PEACE SELLS - BUT WHO'S BUYING?

By now Haley was Sir William, Knight Commander of the order of St. Michael and St. George, having been so honoured in 1946 for his (and by proxy the BBC's) war efforts. He had been looking forward to the experience of broadcasting in peacetime, and for a couple of years he and the rest of the world got it. But only for a couple of years.

The term "Iron Curtain" was first coined in the 19th Century in a more general sense, but after it was revived during World War II (by both Churchill and Goebbels) it quickly became a very specific term for a very specific situation. The Nazis had provided a common enemy, hated more or less equally by the traditional capitalist societies of the West and the new-fangled Soviet Communists spreading through the East. Now they were out of the way, no longer blocking East and West's already sour views of each other. The world - and Europe in particular - was now free to divide into an all-new set of blocs. So it did.

The new world was arguably christened in 1948. The first flashpoint was Prague, where in February the Communist Party - with the explicit aid of the Soviet Union - seized the reigns of power in Czechoslovakia, not to lose it for another forty years. Mere months later the tetrapartite attempt to rebuild Germany inevitably fell apart when the Russians refused point-blank to use the new Deutsche Mark the country's other three custodians had developed. This eventually developed into an outright blockade of Berlin, followed by one of the most complicated, prolonged and dangerous airlifts in history, and ultimately the establishment of the German Democratic Republic in 1949. This event more than any other confirmed that relations could never be anything but hostile. The Cold War was abroad and the BBC was a part of it.

There was a strange inversion here between the approaches of the American and British broadcasting establishments. In most things, American broadcasting was proudly independent and commercial where the BBC was equally proud to be performing a public service under (though not completely beholden to) Government auspices. When it came to overseas propaganda, however, the roles were reversed. The USA's main outlet, the Voice of America, was explicitly run by the Federal Government (then via the State Department). The BBC's External Services, however (as it was called at this point), were their own boss and proud of it: while they had an obligation to consult with the Foreign Office, the service was ultimately entirely independent from them or the rest of the Government, answerable only to the Director-General and the Governors.

For the most part, the BBC considered themselves blessed, superior even, in their editorial

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independence. But even though their Overseas services were free of the "official Government propaganda" status that could be levelled at Voice of America, they did share with their transatlantic cousins a financial reliance on the Government. That obligation to the Foreign Office was more than just a gentlemen's agreement: Whitehall provided funding via a Grant-in-Aid, the precise details (and numbers) of which were subject to change at the Foreign Secretary's discretion.

By 1948 the External Services were broadcasting in twenty languages across Europe and was expanding to other continents as well, as far as the funding allowed - the establishment of the Far Eastern Relay Station in Tebrau, Malaya, for example, ate up a decent amount of Grant-in-Aid money at the turn of the decade. But there was no doubt that it was a necessary expense. The BBC was at the front of a global conflict of ideologies - again - and this one was even trickier than the one that only just finished, because not only was it on a scale to dwarf even World War II, it was almost exclusively covert, intangible and underground. Information and intelligence was the weaponry now, and that meant an organisation like the BBC was more directly involved than ever before. They weren't just embedded with the soldiers, in many ways they were the soldiers. Broadcasters and information-mongers occupied some of the space where infantry would go in a conventional war. The new status quo was grimly set out in 1950, in an internal memo from the BBC to the Government Committee responsible for overseas communications:

"*The Overseas Services of the BBC provide one of the most effective instruments for use by this country in maintaining the stability of the free world in the present struggle with Russian Communism. This struggle, often called the "Cold War", seems likely to be long. It cannot be won quickly, though it might quickly be lost."***

As the Iron Curtain descended, it would be down to the BBC to aid the poor oppressed masses on the other side, by, as it was put at the time, "letting in daylight from the whole of the outside world" to penetrate the oppressive darkness cast by the enormous (if poorly defined) evil of Communism.

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