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The Sound of Revolution: BBC Monitoring and the Hungarian uprising, 1956

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Abstract

Radio occupied multiple broadcast, diplomatic and cultural terrains during the course of the Hungarian uprising. Broadcasters, and the authorities that stood behind them on both sides of the Iron Curtain mapped, interpreted and, at times, appeared to direct the course of events on the ground. The BBC Monitoring Service Transcription Collection offers a vital and unexplored perspective on developments on the ground during the Hungarian uprising, in the context of the wider political warfare battle of the cold war.

Introduction

Listening is an acquired skill: as an emotional capacity and as a set of institutional practices. In the field of radio broadcasting, where much historical analysis has focused on transmission rather than reception, it is a particularly important one. Attentive listening, by audiences to programmes and by programme-makers to audiences, reflects a dualism inherent to broadcasting by radio waves. Yet, there is an additional listening relationship that has underpinned the conduct of international broadcasting for the last eighty years, but which has received little critical attention: the monitoring of broadcast output by competitor media and state actors.

From the quotidian to the exceptional, monitoring as a form of open source communications intelligence became a corollary to international broadcasting from the mid-Twentieth Century onwards. Reflecting the explosion in the scale and linguistic range of broadcasting during the Second World War, monitoring operations offered governments and their broadcasters the opportunity to tune in to the propaganda battle and respond accordingly. As a strategic tool and as a tactical weapon, the value of monitoring to broadcasters (for programme making and understanding audience media ecologies) and to governments (for policy-making and defence planning) bound their interests together. By the autumn of 1956, when public protest led to armed rebellion in Hungary, monitoring operations in the United Kingdom, conducted by the BBC, had become an integral part of Britain's cold war information machinery. And during the crisis that followed, it played a central role in guiding Britain's broadcast and diplomatic responses on the international stage.

The Hungarian uprising was headline news across the world, vying for attention with the unfolding events on the Suez Canal in Egypt. From the mass marches in

Budapest on Tuesday 23rd October and the subsequent reformation of the Hungarian government under the rehabilitated Imre Nagy, to its brutal suppression by the Soviet military less than two weeks later, news from and about Hungary had a potent appeal for audiences around the globe. As the historian Eric Hobsbawm later remarked, 'probably no other episode in 20th Century history generated a more intense burst of feeling'.ⁱ

The uprising was a heavily reported event, but it was also a distinctly mediated one, specifically in relation to radio. "Freedom" radio stations emerged during the uprising, adding to the politics of dissent on the airwaves. But it was Radio Budapest that was at the centre of the radio revolution, mapping the course of the uprising from a Hungarian perspective. It was on these state-controlled wavelengths that the news was relayed at four thirty on the morning of 24th October that 'Fascist reactionary elements have launched an armed attack against our public buildings and have attacked our armed formations'.ⁱⁱ And it was from this station, now under the influence of a new radical government that just before dawn on the morning of 4th November Premier Imre Nagy informed listeners that, 'In the early hours of this morning, the Soviet troops launched an attack against our Capital with the obvious intention of overthrowing the lawful, democratic, Hungarian Government. Our troops are fighting. The Government is in its place. I inform of this the people of the country and world public opinion.'ⁱⁱⁱ Shortly after sunrise, however, the station fell silent as Soviet forces asserted control.

Radio Budapest was one of a number of broadcasters competing on the airwaves to get their version of events heard over the tumult. The BBC External Services (today's BBC World Service), Radio Moscow, Voice of America and Radio Free Europe were key participants in the wider soundscape that framed the discursive terms in which events on the ground were interpreted. As an information service detailing the course of the uprising, as a diplomatic service mediating between governments in Budapest, London, Washington and Moscow, and as a propaganda service imbued with ideological essentialism, radio was a functionally integral part of the Hungarian uprising.

