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## A Voice for East Germany: Developing the BBC German Service's East Zone Programme

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*Originally conceived as part of Britain's psychological warfare effort during the Second World War, the BBC German Service continued to broadcast from London to Germany throughout the Cold War. In 1949, in response to rising tensions between the Western Allies and the Soviets, the German Service created the East Zone Programme, specifically targeting listeners in what was to become the German Democratic Republic. This article analyses the perspectives and voices adopted by the East Zone Programme when addressing East Germans during the first decade of its existence, and the mutual risk-taking of broadcaster and listeners during the early Cold War. Drawing on scripts, correspondence, and policy documents from the BBC Written Archives Centre and the German Broadcasting Archive, the article examines contributions by British presenters such as Lindley Fraser and Richard O'Rorke, wartime German-speaking émigrés including Bruno Adler, Robert Lucas and Erich Fried, and East German letter writers and defectors, asking who was best placed to speak to and for listeners in the German Democratic Republic. An analysis of listener reactions to the East Zone Programme shows listeners' gradual disillusionment with the BBC External Services' non-intervention policy for broadcasting to states behind the Iron Curtain.*

By the late 1940s, the BBC had become the largest international broadcaster in the world, transmitting 'more hours of programme time each week than any two other states combined'.<sup>i</sup> Its German Service could look back on a decade of broadcasting in German from London. Since its slightly haphazard beginnings during the Munich crisis in 1938, the German Service had grown into the largest department within the BBC's External Services, employing 120 people.<sup>ii</sup> During this decade, the German Service's mission had changed from counteracting Nazi propaganda by broadcasting truthful and up-to-date news, to projecting a positive image of Britain during the Allied occupation of Germany. With the Cold War looming, its mission was set to change again.

In May 1949, the Western zones of Germany constituted themselves as the Federal Republic, followed in October by the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in the East. Earlier that same year, the BBC German Service had responded to the increasing inner-German division by creating a special programme for the Soviet Zone, which would run for the next twenty-five years. The German East Zone Programme (GEZP) was first broadcast as part of the BBC German Service on 4 April 1949, and quickly became an established part of the regular schedule. It consisted of half an hour's content following the 8pm news (later expanded to an hour-long slot), with repeats of specific programme items in the early morning and at noon.<sup>iii</sup> The GEZP's anticipated objectives were threefold: 'to convince the population of the Eastern zone that the Western world has not forgotten them', 'to strengthen their belief that the spiritual values of the Western world and its standard of life are superior to those of the Communist world', and finally, 'to help them resist the assaults of Eastern propaganda'.<sup>iv</sup> The BBC was not alone in hoping to reach East Germans via broadcasts from the West. Other stations broadcasting in German to the GDR included the Nordwestdeutscher Rundfunk (NWDR, 1945–1955), the German-run but US-controlled Radio in the American Sector (RIAS, 1946–1993), and the Sender Freies Berlin (SFB, 1954–2003). The US international broadcaster Voice of America (VOA, 1942–present) also continued its German service during the Cold War. These stations faced opposition in the East from Berliner Rundfunk and Moscow Radio.<sup>v</sup>

Research on Cold War broadcasting by the Western powers has often concentrated on US-funded efforts such as Voice of America (VOA), Radio Free Europe (RFE), or Radio in the American Sector (RIAS), while considerations of the BBC's role have focused on languages other than German.<sup>vi</sup> Gary Rawnsley and Michael Nelson have produced comparative studies of British and American Cold War broadcasting,<sup>vii</sup> while Alban Webb's very useful publications have chiefly examined the BBC's output to Czechoslovakia and

Hungary during the 1950s.<sup>viii</sup> Webb has also published on the BBC's audience research efforts at the time, and Graham Mytton has supplemented this account with his experience of working for the Listener Research Unit.<sup>ix</sup> Gerard Mansell's history of BBC external broadcasting up to the 1960s contains invaluable insights into the German Service's wartime work, but provides only cursory information on its post-war role.<sup>x</sup> The most important source on the BBC German Service in the Cold War is a 2013 article by Patrick Major, which provides an excellent overview of the East Zone Programme's history (1949–1975), giving an impression of its most important formats, but lacking the space to analyse these in great detail.<sup>xi</sup> More recently, Susanne Schädlich has published a book-length reflection in German on the GEZP's letter box programme, which follows the fate of East German Karl-Heinz Borchardt, jailed in 1970 for writing to the BBC.<sup>xii</sup>

This article examines the ways in which the BBC German Service used the East Zone Programme during its first decade as a means of persuasion, information, and propaganda to engage an East German audience, and to what extent this achieved the programme's stated objectives by connecting Germans in the former Soviet Zone with the outside world. Going beyond the Service's best known output, it analyses previously unexamined archival sources from the 1950s to examine the BBC's experimentation with different formats and voices addressing GDR listeners. The article considers three categories of speakers or contributors – Brits, wartime German or Austrian exiles, and East Germans themselves – investigating which perspectives appeared most credible and authentic to listeners. It focuses particularly on risk-taking in Cold War broadcasting. What did the BBC German Service expect of its East German listeners? To what extent did it encourage risk-taking on their part? And what did it offer East German listeners in return? These questions are linked to broader issues concerning the purpose of international broadcasting to authoritarian countries during the Cold War. What is the point of broadcasting potentially subversive material to people living

under an authoritarian regime, if the status quo needs to be maintained in order to avoid a larger global conflict? Did the German East Zone Programme encourage dissidence? Did it function as a safety-valve for disgruntled GDR citizens? Was it mainly engaged in keeping the Cold War cold – or at least lukewarm? Investigating broadcasts and listener reactions during the GEZP's first decade shows how the BBC walked the fine line between encouraging criticism of the GDR leadership and maintaining the status quo, while also highlighting the effects of this policy on the reciprocal relationship between broadcasters and listeners.

