation of the future of Russian-language broadcasting. The effect was to hone down the Corporation's appreciation of the various segments of its audience. In a paper prepared by Greene at the start of 1950 it was argued that there were four categories to be considered as listeners: officers in the Army; small numbers of intellectuals, high officials and managers with good sets and homes away from centres of population; a few enterprising political prisoners in remote parts of Russia; the official monitor and a restricted number of high officials who receive the monitoring reports.<sup>56</sup> In a note to Jacob covering this report the Controller of European Services, Tangye Lean,

suggested that 'if we are only going to broadcast to a tiny minority, and accept that limitation so completely, then I doubt whether it is worth the tremendous effort we are making'.<sup>57</sup> Greene, however, took the opposite tack and interpreted his findings to mean that the BBC should not worry about 'offending, and losing, listeners who are loyal to the regime as distinct from the country'. In Greene's mind there was a distinction between patriotism and subservience to a particular system of governance. Army officers, he argued, should be considered as the primary audience for programmes as the combination of their experiences – direct contact with the West and less affected by jamming when posted outside of Russia – gave them either greater opportunity for desertion, or when they returned from duty, more cause to become agents of disaffection.<sup>58</sup> Greene's analysis also gained the support of the British Embassy in Moscow, which agreed that 'the BBC are now broadcasting to a mere handful of people in the Soviet Union' and that 'the effective audience is confined to members of the Soviet armed forces outside the Soviet Union'.<sup>59</sup>

What, though, would the determined listener have been able to hear on the few frequencies that got through? The pattern of all three of the BBC's daily broadcasts was a nine to twelve minute news bulletin followed by two talks. As a necessary concession to the success of jamming, the morning and afternoon programmes were usually repeats of the transmission from the previous evening. The main emphasis was on world affairs and the few 'projection of Britain' programmes were 'designed to counter communist misrepresentations, to demonstrate the inferiority of Soviet Russia in material resources and to illustrate the advantages of living in a democracy where state planning was not synonymous with absence of individual freedoms'.<sup>60</sup> Reviewing Russian broadcasts for the BBC Board of Governors in the summer of 1951, Patrick Ransome of the BBC's Research Unit (a related but separate entity from Lee's audience research department) noted that 'the whole of our Russian output is infused with the single aim of countering Soviet propaganda and of presenting the British point of view'. He was particularly concerned that these broadcasts might not have 'much effect on those who have scarcely begun the adventure of independent thought'.<sup>61</sup> In March 1946 as the BBC Russian Service began broadcasting, this would most likely have been considered an entirely appropriate and suitably cautious view of the BBC's audience. The intervening years had, however, radically altered the assessment of audience requirements and the job of broadcasting over the Iron Curtain. As the Assistant Head of East European Services, David Graham, pointed out in response to Ransome, would they be listening to a foreign radio station at all if they had not begun this adventure rather seriously? Both jamming and frequent articles in the press make it clear that no good Soviet citizen listens to a foreign radio. It is a wicked and rather dangerous thing to do, and must, I think, imply some degree of disillusionment with Soviet doctrine and practice.<sup>62</sup> As concrete information about audiences ebbed away and as world war turned to cold war, the imaginative leap made by broadcasters and policy-makers in respect of the BBC's

Russian audiences appears to have produced a new orthodoxy which was to remain substantially in place for a generation to come.

### **Conclusion**

These changes in the first few crucial years of the BBC Russian Service revolved around a fundamental issue of who its audience was in an environment where anything approaching systematic audience research was simply not possible. From this flowed editorial assessments of what should be broadcast, albeit contextualised by the strategic and geopolitical significance of these programmes. The fear of offending, of switching off listeners (as well as the BBC's clients in Whitehall), had guided the mind's eye picture of audience needs and wants until 1948. Changes in the international environment prompted a rethink of these requirements and redefined attitudes towards the BBC's audience. The conviction that the BBC was broadcasting to listeners who had already transgressed by tuning into its programmes and who were seeking political comment in particular, allowed for greater freedom to engage in programme-making that attempted to provide a more controversial picture of the world in which Russians lived.

