Auntie’s War: The BBC during the Second World War

Review Number: 2222  
Publish date: Thursday, 8 February, 2018  
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ISBN: 9780857523327  
Date of Publication: 2017  
Price: £15.00  
Pages: 432pp.  
Publisher: Doubleday  
Publisher url: https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/1109453/auntie-s-war/  
Place of Publication: London  
Reviewer: Ross Davies

The BBC began broadcasting television programmes from its own studios in 1932 and launched a regular TV service in 1936, only to shut it down when, three years later, Great Britain declared war on Germany. Edward Stourton’s *Auntie’s War: The BBC during the Second World War* is therefore about radio, and in particular the tug of war within the corporation between 1939 and 1945.

The tussle was over the broadcasting of ‘fake news’, a term Stourton does not employ, preferring ‘black propaganda’ as it was called in the war years. Stourton’s timing, doubtless accidental, is spot on. *Auntie’s War* was published in November 2017, the month that the Collins English Dictionary cited ‘fake news’ as its ‘word of the year’, usage having almost quadrupled. Collins defines ‘fake news’ as ‘false news stories circulated with malicious intent’, and disputes President Trump’s claim to have invented the term, which in the Trumpean lexicon appears to signify tidings vexatious to the President and those in his favour at the moment of tweeting. (1)

Stourton’s paean to ‘Auntie’ is as even-handed as can be expected from a BBC old lag with 38 years’ form. *Auntie’s War* is especially valuable as the Second World War goes the way of the First in receding from living memory. This is a lively and widely-researched study, if one let down by an indifferent index that for example seems unable to pinpoint exactly where and when the BBC came by its nom de guerre. Stourton says that throughout his long, globe-trotting career as a BBC broadcaster he has been struck by the respect and even affection in which he finds ‘Auntie’ to be held. This regard, Stourton argues, is an inheritance from the war years during which the BBC emerged as a trusted friend at home and abroad.

The BBC of 1939, Stourton allows, was neither ‘impartial’ nor ‘independent’ as those terms are now understood. Yet during the course of that sprawling, six-year conflict, listeners found BBC broadcasts far less ‘partial’ or ‘dependent’ than those of the BBC’s rabid German counterpart, RRG. As in the Great War, the longer the fighting dragged on and the nearer the Allies came to victory, so the closer to fantasy were the incessant proclamations of triumph by the German Ministry of Propaganda. In Stourton’s view, the BBC emerged with credit not by mere default but after having won a struggle on the Home Front to keep broadcasting more than a tool of political whim.

It is no part of Stourton’s brief to speculate whether the BBC will emerge similarly garlanded, in the UK at
least, from the long trauma of our own day. Brexit, a convulsion being likened for divisiveness to the Corn Laws or Home Rule. It is arguable that ‘Auntie’ traipsed into the Brexit controversy having already frittered away goodwill. In a decade of wage restraint, BBC managers sporting laughably-nebulous titles award each other vast salaries, pensions and payoffs before moving on to plum university posts. BBC pundits get the result of the Referendum on UK membership of the EU magnificently wrong. The result, some say, was affected by the BBC’s evident enthusiasm for ‘Project Fear’. On the other hand, Brexit still has some way to run, and the BBC may yet remain more ‘Auntie’ than ‘Wicked Uncle’.

The wartime BBC that Stourton that celebrates entered hostilities in 1939 ‘Like most of Britain [...] rotten with class privilege and snobbery’. Do privilege and snobbery die, or as in 2018 have they just assumed different forms? Stourton notes that from 1939 the BBC’s old guard was swept away in the huge wartime expansion of broadcasting activity, the new broom being an influx of academics, writers, journalists and refugees. In 2018, a languid manner and la-di-da accent might no longer be as essential to a career in or on the BBC as it once was, and may even be a handicap. Could that be, however, because outrage at voters’ perfidy in the 2016 Referendum in challenging Establishment interests and attitudes demonstrates that a more recent conformity may have taken root in the BBC, different but a conformity nonetheless? Orwell, who resigned from the BBC during the war, declared in *The Lion and the Unicorn* that the ‘English intelligentsia [...] take their cookery from Paris and their opinions from Moscow’. Whoever the ‘English intelligentsia’ are today and wherever its members now take their cookery from, it is arguable that many of its members now take their opinions from Brussels.