The reason we know this is because the broadcasts were monitored and, in many cases, transcribed *verbatim*, albeit in translation. This is the case in the BBC Monitoring Service Transcription Collection, which forms the primary evidential basis of this article. Covering the period from the start of the BBC's Monitoring Service (BBCM) in 1939 to around 1982, the collection contains an estimated fifteen million pages of predominantly typed and handwritten transcripts documenting broadcast output from around the world during the Second World War and the Cold War. Monitoring also involved the translation of broadcast material from the original broadcast language into English, for the benefit of BBCM's internal customers in BBC News, Current Affairs and the World Service, as well as its external partners in the British government and the American Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS). As a consequence, the translation of culture as well as of language was a significant part of the monitor's work. When this task proved particularly difficult, untranslated words and phrases were transcribed, often with an explanatory note, to add provenance to the

monitored interpretation. And it was at this granular level of detail that the Transcription Collection is at its most potent in terms of its historical significance. Unlike BBCM's *Summary of World Broadcasts* publication, which shaped and condensed the monitoring product to the requirements of its stakeholders, the transcripts reveal a much richer and versatile resource.^{iv}

In its pages, the Collection details grand narratives alongside the minutiae of daily life across political, economic, diplomatic, cultural, developmental, trade, decolonisation and countless other themes. Deposited with the Imperial War Museum from the 1960s until 2016 and now back at the BBC, the Collection has been largely ignored as an academic source and remains a hidden gem. In practice, it represents an untapped and hugely significant resource for reading the past in real-time. It is the purpose of this article to examine the role of monitoring during the Hungarian uprising in order to suggest where the collection can make a particular contribution both in terms of the insight it delivers into the specific events of 1956 as well as how monitoring operates as an analytical discipline and its wider historical salience.

Intelligent Listening

Broadcasting is ethereal, an activity that literally disappears into the air: vibrations that animate, but which leave little or no physical trace behind. In this respect, the power of radio is as much sensual as it is political or social. The affective influence of radio in the mid 1950s was difficult to measure, however. In Central and Eastern Europe, on the other side of the Iron Curtain, audience research was not a readily available tool for western broadcasters and governments who were left with little hard evidence of the impact they were having. Moreover, there were problems with even knowing what was broadcast. At this time, recordings of original output were almost never kept, especially international programmes, for reasons of inclination as well as cost. Likewise, scripts are few and far between. Where they do exist it can be difficult to tell if they were "as broadcast". By way of contrast, monitoring apprehends the ethereal and makes it material, albeit with attendant technological and human capacities for distortion at the point of capture. More than just tuning in and transcribing, it is an act of intelligent listening, which uses the experience and skill of the monitor to identify salience and, at critical junctures, deviations from the norm. As radio waves made concrete, monitoring draws sound into renewed dialogue with our historical reconstructions of the past.^v

By detailing the media landscape of the everyday, the transcripts of the BBC Monitoring Service Transcription Collection also contribute to our understanding of the lived experience of listeners. How people listened gives us insight into the world around them. For example, at twenty to eleven on 24th October 1956, the morning after the armed insurrection had begun, Radio Budapest's domestic service made an unusual appeal:

Attention. Attention. We request listeners to place their wireless receivers into the windows as we are shortly to make important

announcements. In a short time we will be broadcasting a speech by Premier Imre Nagy.^{vi}

This was the first of many similar appeals over the next few days to use radio as a public messaging service, both in the house and on the streets. It paints a vivid scene of loudspeakers on the windowsills of Budapest echoing to the sound of revolution. It also usefully demonstrates the way in which radio was clearly understood by politicians, the military, broadcasters and listeners alike to have a central role in the conduct of the uprising. When Nagy took to the microphone an hour and a half later, it was to announce “that all those who in the interests of avoiding further bloodshed stop fighting before 14:00 today and lay down their arms will be exempted from summary jurisdiction” and that comrades should “Trust, that learning from the mistakes of the past, we will find the correct road for the prosperity of our country”.^{vii} His speech was followed by the national anthem.

These details offer us, in the present, a glimpse of the living past. The transcripts allow us to read back into history in a very direct way and to observe its fluctuations in something close to real-time. Nagy’s request for calm and his initial appetite for piecemeal reform was replaced within little over a week with the reintroduction of a multi-party system, a declaration of ‘the neutrality of the Hungarian People’s Republic’ and a claim of effective independence from Soviet influence.^{viii} In the intervening period the transcripts show how, minute-by-minute and hour-by-hour, the course of the uprising flowed and how pivotal figures such as Nagy were carried forward by the tidal wave of revolutionary passion. As such, it adds richness, depth and a sense of immediacy to the historical record.

The BBC Monitoring Service has always been greatly valued by its broadcasting and government customers for often being first with vital breaking news. This was dramatically illustrated, for example, when at the height of the Cuban missile crisis and with the British Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, poised to instigate the ‘Precautionary Stage’ (Britain’s military preparations for thermonuclear war), BBC Monitoring reported Nikita Khrushchev’s broadcast in which he ordered ‘the dismantlement of the weapons [on Cuba], which you describe as offensive, their packing and their return to the Soviet Union’.^{ix} But the BBC’s monitors offered far more than the services of a news agency.