There are two main reasons for focusing on the early phase of the GEZP's existence: first, this was the period during which the BBC was able to communicate with listeners in East Germany and receive direct feedback on its programmes – a process which became much more difficult after the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961. Secondly, research so far has focused on the GEZP's three best-known programmes: 'The Two Comrades' (1949–1963), 'Letters without Signature' (1949–1974) and 'The Surprised Newspaper Reader' (1950–1972). Although all of these programmes were regularly broadcast during the 1950s, almost none of their scripts for this period survive in the archives, meaning that content analysis focusing purely on these programmes tells us only about output during the 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>xiii</sup> Focusing on the 1950s enables us to observe the BBC negotiating how to use the German Service as an effective tool of psychological warfare in a Cold War.

### **British Presenters and Political Commentary**

The main difference between wartime and Cold War broadcasting to Germany was the degree of intervention the BBC German Service could afford to offer on the air. Whereas its wartime mission had been to contribute to an Allied victory which was chiefly attained through military intervention, after the war the BBC's Director General William Haley made

clear that it was ‘not a function of the BBC external services to interfere in the domestic affairs of any other nation’, since they did ‘not exist to throw out Governments or to change regimes’.<sup>xiv</sup> This non-intervention policy set the BBC apart from most other Western international broadcasters such as RFE, VOA, or RIAS, who pursued a liberationist agenda at this point.<sup>xv</sup> The consequence for the German Service was that it had to convince East Germans their government was in the wrong, whilst being unable to promise concrete Western help or an end date to this state of affairs:

We do not aim at short-term visible results, but at a long-term objective – namely, to influence the fundamental outlook of our listeners. We want to convince them that – although the West cannot at the moment give them any tangible assistance – it is none the less good, desirable and worth-while not to succumb to the propaganda of the current regime.<sup>xvi</sup>

This change from radio’s role as a short-term subsidiary weapon of psychological warfare to an instrument for sustaining long-term political resistance whilst fostering the hope of far-off, somewhat nebulous regime change without military backing from the West required an extremely careful handling of the German East Zone Programme’s tone and content.

By 1949, the German Service had already experienced the consequences of getting the tone of its broadcasts wrong. Its output to Allied-occupied Germany after the Second World War had been somewhat overzealous in pursuing German re-education and the projection of Britain. As the gap between British broadcasts on occupation policy and Germans’ lived experience of food and fuel shortages widened, the BBC German service received many critical and even vitriolic letters from its German listeners, often specifically targeting the new Head of the service, Lindley Fraser.<sup>xvii</sup> In one of the earliest surviving

scripts for the GEZP, perhaps reacting to this extremely negative feedback, Fraser struck a friendly rather than a lecturing tone when addressing East Germans:

What I, like other speakers in this programme today, want to do is first and foremost to give a message of greeting to our listeners and friends in the Eastern Zone of Germany, and to say to them that though they are cut off from us by the system of control under which they are forced to live, yet they are by no means forgotten.<sup>xviii</sup>

Fraser went on to praise West Germany's development towards independence, democracy and economic prosperity, encouraging similar hopes for East Germany:

If the same thing cannot be said of the Eastern Zone that is something that we all regret – something that at the moment at least cannot be helped. But one day, we can confidently hope, the Eastern Zone will be able to take its full share in the rebuilding of a peaceful and democratic Germany.<sup>xix</sup>

The basis for Fraser's confident hope remained conveniently obscure, but his profession of Western solidarity may have provided some comfort to East Germans barely three months after the GDR's founding.

While the German Service maintained that 'the EZP has a definite mission in giving information on vital affairs and background to the news of the day, without any special propaganda slant', output to East Germany was never neutral.<sup>xx</sup> Political commentaries were the purview of the service's British presenters, and not all of them adopted the gentle tone of Fraser's 1949 talk. According to the BBC's Charter, Licence and Agreement, the External Services were bound to speak for the 'national interest'.<sup>xxi</sup> Some scripts, such as a 1958 talk by the German Service's Assistant Head Richard O'Rourke, were slanted heavily in favour of

this national interest. In an episode of the series ‘The Truth Is...’ (‘Wahr ist vielmehr...’), which regularly refuted Soviet propaganda claims, O’Rorke responded to a Moscow Radio broadcast on the recent elections in Southern Rhodesia. Moscow Radio had criticised the elections as undemocratic, since most of Southern Rhodesia’s black population had been barred from voting through strict property and income requirements. O’Rorke admitted that this was true, pointing out that ‘the very limited franchise allowed to native Africans has been criticized fairly widely in the British press’.<sup>xxii</sup> However, he proceeded to justify the restricted voting rights by claiming that Southern Rhodesia was not yet civilized enough to extend the franchise.