Stourton declares the Second World War ‘the first war of the broadcasting age’ as well as ‘the first total war’ in that German bombers put millions of civilians ‘on the front line’. The BBC, he argues, thus became part of ‘the whirlwind of war sweeping away all the old social certainties’. Discuss, as the examiners might say. Stourton, to my mind, is on firmer ground the further he keeps away from the rhetorical flourishes that can sound so good on-air but which come on like so much hot air in cold print. Luckily, Stourton’s sparkling narrative is not defined by the vague or the glib. A wealth of contemporary sources fuels his masterful evocation of the tense and hectic struggle that raged within the BBC as well as in the world outside. The struggle within the BBC was to retain control of the corporation and in particular, of its news broadcasts. What saved the day, Stourton asserts, was that although when war broke out the BBC was moved from the Postmaster-General’s department to the Ministry of Information, the Minister (Brendan Bracken) talked Churchill out of taking the BBC into full state control. The Board of Governors remained as buffer zone, its members not too bufferish to wangle a compromise preserving the BBC’s ‘independence’, provided the corporation did not push its luck too far.

The BBC began radio broadcasts in 1922, and in 1939 was a comparative latecomer to the business of news. Between the formal ending of hostilities in 1919 and their resumption in 1939, a newspaper circulation war raged. Bowing to pressure from Fleet Street, the politicians barred the BBC from broadcasting news bulletins before 6.30pm. Not that it mattered much. The radio audience was still tiny, kept that way because so few people could afford radio sets and the BBC’s genteel announcers put off so many potential listeners. The Munich crisis of 1938 and the prospect of war changed all that. The post-Munich tension sent radio audiences and sales of the sets rocketing.

By contrast, Germany was already being flooded with half-price radios. Ex-Corporal Hitler had been impressed by British propaganda’s ‘brilliant’ exploitation of the German army’s collapse in 1918, and saw propaganda as a powerful weapon. While radio broadcasting was still a thing of the future in 1918, fake news – the phenomenon, not the phrase – was already well into its stride. In the Great War, the French doctored photographs to show Count von Bernstorff, the German Ambassador to Washington, apparently meeting a German spy.

The British, who invented the mass-circulation press, were in 1914 were still smarting from the international public-relations disaster that was the Boer War. That war dinned two salutary lessons into complacent British brains, for a while at least. Lesson one was that Great Britain, the world’s foremost colonial power,
encouraged German bellicosity in showing itself barely able to defeat a bunch of farmers, Lesson two was that the military victory over the Boers, such as it was, came at the cost of handing a huge propaganda advantage not just to Germany but also to Britain’s other colonial, industrial and military rivals, France and the United States: John Bull bends the arthritic knee to gold- and diamond-mining magnates, even if it means crushing plucky fellow-whites beneath that knee to do so. (3)

Lessons learned, in 1914 the British were quick off the mark on the news front, from salting the world’s newspapers with useful stories, some of them even true, to circulating leaflet and even fake trench newspapers in the German lines. London moved promptly to set up a coordinated and effective propaganda and censorship structure. Propaganda was held to be ‘the presentation of a case in such a way that others may be influenced’. That ‘way’ itself was influenced by the recognition that the war would be a long one, in which case propaganda could become a double-edged sword. In the end, that sword would work against the propagandist unless the statements made were truthful or at least did not conflict with each other. There was room for fake news, but not contradictory fake news.

German propaganda was full of contradictions. There was no Imperial Ministry of Propaganda in Berlin until August 1918, by when the war was already unwinnable. Like the British in the Boer conflict, the Germans assumed that the ‘European War’ would be short and, the German cause self-evidently just, end in victory. The war over, Hitler and Ludendorff, the Quartermaster-General, were to rail against the deficiencies of German propaganda. Hardly had it started than the cultural historian Karl Lamprecht claimed that fellow-academics were doing ‘more harm than all the efforts of the enemy’. Incapable of understanding other nations, blindly nationalistic German academics rushed into print in the foreign press with contradictory patriotic effusions, and as the war dragged on the results for German morale, were ‘gruesome’. (4)