As can be seen from the transcripts in the archive, BBC Monitoring operated at a number of simultaneous scales of enquiry and intelligence. The ability to bear down in considerable detail on unfolding events while also placing them in a wider constellation of regional and global events was one of the most valuable and critical features of monitoring. It is also a profoundly important analytical attribute for modern day researchers using the archive. Much has recently been made of the concept of the historian’s macroscope: the capacity for close and distant reading of texts and data at the same time.^x However, the BBC Monitoring Service has been using this multivariate optic in its media analysis for the last eight decades.

At the granular level of focus it is possible to isolate and explore how nuances in the language, scheduling and editing of monitored communications reveal the attitudes, stresses and the strategic and/or tactical concerns at play at the moment of broadcast. The unscheduled appearance of 'recorded chamber music' on the Budapest Home Service in the early hours of 24th October 1956, for example, immediately indicated to monitors that not only was something truly dramatic taking place, but that the authorities did not yet appear to be in control of the situation.^{xi} Just as importantly, knowing what is missing from broadcast output, the absence of a news bulletin or speech,^{xii} which is only detectable through attentive listening over the *longue durée*, can also capture the significance of the moment.

Through a wider lens it is possible to view events from a number of geographic and temporal perspectives. Soviet allegations that the aggressive and subversive tactics of the imperialist powers (America and the United Kingdom in particular) had led to the undermining of Hungarian socialism and had incited Hungarian citizens to violence played directly into the narrative of the uprising and its aftermath. So too did the Soviet and other communist countries' analysis of the contemporaneous military incursions of Israel, Britain and France in Egypt, which was used to demonstrate the destabilising and pernicious unreliability of the Western alliance. Meanwhile, the demand at the start of the protests in Budapest that 'comrade Imre Nagy be reinstated'^{xiii} to government was as much about the events of 1953, when he was deposed from the leadership in favour of the hardliner Matyos Rakosi and the sense of democratic loss experienced then, as it was about his present suitability for government. However, without an understanding of that historical echo, which monitors clearly had, the subsequent interpretation of current events would have lacked a critical part of their meaning.

The existence, in various states of accessibility, of other monitoring archives around the world – in the UK, US, Russia and Hungary, for example – suggests the promise, not yet realised, of a much richer resource of monitoring archives that if combined could provide a multi-perspectival analytical framework and methodology for examining our mediated lives. It is evident, however, that to do this requires an interdisciplinary academic approach. The science and technology of monitoring needs to be read alongside its history and sociology as well as its cultural and political impact. As it is, the BBC Monitoring Service Transcription Collection, which is the focus of this study, is a meeting point for a number of academic disciplines of analysis, reflecting the far reaching nature of its activities.

Communications Intelligence

Monitoring at the BBC had begun in tandem with the launch of the Corporation's first overseas language service in Arabic in January 1938.^{xiv} As foreign language broadcasting at the BBC expanded over the coming year and a half, so too did the Corporation's *ad hoc* monitoring operations. But it was only on the eve of the outbreak of the Second World War that a distinct Monitoring Service was

formally established within the BBC structure, initially located at the BBC's evacuation centre at Wood Norton, Worcestershire, before moving in 1943 to its current home at Caversham in Berkshire. Born out of the necessity to know what competitor nations and broadcasters were saying in their mass media communications, monitoring served the needs of both BBC broadcasters and the British government in offering up-to-date open source intelligence.

The explosion in international broadcasting brought about by the war necessitated monitoring on a very large scale. By the middle of the war over 30,000 words in 'flash messages', those of utmost importance, were being relayed daily to government departments by teleprinter, out of the one and half million words in thirty-two languages listened to every day.^{xv} The global information battle was on the front-line of the Second World War and it ensured that monitoring became an embedded practice in the defence of the realm and in the production of programmes. The war proved the value of Monitoring: to the government, who saw it as an essential source of intelligence; and to the BBC through the increasing use made by its various branches of monitored material.