The British have been in Rhodesia a very short time. Even 50 years ago the country was almost completely undeveloped and the population was still living in a state of primitive savagery. In these last 50 years the country has been developing fast. [...] But it takes more than one or two generations to convert primitive savages into men capable of running a complex modern civilisation.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Having thus defended British racism in a former colony, O’Rorke launched a verbal attack on the USSR, maintaining that ‘[t]he last country with any right to criticize colonialism is the Soviet Union, which so far from restoring freedom and independence to nations, has deprived them of it’.<sup>xxiv</sup> Applying this specifically to the GDR, O’Rorke stated that ‘real Democracy [...] means being able to vote Herr Ulbricht out of power and replace him by someone who really wants German reunification’.<sup>xxv</sup> While demanding greater freedom for East Germans, O’Rorke’s line of argument betrayed a colonialist outlook and a compulsion to defend racist British policies, demonstrating the slipperiness of any claims to objectivity in British broadcasting to East Germany.



## Contributions by Wartime Émigrés

From the beginning, the GEZP supplemented its informational content with a variety of other formats including satirical and comic features. The German Service relied on its wartime émigré staff to supply this content: Bruno Adler (1889–1968), a German-speaking Czech, was commissioned to write a series called ‘The Two Comrades’ (‘Die zwei Genossen’), bearing a striking resemblance to his wartime ‘Kurt und Willi’ series, in which a Party functionary enlightens his somewhat naïve friend as to what is actually going on behind the veil of official propaganda.<sup>xxvi</sup> Robert Lucas (born Robert Ehrenzweig, 1904–1984), a Jewish-Austrian émigré who during the war had scripted the humorous letters of Adolf Hirschal, now penned a series called ‘The Surprised Newspaper Reader’ (‘Der verwunderte Zeitungsleser’): a comical East Zone press review with ironic commentary exposing the contradictions in GDR state-controlled journalism.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Before these long-running formats became established, the East Zone Programme was frequently reorganized, with new features by wartime émigrés being trialled and often abandoned. Among the short-lived programmes (for which no scripts survive) was a comic feature called ‘Don’t Interrupt Me!’ (‘Unterbrich mich nicht!’), in which a Party official’s wife aired her opinions on East German policy. The format sounds similar to Adler’s wartime series of monologues by the garrulous Berlin housewife ‘Frau Wernicke’ and may well have been scripted by him. Another early feature in the GEZP was ‘West-Easterly Ivan’ (‘West-östlicher Iwan’) by writer and translator Carl Brinitzer – a comic take on a permanently inebriated Russian occupation soldier explaining Soviet foreign policy, ending with a song.<sup>xxviii</sup> A further, short-lived feature added in 1951 was ‘Learn German with Radio London’ (‘Lernt deutsch im Londoner Rundfunk’), a satirical derivative of the BBC’s extremely popular English lessons, in which the different uses of words such as ‘freedom’, ‘democracy’ and ‘terror’ on either side of the inner-German border were discussed.<sup>xxix</sup>

To enhance its East Zone Programme, in late 1951 the German Service was looking for ‘a personality speaker [...] who would have a real knowledge of the country he was speaking to and could awaken a feeling in listeners that their fate is important and that people over here are concerned about them and working for them’.<sup>xxx</sup> The successful candidate was poet Erich Fried (1921–1988). An Austrian Jew, Fried had spent the war years in London, and had worked sporadically for the BBC since 1945. As a convinced communist with a gift for fast and prolific writing, Fried was useful to the German Service, since he could credibly critique communism ‘from within’, comparing Soviet policy to original communist ideals. Long before launching his career as a leading twentieth-century poet and translator, Fried became a full-time Programme Assistant for the East Zone Programme in 1952, contributing talks, poetry, and translations until his resignation in 1968.<sup>xxxi</sup> Fried successfully filled the role of a relatable personality speaker for the East Zone Programme, with listeners praising his talks as ‘informative, intellectual, objective’.<sup>xxxii</sup> In his annual appraisal for 1961, Lindley Fraser claimed that ‘Mr. Fried’s contribution to the Soviet Zone programme is probably the most valuable single one we have’.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Although the 1960s marked the zenith of Fried’s career at the BBC, some of his earlier contributions to the GEZP survive and have so far attracted almost no critical attention. In addition to scripting talks about ‘Marx and Engels’<sup>xxxiv</sup> and a series called ‘Tito Speaks’<sup>xxxv</sup> in the early 1950s, Fried was trying his hand at satirical sketches about problems in the GDR (sometimes under the pseudonym Manfred Schreiner), producing scripts with titles such as ‘The Progressive Socks’, and ‘The Activist Vacuum Cleaner’.<sup>xxxvi</sup> While some of these scripts have their moments of wit, Fried’s talents lay decidedly in the realm of political talks rather than sketch comedy, and his activity in this area appears to have ceased by 1954.

One script among Fried's early efforts stands out, however. In December 1952, he was given the rare opportunity of incorporating his poetic gifts into political commentary, writing a verse drama called 'The Lesson of Prague'.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Using two male and two female voices, the piece is written in rhyming couplets of varying length, and presents an extended lament for the victims of the 1952 Czech Communist Party show trials, unmasking the accusers' hypocrisy and exhorting listeners to learn from the events of Prague. The speakers enumerate insults and accusations hurled at the defendants during the show trials ('Trotskyites!', 'Fascists!', 'Zionists!', 'Imperialists!'), before listing each defendant by name, followed by his punishment, resulting in frequent repetition of the phrase 'death by the noose' ('Tod durch den Strang').<sup>xxxviii</sup> By questioning how fourteen men from within the Communist Party could all have been found guilty, Fried exposes the lies contained in official Czech and Soviet propaganda. Throughout the script, Male 2 offers different justifications for the verdict, but is gradually forced to question his own part in supporting the official Party line. By allowing an anonymous communist collaborator to voice his own doubts and regrets, Fried reaches out to devoted GDR communists shocked by the events in Prague, who might have been questioning their own conduct.

