

8. Wartime at the BBC

DA: So you actually lived in London?

MA: I lived at the back of the BBC.

DA: Bush House area?

MA: No, no. The Portland Place one – there is a narrow little street in the back there. And I had a flat there.

DA: What were you doing at the BBC? And how did it come about that you left the London Press Exchange?

MA: Well, this man Ernst Kris that I mentioned to you was taken on immediately by the BBC, partly because he was Austrian and knew German and knew Germany. Partly because he was a psychoanalyst. And they thought, to have someone like that around, attached to the overseas broadcasts might be a help to them. And they had another woman, joined Kris, called Alison Outhwaite¹, who had been a journalist in Germany and knew German very well and the two of them worked together. And then the question came of turning it into a formal unit ... not simply two unattached people trying to make an impact on busy journalists, busy broadcasters ...

Audio Note²

Kris said I think I know someone and mentioned my name to a man called John Salt, who was head of overseas broadcast³. So they phoned me and I went along, and was interviewed, and they said, "Fine, we liked you to start as head of our Overseas Propaganda Analysis Unit." I said "Fine, you know, that's useful I hope," so I set up this unit at the BBC.

DA: But why did you do that rather than stay at the London Press Exchange?

MA: Well, it was not terribly useful being in an advertising agency with the war going on.

¹ See papers of Ernst Kris: : <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/service/mss/eadxlmss/eadpdfmss/2006/ms006003.pdf>

² Tape 2, Side B;

³ John Salt died in 1947. See obituary at <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/obituary-olive-shapley-1081732.html>

DA: So you felt it was just more useful?

MA: Yea, I felt it was more useful. And I built the unit up and we had people like Dennis Brogan⁴... I persuaded him to join. A man called Denys Harding, who was then Professor of Psychology at Bedford College⁵ -- I got him to join. Frank Hardie, the man who had been President of the Oxford Union when they passed the resolution 'We Will Never Fight for King and Country'⁶ -- he joined ... and it became a very, very good unit and it produced each week an analysis of all overseas broadcasts, either originating in Germany or from occupied parts of Europe -- occupied by Germans or the Italians later on.

DA: When did you actually join the BBC? Can you remember which year it was? You've got here '39?

MA: 39, Yes, it was the end of '39. And it became the thing that people yammered for, and they were always told, "No, no. Confidential to hand picked people." It went to the Foreign Office, it went to the Ministry of Information, it went to Cabinet Ministers. And then, finally (all my time at BBC Broadcasting House), then it became big enough for them to say, "Look you must have your own headquarters, your own offices". We moved out towards Marylebone High Street, to a sort of abandoned nursing home in Duchess Street. We had the whole place to ourselves and produced this. And there I developed something which I think was a fairly useful social research tool, which I called 'content analysis'. You'd go through material over a period of time and you will see what its latent content is, and its intention and, why it's there, and why certain things are being said and done and so on. But it means a very careful reading and analysis of the manifest material.⁷

DA: And what was the main way you went about that?

MA: I went about it in a very crude way, quantitatively to begin with. How many times in the quotations for example how many times in the quotations from Berlin, were there references to the imminent invasion of England ... that is to their home audience. And when the number began to decline, I said, "Maybe they are preparing their people for there not

⁴ Dennis Brogan was later to supervise Philip's PhD at Cambridge, and Hugh Brogan was a friend of Sonia and Philip's' <http://www.universitystory.gla.ac.uk/biography/?id=WH0133&type=P>

⁵ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-professor-d-w-harding-2320718.html>

⁶ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_King_and_Country_debate#cite_note-BWBU-3 and <http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/dept/scwmss/wmss/online/modern/hardie/hardie.html>

⁷ An example of this is provided in the Appendix, which shows Mark's 1940 content analysis 'Studies in Broadcast Propaganda', which examined German broadcasts about Britain's vulnerability to attack.

being an invasion of England. Let's see if it is changing to other countries". Then when Italy came in, I said, "Let's see how many times Italian propaganda refers and relates to the Middle East and in what terms ... positive or negative ... as a potential war area ... as a possible revolution area, and so on." And finished up by saying, quantitatively, the Italians are replacing the Germans in the Middle East as the inciters of Arab hostility primarily directed against the Jews. They had become more than a mouthpiece for Berlin ... they are way ahead. So clearly, either they are worried about what is going happen there or they are hoping very strongly for Arab support. So, it was a quantitative thing to begin with.

The person who added real qualitative understanding to the material in a way that I couldn't do were these two – Ernst Kris⁸ and above all Alison Outhwaite – both knew Germans and Germany and could say, "Aah I know Guderian, and when Guderian⁹ is brought forward to say that sort of statement ... I know what is really on his mind," sort of thing. And somehow this account of what we were doing, particularly the paper saying we don't think there is going to be an invasion of Britain. When that turned out to be right, it was passed on to America, because they were think of setting up a similar unit, and they sent over a journalist to interview the three of us and write a piece called 'Magicians of the Air' ... and all three of us were photographed¹⁰ holding telephones to our ears, you know, which was the photographic cliché at the time. To show that you were important and busy you had to have a telephone stuck to your ear! [laughs]

Well, after a while this reached the point where the Foreign Office... and I began to expand the thing and say that "Not only is this an analysis of enemy propaganda but Page 1 is five main points, or six main points that we in our turn should be putting into British propaganda". And that immediately upset the Foreign Office, who instituted an enquiry into what this unit was doing and why it was doing it, and who the hell were they anyway? And a man called French – I want to say Sir John French – but his first name may not have been John, came and interviewed us all and looked at our material. And the outcome was that we should not be suppressed, or fired, or shot or anything, but we should be transferred to the Foreign Office ... and it became the Political Intelligence Department and I became the manager of the FO's Political Intelligence Department.

