HONEYMOON IN EAST BERLIN

With broadcasting as a legitimate front in this new kind of war, it was finally time for F.W. Ogilvie to come into his own. Not literally or anything - he died in 1949 - but in spirit, in the shape of his sole legacy as Director-General - the BBC Monitoring Service. At the peak of hostilities in World War II, the Monitoring Service was sending 30,000 words' worth of information a day on enemy broadcasts - and allied broadcasts, for that matter - to the Government and the main BBC newsroom. It was a full and proud part of the BBC's mighty wartime newsgathering apparatus, but most of that was unceremoniously dismantled within six months of the war's end. The Monitoring service was spared the fate of the War Reporting Unit, but questions remained over its utility in peacetime.

But not for long. Espionage doesn't require outright hostilities, after all, and just because no-one was shooting at anyone for the first time in years, it didn't mean that everyone was friends all of a sudden. The defeated Germany was a major front in the opening stages of the Cold War. Divided initially into three, then four when France demanded a piece of the action, it became a natural Ground Zero for the irreconcilable differences between east and west.

The BBC had been broadcasting to Germany in German since 1940, for explicit propaganda purposes. Once the war was over, Haley and the Corporation were all for sending the German Service up the river along with the rest of the fruits of the wartime news expansion, but the Foreign Office, seeing the writing on the wall, persuaded them to keep it as a means of "projecting Britain". During the war itself, the news editor was an up-and-coming journalist and broadcaster called Hugh Carleton Greene, who'd been a Munich correspondent for the New Statesman and Daily Telegraph. Now the war was over he was promoted to head the entire German Service.

Greene read the writing the Soviets had scrawled on the wall by the blockade and launched a new station on the Service in April 1949: the East Zone Programme. All Cold War, all the time, particularly and explicitly aimed at those on the other side of the curtain. When this began in the Spring, there was still, in effect, a single if quartered Germany. Within six months, however, the Soviet Zone declared itself the German Democratic Republic and all bets were off. Not that this had any immediate effect on the EZP, as the Western nations refused to recognise the new Republic as legitimate. The new Programme therefore had to balance the fact that the new East Germany didn't officially exist as far as their side was concerned, with the equally solid fact that it absolutely and unavoidably did in practice. Greene and company managed to turn this cognitive dissonance from a potentially mind-mangling issue into the fuel for the Programme itself.

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The EZP's mission was not entirely different to that of the German Service during the war: straight-up pro-Western propaganda. Indeed, most of the personnel on both sides of the microphone were the same, and even most of the satirical material in the earliest days consisted of old anti-Nazi plays and sketches with the names and titles changed. And then there was their most popular programme, "Letters Without Signature", which began with the service and ended in 1974 with the arrival of détente, infuriating the Soviets the whole time.

Of course, propaganda is more delicate in a Cold War (particularly if one intends to keep it cold) than one that's already hot. One has to insinuate rather than actively flicking V-signs (of either sort), especially if one is a public broadcaster like the BBC - which is so associated with Britain it is often mistaken for a state broadcaster. Where relative independents like the Voice of America or Radio Free Europe directly and explicitly advocated the outright overthrow of Soviet domination, the BBC simply explained how much nicer everything was over here, how corrupt the leaders were over there, and let them work it out for themselves. So much more British.

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