The piece ends with an epilogue by Male 1, appealing to listeners in all countries to question official propaganda and to learn from the Prague trials by bearing witness to injustices:

This is the lesson of Prague: you people in all countries,

Do not avert your eyes, for so it is, and you yourselves must change it.

Injustice is not destroyed through greater injustice

and errors are never judged justly through villainy.

Remember the speeches of freedom and equality: they were lies.

Remember your hopes, again and again betrayed.

If today they forbid you to speak and think,  
Then you know: These are the people who will carry out anything ...  
And those men in Prague, hanged by their own comrades,  
remember! Remember!<sup>xxxix</sup>

In both form and content, Fried's script is unlike anything else broadcast in the German East Zone Programme at this or any other time. Whilst appealing directly to listeners to challenge political authority, it remains curiously vague on the ways in which this should be done. The script's unique character within the GEZP's output suggests that this kind of poetic intervention was not deemed appropriate for continuation.

Once the GEZP's content stabilized, its wartime émigrés fulfilled two main functions: while Adler and Lucas continued to produce variations on their wartime comedy features, Fried established himself as the German Service's leading political commentator on East Germany. During the 1960s, he was in charge of three different series of weekly talks, beginning with a seven-minute talk on Mondays called 'Intimus' or 'Personal Observations' ('Persönliche Betrachtungen'), followed by a fifteen-minute, multi-voice Wednesday feature on 'Culture and Ideology' ('Kultur und Ideologie'), and finally 'Critical and Uncritical Communism' ('Kritischer und kritikloser Kommunismus') every Friday. The fact that Fried was allotted three political talks per week, while talks by British staff members decreased, indicates that his dissections of 'actually existing socialism' seemed more credible to East German listeners than British voices promoting the United Kingdom's foreign and domestic policy. However, even in his most critical scripts, Fried never repeated his earlier direct calls to action, thus remaining carefully within the bounds of the BBC's non-intervention policy.

### **Giving East Germans a Voice**

To boost its credibility and avoid a widening gulf between presenters and listeners, the BBC needed contributors with direct experience of life in East Germany. One source of such first-hand accounts were recent defectors from the GDR. In 1958, the German Service broadcast a series of twelve talks by East German writer and public intellectual Alfred Kantorowicz (1899–1979) with the programmatic title ‘I Speak for the Silent’. Having fled Nazi persecution as a communist, Kantorowicz spent the war in the United States, returning to East Berlin in 1946 to found the journal *Ost und West*. After the journal was banned, Kantorowicz joined the Socialist Unity Party and became a literature professor at the Humboldt University, before fleeing to West Germany in 1957 to escape arrest. His broadcasts’ opening words ‘My German listeners’ (‘Meine deutschen Hörer’) suggest that this series sought to place itself in the tradition of another famous exiled writer’s appeals to the nation: Thomas Mann’s wartime broadcasts, which always began with the exclamation ‘Deutsche Hörer!’.<sup>xI</sup> However, the content of Kantorowicz’s talks limited its appeal to a narrower audience than Mann’s, focusing chiefly on Kantorowicz’s relationship with the Communist Party, his exile, and his experience of publishing in the GDR. Since most East Germans did not share these experiences, it is doubtful to what extent Kantorowicz could legitimately claim to ‘speak for the silent’.

Another GDR exile granted airtime by the BBC was Manfred Hertwig, former director of the East German publishing house Aufbau, who in 1957 had been subjected to a high-profile show trial and imprisoned as part of the Harich-group. Following his escape to the West, in September and October 1959 Hertwig broadcast three talks on the GEZP, providing background information on his arrest, on the Harich-group’s reform proposals, and on the Stasi’s attempts to recruit him as an informant.<sup>xII</sup> Since the Harich-group’s show trials had been widely publicized in the GDR, information which contradicted the official Party line may have met with more widespread interest than Kantorowicz’s broadcasts. From

January to April 1960, Hertwig presented a series of weekly talks on the GEZP called ‘Democracy – Socialism – Reunification’, in which he continued to refute the Ulbricht regime’s pronouncements on himself and his colleagues by providing detailed background information.<sup>xlii</sup>

While contributions from leading intellectuals who had recently fled the regime were useful as authentic accounts of state oppression and surveillance contradicting official GDR propaganda, they necessarily presented a minority view and could not claim to speak for a broad GDR audience. From a policy point of view, however, these broadcasts adhered very closely to the BBC’s mission of criticizing the East German leadership whilst not encouraging its overthrow. Instead, detailed accounts of the state’s harsh treatment of would-be reformers, highlighting defection as the only way out, may have served as a deterrent to any form of active resistance.