⁸ See Kris (1941) *The Danger of Propaganda*. <http://www.pep-web.org/document.php?id=aim.002.0003a>

⁹ Rebecca Abrams adds: Heinz Wilhelm Guderian (1888 – 1954) was a German general during World War II. He was a pioneer in the development of armored warfare, and was the leading proponent of tanks and mechanization in the Wehrmacht (German Armed Forces). During the war, he was a highly successful commander of Panzer forces in several campaigns, became Inspector-General of Armored Troops, rose to the rank of Generaloberst, and was made Chief of the General Staff of the Heer in the last year of the war.

¹⁰ Not yet located

DA: So, you were responsible for firing off propaganda?

MA: Not for actually sending it out. Simply the analysis of the enemy and the provision of raw material, guidelines as to what we should be doing in return. And in fact people like Brogan, who was very, very quick at writing things, would read through our summaries and our analyses, and get out his typewriter, and start typing out counter pieces, which would then be passed on to the overseas broadcasting machinery, the leaflet writing sections, and so on.

Now there was one interruption in my service with the BBC. When the Germans began bombing places like Coventry, and so on. [Herbert] Morrison was then Home Secretary, responsible for civilian morale. And one of the men who worked with him had worked with me at the London Press Exchange – his name was Clem Lesley, he was an Australian but settled in this country. And Clem said, “If you really want to find out about civilian morale under bombing, get this man Mark Abrams away from the BBC and get him to study it”. So that was arranged. And what happened was that I would wait until a town was being subjected to a series of bombing attacks, then off I would go. I remember, in places like Hull, spending a couple of nights, hiding under tables [laughs], because they did not have proper dugouts! But then seeing what happened.

DA: Did you take in a little team of researchers or something?

MA: No, No.

DA: It was just impressionisticof it?

MA: You could say that, but it was also backed up by what you might call operational statistics. What really the Government wanted to know was, not what was happening to the morale of people as such, but what they wanted to know was ‘what effect is any change in their morale having on our output of raw material?’

The outcome was pretty simple. That in a place like Hull, which was making absolutely no contribution to the war effort ... all it had was a paint trade at the Baltic which was absolutely dead. And a couple of bombs on their golf course, outside Hull, and a third of their population disappeared and they went away and never came back. The factories did not mind, it made no difference to the war effort.

But a comparable attack on West Bromwich in the Midlands, which was really making important war material ... three, four, five attacks there ... and within two or three days the people were back, again working twice as hard because they thought, "We'll show these bastards. They can't bomb us". And the general outcome was to say, "Look, whoever uses bombers to attack a civilian population with the idea that it will help the war effort is making a great, great mistake. If he bombs civilians which are making no contribution to the war effort, he's wasting his bombs, because it is better to leave them there being useless than anything else. They're going to go on being useless. If he uses his bombs to attack people who are important to the war effort, then it is going to be counterproductive. Those civilians will come back in a temper and more determined than ever." And that could be verified, you see, by statistics of production.

DA: It increased following a bomb attack?

MA: Yea, I remember going along to a room at the Savoy Hotel and talking to one of the senior people in the Ministry of Production and saying, "I must have statistics of the output of airplanes, and things like that ..." and he said, "Only Lord Beaverbrook can release those." And I said, "Okay, well phone Beaverbrook." And he did, and the figures were in the direction I wanted, that I expected, rather than wanted. And then I went back to the BBC. I had just been seconded, for I think, was six months, something like that.

And then the other break came when the Americans came into the war and they set up the equivalent of an overseas propaganda department, called the OWI (Office of War Information). And they used to beam propaganda material to Germany and to the Japanese and so on. And, so I was sent over as a sort of adviser. And it was fantastic.. You know, you would spend your time trying to explain to these journalists from the West the difference between Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia ... or that in Yugoslavia there were two lots of partisans and that Tito was okay and that Mihailević was not so okay. Of course our materials were going to Tito. And therefore any claims by Mihailović¹¹ that he was beating the Germans was probably inaccurate because he just didn't get the armaments to do it. And they kept saying, "Well how do you spell Mihailović? It doesn't sound like a Yugoslav name to us" ...[laughs] as if they knew Yugoslav names!

DA: So you were overseeing or advising?

¹¹ Dragoljub "Draža" Mihailović (Драгољуб Дража Михаиловић) leader of Chetnik partisans trying to re-establish the monarchy in Yugoslavia ,See: http://216.239.59.104/search?q=cache:5bLCWbBU9Woj:en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dra%C5%BEa_Mihajlovi%C4%87+%22Draza+Mihailovic%22%2B%22partisan%22&hl=en or <http://www.trussel.com/hf/tito4.htm>

MA: Oh, advising. I gave them a weekly directive with guidance as well, yup.

DA: Were they competent, do you think? I mean compared with what you had been used to?

MA: Well, they couldn't be as efficient, effective as the British because they were so far away both from the Germans and the Japanese. Problem was the only people who heard them were the people in Germany and Japan working for the government, who were monitoring these broadcasts. There was one cartoon appeared in the *New Yorker* at the time, of a bewildered looking American soldier with a bayonet rifle bringing in a German that surrendered and the American GI says to the Colonel, "Sir he surrendered because he said he heard some of our propaganda and believes it." And everyone at OWI felt, "Oh God, yes."

Well then I came back and worked ... no, at the time I came back I think I had already been moved to SHAEF (Supreme Headquarters of Allied Expeditionary Force)

DA: What did that do?

MA: What did that do? It didn't mean any difference. I still went on doing the same sort of work. And that was the war, as far as I was concerned.