The postwar planning assumption had been that the BBC Monitoring Service would be considerably reduced once the imperatives of conflict had subsided. However, for both the BBC and its government customers, monitoring was too vital a source to give up, especially as hot war with Germany and her allies gave way to a cold war with the Soviet Union and its sphere of influence. In practical terms, the BBC had come to rely on monitoring, particularly in its External Services broadcasts overseas. As the BBC Director-General William Haley noted at the end of 1945, the 'monitoring service obtained from the news agencies was so inadequate and at times inaccurate, that the BBC would have either to cease quoting foreign broadcasts or to continue monitoring for itself'.^{xvi} Meanwhile in Whitehall, the value derived from monitoring had been recognised across a wide range of government business. Foreign and diplomatic affairs, military and defence planning, propaganda and psychological warfare strategies, and the intelligence services, all benefitted hugely from access not just to the monitoring product, but also to the skillset and experience of the monitors that produced it. This was underwritten by government funding of the BBC Monitoring Service through Foreign Office Grant-in-Aid as, indeed, were the BBC External Services. And by 1948, the government's Joint Intelligence Committee, the coordinating nexus of the UK's intelligence machinery, established a Sub-Committee on Monitoring Requirements to facilitate the requirements of Britain's intelligence services.^{xvii}

The creation, also in 1948, of the rather blandly titled Information Research Department (IRD) within the Foreign Office plugged the Monitoring Service into the heart of the government's covert propaganda operations. Initially designed 'to collect information concerning Communist policy, tactics and propaganda and to provide material for our anti-Communist publicity',^{xviii} IRD relied on monitoring output. This was particularly true in relation to the Foreign Office's internal 'Trends in Communist Propaganda' publication that guided the work of IRD and was largely based on the information provided by monitoring. In a similar way, the Monitoring Service also channelled data on the history and

development of communist movements around the world into a little known BBC department: the Central Research Unit (CRU), led by Walter Kolarz. During the Hungarian uprising, CRU was to prove invaluable as an institutional memory-bank that, among other things, contained 'the names and careers of every insignificant Under-Secretary and most of the Communist Party functionaries, dating back to 1945'. As the Head of the BBC Hungarian Service in 1956, Ferenc Rentoul, noted, this 'self-contained information bureau paid rich dividends when the slow-moving events of the Cold War years suddenly burst into a full national revolution'.^{xix}

Central though the BBC and the British government were to the practice, tasking and funding of the Monitoring Service, the arrival of American monitors from 1941 opened up a transatlantic open source intelligence relationship between the BBC and United States that continues to this day. As the Senior Supervisor of the Information Bureau at Monitoring, Frank Benton, noted in his logbook at the time: 'Four Americans, members of the American Monitoring service, are coming to Wood Norton some time this week to start a sort of European outpost for their service. They propose to send home by transatlantic telephone, three times every 24 hours, a précis of material put out by European stations which are normally inaudible in the United States.'^{xx} The reach of the combined British and American monitoring operations was global and extremely useful to both governments on reciprocal terms. After the war, an American editorial team was maintained at Caversham for the supply of 'up to 20,000 words of BBC material by telegraph to Washington every day.'^{xxi} By the Spring of 1948, two years after the signing of the UKUSA Security Agreement on sharing signals intelligence (Sigint) between Britain and America, the BBC Monitoring Service and the US Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) agreed to 'the dove-tailing of the monitoring operations of the two countries so as to avoid duplication as far as possible, and for the complete pooling of the intercepted material'.^{xxii} To this extent, the BBC Monitoring Services was embedded from the beginning in the special intelligence between Britain and America.^{xxiii}

By the time of the Hungarian uprising in 1956, this relationship was well established with both British and American authorities and broadcasters waiting on every 'flash' and 'snap' of breaking news that was picked up at Caversham. In the case of the BBC Hungarian Section, broadcasting into Hungary during the uprising, their dependence on monitoring was vital. So much so that following the example of the Polish Section during the Poznan riots in June 1956, a direct line from the Monitoring Service was fed into Bush House in London, the home of the External Services, for the benefit of the Hungarian Section staff. Here, monitoring and broadcasting came full circle as BBC journalists listened intently to the output of Radio Budapest (as their principal source of news) in order to frame the BBC's narrative of events, which was then broadcast back into Hungary. Reflecting on listening to these broadcasts in the early hours of Wednesday 24th October the Assistant Head of Central European Services at the BBC, George Tarjan, later recalled hearing 'untrained voices making sporadic, hasty announcements on the wavelength . . . we knew then that the Communist Government had lost control of the situation despite seemingly confident statements about people laying down their arms'.^{xxiv} Moreover, he continued, 'we

felt that only by listening ourselves to Radio Budapest could we get near enough to the atmosphere in the Hungarian capital to gauge what events really meant'.^{xxv} In these moments, listening was the genesis for broadcasting.