The tension between a non-interventionist policy and potentially subversive content surfaced repeatedly in the GEZP’s most popular format featuring GDR voices: the letter box programme ‘Letters without Signature’. In early June 1953, presenter Christopher Dilke suggested ‘a more stirring opening to the programme’, which involved a trumpet call from Beethoven’s *Fidelio* followed by Dilke’s announcement: ‘Freedom – the longing for freedom – the despair over being deprived of freedom – this is the topic which overshadows all others’.<sup>xliii</sup> However, even when proposing it, Dilke was clearly aware that this more dramatic presentation had to remain empty rhetoric, assuring the Head of the German Service: ‘You will observe that by the form of words I avoid promising any sort of immediate relief’.<sup>xliiv</sup> In any case, Dilke’s suggestion quickly received a dampener from the Assistant Head of the German Service, Richard O’Rorke:

I am personally opposed to any more dramatic form of presentation of the very human raw material of ‘Ohne Unterschrift’ [‘Without Signature’]. It is my view

that people in the E.Z. want to hear first and foremost the letters themselves – linked with a minimum of straight, serious and sincere comment.<sup>xlv</sup>

In O’Rorke’s view, the programme’s foremost quality was its relaying of authentic East German voices instead of outside commentary. Since listener research supported O’Rorke’s opinion, the programme continued to adopt a more measured tone.

This was by no means the last disagreement on the degree of political intervention in ‘Letters without Signature’. A few months after the East German workers’ uprising of 17 June 1953 had been brutally suppressed by Soviet tanks, James Thomson, the German Topical Organiser, exchanged a series of increasingly heated memoranda on the subject with Dilke. Thomson pointed out that the programme had ‘entered upon a particularly crucial period with [...] both the listening audience and the security risks of contact with the BBC higher than ever before’.<sup>xlvi</sup> In Thomson’s view,

any attempt on our part to mobilise resistance, even if only passive, is both inconsistent and dangerous. Quite apart from anything else, we run the grave risk not only of jeopardising people’s lives and liberty but also of involving the Corporation in political trials.<sup>xlvii</sup>

Dilke strongly disagreed with this interpretation of the GEZP’s mission:

I think passive, as opposed to active, resistance does fall within our orbit. Such mild forms of resistance as I allow listeners to put forward, such as not buying newspapers and making use of constitutional rights, are not illegal and are very unlikely to involve the B.B.C. in a political trial unless it was going to be involved anyway.<sup>xlviii</sup>

One of the aspects most likely to expose listeners to potential reprisals was the fact that the

programme depended on East German listener letters for its content and its claims to authenticity. As the GDR became increasingly isolated and government surveillance methods more efficient, encouraging listeners to write to the BBC meant asking them to take a considerable risk. Until 1961, listeners still had the option of posting letters in West Berlin, or of visiting the BBC German Service office on Savignyplatz and writing a letter there. However, neither of these options was risk-free, and listeners without access to West Berlin remained at even higher risk than those able to visit the Western half of the city.

In mid-1954, the German Service's Berlin representative reported that East German state security services were intercepting all 'Letters without Signature' correspondence to the BBC's P.O. box in West Berlin. He cautioned that 'there appears to be a real danger now that our listeners will get into serious trouble if they write to us'.<sup>xlix</sup> Instead of cancelling the programme, the German Service began frequently switching P.O. boxes and finally adopted a system of fake addresses, usually linked to bomb sites in West Berlin, which would alert the West Berlin postal service to divert letters to the BBC office. Nevertheless, numerous East Germans were arrested and tried for corresponding with the BBC: in 1957 the German Service learnt that two men from small towns in Thuringia and Saxony had been sentenced to four and five years' hard labour respectively for 'having sent inflammatory and libellous letters about conditions in the Soviet Zone to the BBC'.<sup>1</sup>

A significant minority of listeners clearly thought the BBC German Service was worth the risk, as they continued to write letters throughout the East Zone Programme's existence.<sup>li</sup> Correspondence tended to increase at crisis points during the early Cold War, with a particular influx of letters following the 1953 workers' uprising.<sup>lii</sup> This was partly due to increased listening to foreign stations during politically turbulent times. A report compiled by British Military Government in Berlin a few months after the 1956 Hungarian uprising stressed the significance of impartial news broadcasts for East German listeners:



Recent events have if anything increased the importance of the BBC's East German broadcasts by increasing (notably during the Polish crisis and even more so during the Hungarian rising last October and November) the amount of listening to western radio.<sup>liii</sup>

In addition to this desire for accurate information during Cold War flash points, a sense of imagined community amongst East German listeners and of solidarity from the West were important factors for making people engage with the East Zone Programme, and particularly with its letter box feature. Listeners writing to the BBC after the 1953 uprising 'repeatedly expressed their gratitude for the hope and strength gained from listening to the E.Z.P., which [...] encourages them by showing on the one hand that others in the Zone feel as they do, and on the other that their conditions of life are known in the West'.<sup>liv</sup> This was a crucial part of the appeal of 'Letters without Signature'.

Drawing on listener letters and interviews with East German refugees and visitors to Berlin trade fairs, the BBC's Listener Research Unit documented the programme's consistent popularity:

Listeners said it gave them the feeling of being in touch both with each other and the world beyond the Iron Curtain. People liked to hear their own views expressed and their questions answered. Four or five of those interviewed said they had written to ['Letters without Signature'] themselves. Admiration was expressed for the impartiality of the BBC in reading critical and favourable letters alike which inspired confidence in the BBC.<sup>lv</sup>

Gradually, however, alongside the repeated praise, the listener research reports also documented a growing sense of dissatisfaction with BBC presenters' responses to listener

letters:

Dilke was [...] criticised by half a dozen listeners for not being serious enough about East Zone needs, for not being tough enough, for giving evasive or useless advice. ‘The speaker waters everything down and tells us to hold out. That gradually irritates and depresses the listener. But it’s not the speaker’s fault – that’s just England’s attitude’.<sup>lvi</sup>

By the early 1960s, the impression of the programme’s futility began to mix with a feeling of abandonment by the West during the second Berlin crisis. One listener commented in July 1960: ‘Your programmes are very good and I listen to them as often as possible, but I doubt whether basically they change anything’, while another criticized that ‘by simply reading the Letters without Signature you do nothing to get rid of Communism. You should make a change and not only read out the letters but at the same time suggest how Communism can be absolutely destroyed’.<sup>lvii</sup> In return for corresponding with and listening to the BBC, some listeners clearly expected concrete advice from the broadcaster, paired with diplomatic intervention by Western governments.