In Auntie’s War, Stourton declares the ‘immediate cause’ of the Second World War, the first radio war, to be ‘appropriately – a radio station’. On the evening of 31 August 1939 German troops, kitted out in Polish uniforms, faked an attack on a German radio station in Upper Silesia, which the Versailles Treaty required Germany to cede to Poland. The fake attackers headed a party of convicted criminals who had been promised amnesty if they took part also wearing Polish uniforms, The ‘attack’ over, the German troops then machine-gunned the criminals, ‘Polish corpses’ providing the ‘fake news’ pretext for the invasion of Poland that began about 6 a.m. the following day (p. 55).

A less-chilling vignette is from 1942 London and the Bush House studios of the BBC European Services, where ‘One lift in the building led to a world where trust was king, another to a world dedicated to deception and trickery’ (p. 353). Take the second lift in 1941 and you might have found Stephen Haggard at the microphone. Haggard, an actor bilingual in German, was then serving as a Captain in Military Intelligence, now attached to the German Talks service of the BBC. He nightly posed as a recently-captured German purser, broadcasting to enemy submariners ‘suitably edited news’ laced with the lure to listeners of the names of captured U-Boat crews. Haggard’s father, Sir Godfrey, remarked ‘It took me back to my Bolivian days during the First [World] War, when I used to dish out ‘news’ to the local press on much the same system’. (5)

At the BBC from 1939 onwards, it was no longer possible to dismiss ‘black broadcasting’ as foreign devilry. To keep up the spirits of the British and their allies as well as those of the people of occupied Europe became a patriotic duty and even a human imperative. To discharge that duty as honourably as possible involved constant tussles not just with Churchill and the War Cabinet but the Army, Royal Navy and Royal Air Force. Also jostling for airtime and an editorial say were the French, Polish and other governments in exile. Then there were Great Britain’s secret services, no less than nine of them. These ranged from long-established ‘official’ organizations – notably MI5 and MI6 – to wartime improvisations such the two overlapping and therefore mutually-hostile clandestine agencies, the Special Operations Executive and the Political Warfare Executive.
Stourton quotes a former Hitler courtier, Hermann Rauschning, as saying that in 1932 the Nazi leader told him that artillery would give way ‘psychological dislocation’ as a prelude to future aggression (p.21). Hitler saw radio propaganda as the new ‘artillery’ enabling such dislocation. Auntie’s War arrives as the EU Budget prepared for the first time to fund a unit countering ‘disinformation and fake news’ from Russia. Russian naval vessels and military aircraft daily probe British waters, airspace and cable links. Russophile hackers meddle in a Referendum and a General Election. Could it be that that today’s internet-borne barrage of fake news is not just a more-effective ‘artillery’ preparation for an attack, but is the attack?

Notes

1. See Faking It: The Sentimentalisation of Modern Society, d. Digby Anderson and Peter Mullen (London, 1998) for a discussion of ‘fake schools’, ‘fake religion’ and, particularly, p. 161ff., ‘All Venusians now: sentimentality in the media’, for the argument that if a news story is not ‘fake’ to begin with, it likely will be by the time newspapers and TV have done with it. Back to (1)
2. Stourton, see p. 248ff, for Churchill’s ‘visceral antipathy’ to the BBC, going back at least as far as 1933 and his conviction that the BBC had got above itself in claiming to ‘speak for England’. Back to (2)
3. See James Hawes, Englanders and Huns: How Five Decades of Enmity led to the First World War (London, 2014), pp. 221ff., 331ff. With extensive reference to the German press, Hawes argues that German ‘anglophobia’ was well under way by 1875. Back to (3)
5. Notes for an unpublished memoir, c.1963. Haggard Family Archive. Sir Godfrey (1884–1969) was the Charge d’Affaires in Bolivia, 1915–21, and during WW2 British Consul-General in New York. His son Stephen Haggard (1911–43), actor, war poet, playwright, novelist (and subject of a forthcoming biography), was later attached to the propaganda arm of SOE (Special Operations Executive), and was then transferred to another clandestine agency, PWE (Political Warfare Executive), when PWE took control of ‘black propaganda’ broadcasting. Back to (5)

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