The cold war architecture of audience research – diffuse, discursive, political and speculative – required not just a leap of the imagination, but a leap of faith in arriving at editorial conclusions that could only be judged in hindsight. Traditional methods were substituted by a process of intuitive engagement, which combined broadcast professionalism, a negotiated and ongoing dialogue with the Foreign Office, and tacit knowledge of a necessarily imagined audience – set alongside technical and fiscal restraints. Consequently, the cautious methods underpinning previous output were abandoned and a far more robust critique of conditions in Russia and of Soviet domestic and overseas policy became the mainstay of the service. Essential to this shift in emphasis and to the continued credibility of the BBC's output with audiences were the broadcast personalities and staff which gave voice to the BBC Russian Service. The wide range of experiences reflected in the diasporic, migrant, émigré and dissident make-up of staff were also part of the editorial calculus, the pulse of the service and a series of internal checks and balances to sudden changes.

The mixed-economy of primitive audience research techniques available were themselves implicated in the practice of knowing the BBC's Russian audience. Their diversity introduced a number of aims and purposes – political, diplomatic, and governmental – outside of the BBC's core editorial remit which can be observed in the discourses about who listened to the BBC's output and why. In this way the imaginative process examined in this paper of identifying and comprehending audience needs and tastes reflects the institutional, technological and geopolitical concerns of Whitehall and Bush House just as much as they do the indigenous editorial requirements of the BBC's audiences.

### **Biographical Note**

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<sup>1</sup> 'General Overseas Service', *BBC Yearbook 1947*, (London: BBC, 1947), p.96.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Nelson, *War of the Black Heavens: The battle of Western Broadcasting in the Cold War*, (London: Brassey's, 1997), p.xiii. For a similar take on the power of the western radios see, for example, Arch Puddington, *Broadcasting Freedom: The Cold War Triumph of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Harold Lasswell, 'The Theory of Political Propaganda', *American Political Science Review*, Vol.21, 1927, p.631; cited in Jeremy Hawthorn (ed.), *Propaganda, Persuasion ad Polemic*, (London: Edward Arnold, 1987), p.2.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Parta, R.E., *Discovering the Hidden Listener: an assessment of Radio Liberty and Western Broadcasting to the USSR during the Cold War* (Stanford: Hoover University Press, 2007); Johnson, A.R. & Parta, R.E., *Cold War Broadcasting: Impact on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2010). One of the few recent examples of British research in this areas is, Graham Mytton, 'Audience Research at the BBC External Services during the Cold War: A View from the Inside', *Cold War History*, 11(1), 2011, pp.49-67.

<sup>5</sup> BBC Written Archive Centre, Caversham, Berkshire (WAC), R1/80/2, G51, 'Broadcasting to Europe', 12 October 1944.

<sup>6</sup> Briggs, A. *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom, Volume III: The War of Words* (Oxford: OUP, 1995), p.154.

<sup>7</sup> Briggs, A. *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom, Volume V: Competition* (Oxford: OUP, 1995), p.701.

<sup>8</sup> For the setting up of the Joint Broadcasting Board in 1939, see Briggs, *The War of Words*, pp.168-170.

<sup>9</sup> Briggs, *War of the Words*, p.209.

<sup>10</sup> WAC, E3/24, European Service Directive No.8 'Intelligence', 8 February 1947.

<sup>11</sup> WAC, E3/24, Appendix to the European Service Review of the Year: 'Listening to the BBC in Europe', March 1949.

<sup>12</sup> Previous polls had also been conducted in Holland, Finland, Norway Denmark, Sweden, Austria by, in the majority of cases, outside research organisation and, in the case of Hungary and Czechoslovakia, by government-controlled polling outfits.



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<sup>13</sup> WAC, E3/24, Appendix to the European Service Review of the Year: 'Listening to the BBC in Europe', March 1949.

<sup>14</sup> The name 'BBC World Service' was first applied to English language broadcasts from 1965 and extended to cover all overseas services, as is presently the case, in 1988.

<sup>15</sup> Briggs, A. *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom, Volume IV: Sound and Vision* (Oxford: OUP, 1995), p.136.

<sup>16</sup> Despite the Foreign Office decision not to broadcast to Russia during the war, there had been a series of 15 minute weekly newsletters broadcast between 7 October 1942 to 26 May 1943. See, Briggs, *War of Words*, p.362.