Following the building of the Berlin Wall, some listeners treated the BBC as a direct representative of the British government, and used their letters to call on the Western powers to take a stand: ‘In the names of thousands of enslaved peoples we appeal to you for deeds [...] For 16 years we have been told that we will become free but what has happened? How can we still believe in the Western world?’<sup>lviii</sup> In some cases, the heightened sense of abandonment mixed with accusations that Western broadcasters had acted as a safety-valve, encouraging East Germans to believe they would eventually be freed from oppression:

A listener in Brandis, Wurzen, wrote this: ‘You, the London station, and RIAS are always reproached with having, through your broadcasts, enticed citizens

away from the DDR. I can prove the contrary concerning myself and my family.

If you had not always given us hope, we would no longer be in the DDR. I cannot refrain from the bitter reproach, as not only I but the largest, the overwhelming part of the East Zone has realized that you have written us off. [...] Please do something at last or we shall lose our hope'.<sup>lix</sup>

In this listener's opinion, through fostering hope within East Germany the BBC had in fact strengthened the regime it purported to oppose by discouraging East Germans from taking direct action against it, or making plans to escape to the West.

One of the East Zone Programme's inherent contradictions was that by providing East Germans with news of the outside world and a sense of community, it helped to make life under an oppressive regime more bearable, thus potentially stabilising the GDR. Moreover, the option of writing letters to the German Service provided disgruntled East Germans with an outlet for criticism which might otherwise have been channelled into concrete political protest. The sustained popularity of 'Letters without Signature' throughout the GEZP's existence indicates that listeners felt best represented by these anonymous East German voices on the air. British voices overtly promoting UK government policy were the least credible to East German listeners, as they were easily detected as unsophisticated propaganda efforts from the other side of the Iron Curtain. German-speaking wartime émigrés dissected Eastern propaganda in entertaining comedy features and – in Erich Fried's case – through widely-respected political commentary. Meanwhile, recent East German defectors presenting their own accounts provided the German Service with authenticity and topicality by refuting Party propaganda from first-hand experience, but ultimately these individual fates did not represent the majority of the East German population.

By drawing on all of these different perspectives, the BBC German Service to a certain extent lived up to its goals of convincing listeners that the spiritual values and living

standards of the West were superior, and helped them to resist East German government propaganda. However, while the sense of an imagined oppositional community promoted by the BBC might foster hope within listeners for a better future, the German Service was in fact very careful not to encourage any hopes for concrete Western intervention. One problematic aspect of this broadcasting strategy was its sustainability: it was a gamble as to how long the BBC could keep East Germans (illegally) listening to foreign broadcasts without offering them any prospect of change.

*Acknowledgements:* This work was funded by the Leverhulme Trust through a Leverhulme Early Career Fellowship.

## NOTES

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- <sup>i</sup> J.B. Black, *Organising the Propaganda Instrument: The British Experience* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975), 59.
- <sup>ii</sup> Patrick Major, 'Listening behind the Curtain: BBC Broadcasting to East Germany and its Cold War Echo', *Cold War History* 13 (2013): 255–75, here: 258.
- <sup>iii</sup> Initially the GEZP occupied a different time slot, but following analysis of listener data throughout the 1950s, it moved to the 8–9pm slot in its final iteration.
- <sup>iv</sup> Memo from Fritz Beer (German Workers' Programme) to Lindley Fraser (Head of German Service), subject: 'Eastern Germany Programme', 24 February 1949, E1/756, BBC Written Archives Centre [WAC in the following].
- <sup>v</sup> On radio in the GDR, see Klaus Arnold and Christoph Classen (eds), *Zwischen Pop und Propaganda: Radio in der DDR* (Berlin: Christoph Links, 2004).
- <sup>vi</sup> See e.g. Friederike Kind-Kovács, 'Voices, Letters, and Literature through the Iron Curtain: Exiles and the (Trans) Mission of Radio in the Cold War', *Cold War History* 13 (2013): 193–219; Arch Puddington, *Broadcasting Freedom: The Cold War Triumph of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2003); Gary D. Rawnsley, 'Cold War Radio in Crisis: The BBC Overseas Services, the Suez Crisis and the 1956 Hungarian Uprising', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 16 (1996): 197–219.
- <sup>vii</sup> Gary D. Rawnsley, *Radio Diplomacy and Propaganda: The BBC and VOA in International Politics, 1956–64* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1996); Michael Nelson, *War of the Black Heavens: The Battles of Western Broadcasting in the Cold War* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1997).
- <sup>viii</sup> Alban Webb, 'Auntie Goes to War Again', *Media History* 12 (2006): 117–32; Webb, 'Cold War Radio and the Hungarian Uprising, 1956', *Cold War History* 13 (2013): 221–38; Webb, *London Calling: Britain, the BBC World Service and the Cold War* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).
- <sup>ix</sup> Webb, 'A Leap of Imagination: BBC Audience Research over the Iron Curtain', *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 8 (2011): 154–72; Graham