Narratives

The historical narrative of the Hungarian uprising has, in the past, been a hotly contested topic, reflecting the political and ideological imperatives at play. This was most evident in the immediate aftermath of the uprising, resulting in the setting up of a 'Special Committee on the Problem of Hungary' at the United Nations. In its deliberations on the causes of the uprising the committee relied heavily on the BBC Monitoring Service's *Summary of World Broadcasts* and FBI's *Daily Reports*, reflecting their value as historical documents. The committee found that in a country where the government was 'maintained by the weapon of terror' and the Soviet Union was 'an alien influence [that] existed in all walks of life', what happened in Hungary was 'a spontaneous national uprising, caused by longstanding grievances'.^{xxvi}

These grievances had been building for some time in both Poland and Hungary, with events in those countries loosely mirroring each other right up to the student march through the streets of Budapest on 23rd October 1956. Civil society in both had, over the previous months, been agitating for political, economic, cultural and democratic reforms. The dramatic events of the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in February 1956, where Khrushchev had denounced the mistakes of Joseph Stalin and the "cult of personality" that surrounded him, set an entirely new precedent for legitimate discourse in the communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe – that of self-criticism. But what would be the effect of this radical *volte-face* in the governing logic of the satellite states? As Ferenc Rentoul put it in a General News Talk for the European Services in June that year: 'Like the sorcerer's apprentice who had released forces he could not later control, the Communist regimes of Central and Eastern Europe are in difficulties.'^{xxvii}

The riots at the Cegielski engineering works in Poznan, Poland, in June 1956 and the accompanying demand for "Bread and Freedom" had indicated where this might lead. But the return to power of Wladyslaw Gomulka with a popular reforming agenda on the one hand, while facing down the threat from Moscow to intervene militarily on the other, miraculously succeeded in diluting revolutionary fervour. On 20 October 1956 he was appointed First Secretary of the Polish United Workers' Party. His success was celebrated in Hungary where, over the next couple of days, intense public debate ensued in the universities, factories, among the intelligentsia and on the streets, resulting in an agenda for change and a public appetite to pursue it.

Throughout the evening of Monday 22nd October, Radio Budapest reported on the 'extraordinary' university student meetings, inspired by the events in Poland, at which lists of reforming demands were produced and plans made for a public march through Budapest the next day. Following this lead, other civil society

groups, such as the Petofi Circle of the Union of Working Youth, the Union of Journalists and the Hungarian Writers' Union, met to support the student initiative and produce their own demands. There was a clear sense, for anyone listening, that a palpable momentum for change was building. What's more, by being reported so openly in domestic media the impression of implicit, if limited, acceptance by the Hungarian authorities was given. The next day's edition of *Szabad Nep*, the Hungarian Workers' Party newspaper, even led with the headline, "New Spring-like Review of Youth". Meanwhile, Radio Budapest's 7am news bulletin on 23rd October examined in detail the events of the previous evening and the demands of the university students, who 'have given proof of their constructive enthusiasm':

We, who have turned against the crimes and mistakes committed in the immediate past, want to side with the collective action of youth not only with words, but also by deeds and with all the possibilities of material and moral support We, therefore, are in agreement with the demands of youth. Indeed, we not only agree with them, but shall fight for them in our own field and to realize them.^{xxviii}

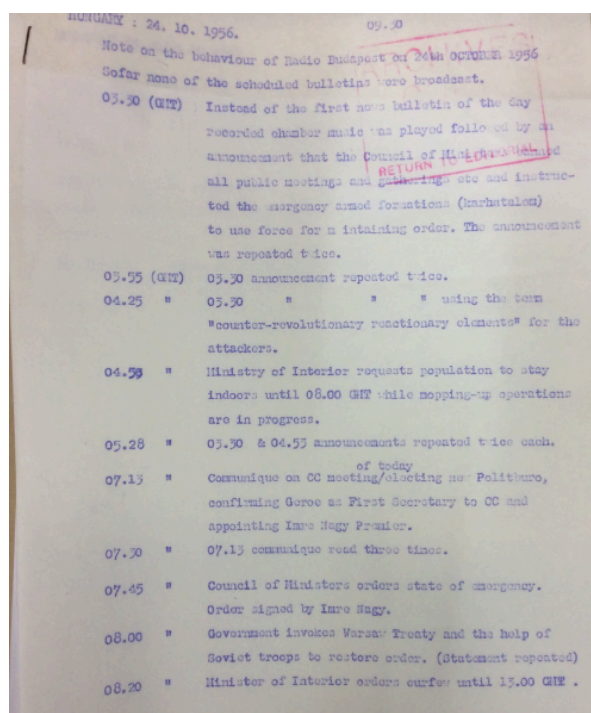
Despite this, there was evidence that the Hungarian authorities were still uncertain about which course of action to take. This was the case with the initial imposition of a ban on all open-air rallies and demonstrations on 23rd October, only for this ban itself to be overturned by the Minister of the Interior, Laszlo Piros, in the early afternoon.^{xxix} By this time, however, the student demonstration was under way. Workers returning home at the end of the day also joined the students, so that by the time they reached Parliament Square in the early evening the crowd numbered in excess of 200,000 people.