<sup>17</sup> WAC, E3/285/1 Listening Behind the Iron Curtain, 1947-55; WAC, R1/82/4, Ga2, 'BBC Broadcasts in Russian', 6 November 1946.

<sup>18</sup> WAC R1/15, Board of Governors meeting, 'Controller (European Services) Report', 26 June 1947.

<sup>19</sup> WAC, E3/285/1 Listening Behind the Iron Curtain, 1947-55. This was in addition to the six million 'wired wireless' sets directly controlled by the state (calculated at ten listeners per set) and installed as part of its domestic 'radiofication' strategy.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> WAC, E3/24, Jacob to Warner, 19 January 1949; Warner to Jacob, 31 January 1949.

<sup>22</sup> WAC, E1/1268, Lean to Malcolm, 18 June 1951; Malcolm to Lean, 26 June 1951.

<sup>23</sup> Between 1939 and 1943 the Monitoring Service was initially based at Wood Norton Hall near Evesham in Worcestershire.

<sup>24</sup> Briggs, *The War of Words*, p.172.

<sup>25</sup> WAC, E3/285/1 Listening Behind the Iron Curtain, 1947-55.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> *Broadcasting Policy*, Cmd.6852, HMSO, July 1946, para.60.

<sup>29</sup> WAC, E2/208, Controller's Circular No.1, 'Political Information Section', 16 August 1946.

<sup>30</sup> WAC, E2/327, Mitchell to D.O.S., 24 November 1948.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> The National Archives, Kew, London (TNA), CAB129/23, CP(48)8, 4 January 1948.

<sup>33</sup> WAC, E3/24, 'Impact of the BBC European Services', Asher Lee, 14 February 1949.

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- <sup>34</sup> WAC, E2/329, Warner to Jacob, 2 March 1949.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid., Peterson, Moscow, to Bevin, 26 January 1949.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid., Greene to DOS, 22 March 1949. Emphasis in the original.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>39</sup> WAC, E3/279/1, 'Hostility to Western Broadcasts', undated memorandum.
- <sup>40</sup> WAC, E2/329, Greene to DOS, 22 March 1949
- <sup>41</sup> WAC, E3/24, 'Impact of the BBC European Services', Asher Lee, 14 February 1949.
- <sup>42</sup> WAC E2/328, 'Embassy Criticisms of the European Service', Lean, 17 September 1948.
- <sup>43</sup> WAC, R1/14, Board of Governors meeting, 'Controller (European Services) Report', 14 November 1946.
- <sup>44</sup> WAC, R1/82/4, Ga2, 'BBC Broadcasts in Russian', 6 November 1946.
- <sup>45</sup> WAC, E2/209/5, 'Output Report No.6', 1 April 1947.
- <sup>46</sup> WAC, E2/120/2, Output Report No.19, 25 August 1948.
- <sup>47</sup> WAC, E2/120/3, 'Output Report No.27', 3 August 1949.
- <sup>48</sup> Briggs, *Competition*, p.687.
- <sup>49</sup> TNA, CAB130/37, GEN231/2, 'Liaison Between the Foreign Office and Chiefs of Staff: Collaboration with the United States', 31 March 1948.
- <sup>50</sup> TNA, FO371/71687, Russia Committee meeting, 1 April 1948.
- <sup>51</sup> WAC, E2/324/2, DOS to McLean, 13 June 1949; WAC, R1/85/6, G117, 'Report by the Director of Overseas Services', undated.
- <sup>52</sup> TNA, CAB134/99, CI(49)11(1) 'Trends of Communist Propaganda', 21 July 1949.
- <sup>53</sup> TNA, CAB134/101, CI(49)72 'BBC Broadcasts in Russian', 9 September 1949.
- <sup>54</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>55</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>56</sup> WAC, E40/259/1, Report by H.E.Eur.S., 4 January 1950.
- <sup>57</sup> Ibid., Lean to DOS, 4 January 1950.
- <sup>58</sup> Ibid., Report by H.E.Eur.S., 4 January 1950.
- <sup>59</sup> TNA, FO953/701, Embassy, Moscow to IPD, 24 February 1950.

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<sup>60</sup> WAC, E2/120/5, 'Output Report No.40', 22 May 1951.

<sup>61</sup> WAC, E2/120/5, 'Critical Notes No.40', 1 June 1951.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., Graham to Ransome, 1 June 1951.