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- Mytton, 'Audience Research at the BBC External Services during the Cold War: A View from the Inside', *Cold War History* 11 (2011): 49–67.
- <sup>x</sup> Gerard Mansell, *Let Truth Be Told: 50 Years of External Broadcasting* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1982).
- <sup>xi</sup> Patrick Major, 'Listening behind the Curtain: BBC Broadcasting to East Germany and its Cold War Echo', *Cold War History* 13 (2013): 255–75.
- <sup>xii</sup> Susanne Schädlich, *Briefe ohne Unterschrift: Wie eine BBC-Sendung die DDR herausforderte* (Munich: Albrecht Knaus, 2017).
- <sup>xiii</sup> Apart from one surviving script for 'The Two Comrades' from 1949 (German Features: Scripts, October 1949, BBC WAC), the earliest dates from January 1961 (Microfilm EG 11, BBC WAC). The earliest available script for 'Letters without Signature' is from January 1965 (Microfilm EG 7, BBC WAC), while the earliest surviving script for 'The Surprised Newspaper Reader' is from January 1967 (Microfilm EG 12, BBC WAC).
- <sup>xiv</sup> 'The Principles and Purpose of the BBC's External Services', 30 October 1946, R1/82/2, G68, BBC WAC.
- <sup>xv</sup> See Major, 'Listening behind the Curtain', 273.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Memo from Fritz Beer (German Workers' Programme) to Lindley Fraser (Head of German Service), subject: 'Eastern Germany Programme', 24 February 1949, E1/756, BBC WAC.
- <sup>xvii</sup> For more information on the German Service's role during the occupation, see Emily Oliver, 'Tuning into Germany: The BBC German Service and the British Occupation', in *German in the World: A Culture in National, Transnational and Global Contexts*, ed. James Hodgkinson and Benedict Schofield (Rochester, NY: Camden House, forthcoming 2020).
- <sup>xviii</sup> Lindley Fraser, 'As I See It', 26 December 1949, Lindley Fraser: Talks & Features Scripts, 1.7.1949–31.12.1949, BBC WAC.
- <sup>xix</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xx</sup> Memo from Christopher Dilke to Lindley Fraser, subject: 'Minutes of a Special Programme Meeting on 17<sup>th</sup> December to Consider the Future of the East Zone Programme', December 1951, E1/756, BBC WAC.
- <sup>xxi</sup> See Webb, 'Cold War Radio', 233.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Richard O'Rorke, 'The Truth Is ...', 12 June 1958, E1/753/6, BBC WAC.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xxiv</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xxv</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xxvi</sup> See Jennifer Taylor, 'The Propagandists' Propagandist: Bruno Adler's "Kurt und Willi" Dialogues as Expression of British Propaganda Objectives', in *Immortal Austria'?: Austrians in Exile in Britain*, ed. Charmian Brinson, Richard Dove, and Jennifer Taylor (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 19–31.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> For a collected edition of the Hirschal scripts, see Robert Lucas, *Teure Amalia, vielgeliebtes Weib!* *Die Briefe des Gefreiten Adolf Hirschal an seine Frau in Zwieselndorf* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1984).
- <sup>xxviii</sup> No scripts survive for this programme, but an audio recording is included on a CD of German Service highlights, see Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv (ed.), *Hier ist England: Historische Aufnahmen des Deutschen Dienstes der BBC* (Frankfurt: DHM, 1998). For more information and transcripts of some of Ivan's songs, see Carl Brintzer, *Hier spricht London: Von einem der dabei war* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1969), 313–17.
- <sup>xxix</sup> See 'Erweitertes Programm für Ostdeutschland im deutschsprachigen Dienst der BBC', 13 May 1951, E1/756, BBC WAC.

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- xxx Memo from Christopher Dilke to Lindley Fraser, subject: “Minutes of a Special Programme Meeting on 17<sup>th</sup> December to consider the future of the East Zone Programme”, December 1951, E1/756, BBC WAC.
- xxxii On the circumstances surrounding Fried’s departure from the German Service, see Steven W. Lawrie, *Erich Fried: A Writer without a Country* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996); and Lawrie, “‘Ein Urviech und eine Seele von Mensch’: Erich Fried at the BBC”, in *‘Stimme der Wahrheit’: German-Language Broadcasting by the BBC*, ed. Charmian Brinson and Richard Dove (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003), 117–38.
- xxxiii J.T. Lockhart, ‘German Audience Research: Berlin Industrial Fair Soviet Zone Listening Survey, 14<sup>th</sup>–29<sup>th</sup> September, 1957’, 11, E3/208/1, BBC WAC.
- xxxiiii Lindley Fraser, ‘Programme Contract Staff: Annual Report’, 12 Apr 1961, R94/1, 711/1, BBC WAC.
- xxxv Erich Fried, ‘Marx und Engels’, prod. Walter Hertner, 14 March 1952, Microfilm: European Division (1952–1974), no. 1, BBC WAC.
- xxxvi Erich Fried, ‘Tito Speaks’ (I–IV), prod. H. Rosenhauer, H. Steindamm, and Gerd Puritz, 12–24 February 1953, Microfilm: European Division (1952–1974), no. 1, BBC WAC.
- xxxvii Erich Fried, ‘Die fortschrittlichen Socken’, prod. Gerd Puritz, 23 September 1952; Fried, ‘Der aktivistische Staubsauger’, prod. H. Steindamm, 27 October 1952, Microfilm: European Division (1952–1974), no. 1, BBC WAC.
- xxxviii Manfred Schreiner (a.k.a. Erich Fried), ‘Das Lehrstück von Prag’, prod. Gerd Puritz, 2 December 1952, Microfilm: European Division (1952–1974), no. 1, BBC WAC.
- xxxix *Ibid.*, 1–2.
- xl ‘Dies ist die Lehre von Prag: ihr Menschen in allen Ländern, / Wendet die Augen nicht ab, denn so ist’s, und ihr selbst müsst es ändern. / Unrecht wird nicht von größerem Unrecht vernichtet / und Irrtum wird von Gemeinheit niemals gerecht gerichtet. / Gedenket der Reden von Freiheit und Gleichheit: die waren gelogen. / Gedenkt eurer Hoffnungen, immer wieder betrogen. / Wenn sie euch heute das Reden und Denken verbieten, / Dann wisst ihr: Das sind die Leute, die alles verrichten: ... / Und auch jener Männer aus Prag, von den eigenen Genossen gehängt / gedenkt! Gedenkt!’ (Schreiner, ‘Das Lehrstück von Prag’, 7). All translations from German are my own unless otherwise indicated.
- xli Alfred Kantorowicz, ‘Ich spreche für die Schweigenden – Talk XII’, 13 July 1958, A33/168, Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv (DRA). For more information on Thomas Mann’s wartime broadcasts, see Sonja Valentin, *‘Steine in Hitlers Fenster’: Thomas Manns Radiosendungen Deutsche Hörer! (1940–1945)* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2015).
- xlii See Manfred Hertwig, ‘Über einige Ursachen und Hintergründe der Verhaftung der Harich-Gruppe’, 29 September 1959; Hertwig, ‘Der dritte Weg und die Harich-Gruppe (2)’, 6 October 1959; Hertwig, ‘Wie ich aus dem Zuchthaus Bautzen kam’, 13 October 1959, A33/168, DRA.
- xliiii See Manfred Hertwig, ‘Demokratie – Sozialismus – Wiedervereinigung (1–16)’, 5 January – 19 April 1960, Microfilm EG13, BBC WAC.
- xliiiii ‘Freiheit – die Sehnsucht nach Freiheit – die Verzweiflung über den Raub der Freiheit – das ist das Thema, das alle anderen Themen überschattet’. Memo from Christopher Dilke to Lindley Fraser, subject: ‘Letters without Signature’, 10 June 1953, E1/756, BBC WAC.
- xlv *Ibid.*
- xlvi *Ibid.*
- xlvii Memo from James Thomson to Christopher Dilke, subject: ‘East Zone Programme’, 26 October 1953, E1/756, BBC WAC.

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- xlvii Ibid.
- xlviii Memo from Christopher Dilke to James Thomson, subject: ‘East Zone Programme’, 28 October 1953, E1/756, BBC WAC.
- xlix Memo from R.A. Harrison to Lindley Fraser, subject: ‘Briefe ohne Unterschrift’, 5 May 1954, E1/756, BBC WAC.
- <sup>1</sup> Memo from Richard O’Rourke to Controller European Services, subject: ‘Letters without Signatures’, 4 December 1957, E1/753/5, BBC WAC. See also: J.A. Cole, ‘Report on Mail Received in German from Listeners in the Soviet Zone and Countries behind the Iron Curtain, October 16<sup>th</sup>-31<sup>st</sup>’, 25 November 1957, E3/208/1, BBC WAC.
- <sup>li</sup> The BBC Written Archives Centre holds 233 folders of original letters from the GDR for the period 1955–1976. See E3/300–532, BBC WAC.
- <sup>lii</sup> See Major, ‘Listening behind the Curtain’, 268.
- <sup>liii</sup> Memo from German Programme Organiser to all Soviet Zone Scriptwriters, Mr. Arengo-Jones, Mr. B. Adler, and BBC Representatives Berlin, subject: ‘Report on Soviet Zone Programme’ (compiled by British Military Government in Berlin for the information of the Foreign Office in London, 30 April 1957), 8 May 1957, E3/208/1, BBC WAC.
- <sup>liv</sup> Eleanor F. Ransome, ‘Overseas Listener Research Report – BBC Service: German, Survey of the Year 1953’, E3/275/5, BBC WAC.
- <sup>lv</sup> J.T. Lockhart, ‘German Audience Research: Berlin Industrial Fair Soviet Zone Listening Survey, 14<sup>th</sup>–29<sup>th</sup> September, 1957’, E3/208/1, BBC WAC.
- <sup>lvi</sup> Eleanor F. Ransome, ‘German Audience Research: Berlin Fair Interrogation, 25<sup>th</sup> September–10<sup>th</sup> October, 1954’, E3/275/5, BBC WAC.
- <sup>lvii</sup> J.A. Cole, ‘Report on Mail Received in German from Listeners in the Soviet Zone and Other Countries, July 16–31, 1960’, 31 July 1960, E3/208/1, BBC WAC.
- <sup>lviii</sup> J.A. Cole, ‘Report on Mail Received in German from Listeners in the Soviet Zone and Other Countries, October 1–15, 1961’, 15 October 1961, E3/208/1, BBC WAC.
- <sup>lix</sup> J.A. Cole, ‘Report on Mail Received in German from Listeners in the Soviet Zone, November 1–15, 1961’, 15 November 1961, E3/208/1, BBC WAC.

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