If the Hungarian government had appeared uncertain at this critical juncture, it was perhaps because its leader, Erno Gero, had been away on an official visit to Yugoslavia. His return that day was marked by a speech broadcast on Radio Budapest at 8pm, the offices of which were surrounded by thousands of determined protestors, in an off-shoot from the main march. It was a curious speech that failed to match the sentiment of those on the streets. While admitting the 'numerous mistakes of the past' he argued that the government was indeed taking action, but that gradual reform was needed to avoid making further mistakes: 'Let us proceed more slowly'. This was an error of judgment on the part of Gero that would have done little to placate the growing public militancy for radical reform. Gero did not stop there, however, and proceeded to denounce 'the enemies of our people' who,

heap slanders on the Soviet Union that our relations to the Soviet Union allegedly is not that of equality and that our independence must be defended allegedly not against the imperialists but against the Soviet Union. All this is impudent untruth, hostile propaganda which does not contain a grain of truth.^{xxx}

As this had been a core criticism of the protestors, it would have been interpreted as a denunciation of them. Moreover, Gero proceeded to 'condemn those who strive to spread the poison of chauvinism among our youth and who have taken advantage of the democratic freedom ensured by our State to the working people to carry out demonstration of nationalistic character'.^{xxxii} For the BBC's George Mikes, who arrived in Budapest a few days later, 'it was this speech that pulled the trigger' on the uprising.^{xxxiii}

As has already been shown, the first acknowledgment of an armed revolt came at 4:30am on Wednesday 24th October. And what followed on Radio Budapest in the first hours of the uprising was a somewhat fractured narrative that reflected the uncertainty of unfolding events.



xxxiii

Fig.1: Note on the behaviour of Radio Budapest, 9:30am, 24th October 1956

The radio station entered a holding pattern, as can be seen in Fig.1, while the Hungarian government worked out its response. In the meantime, the normal schedule of programmes was dispensed with in favour of chamber music, followed by opera arias, interspersed with public announcements, which were interesting in themselves.^{xxxiv} For example, in a repeat an hour after the original announcement concerning that start of hostilities, the term "Fascist reactionary elements" was replaced by "Counter-revolutionary reactionary elements".^{xxxv} Half an hour later, listeners were advised not to go out on the streets unless it was an 'absolute emergency' so as to avoid what was described as the 'mopping up (tisztogatas) of looting counter-revolutionary groups is still in progress'.^{xxxvi}

At 8:13am Budapest Radio announced a reshuffle in the government with the appointment of new members of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Workers' Party, including Imre Nagy as Chairman of the Council of Ministers.

Gero, however, was to remain as First Secretary of the Party. Two further announcements in the following forty-five minutes were to be the cause of considerable confusion both during and after the uprising. The first, was the declaration, explicitly referenced as being signed by Nagy, that the death penalty would be applied,

against acts designed to overthrow the People's Republic, revolt, incitement, appeal and conspiracy to revolt, murder, manslaughter, arson, keeping of explosives and crimes committed by use of explosives, crimes indirectly committed, force applied against official authorities, force against private persons, illicit possession of arms.^{xxxvii}

The second concerned a request by the Hungarian government, under the terms of the Warsaw Treaty, for Soviet troops stationed in Hungary to take part in the restoration of order.^{xxxviii} The implication was that the use of Soviet force to quash the uprising had been done at the request of Nagy. In fact, the request had come from Gero, but the seed of doubt this sowed was the source of considerable consternation in Budapest and in the minds of monitors that, in turn, fed wider official and public opinion.

Another feature of Radio Budapest's output on 24th October was the drip feed of reports about the supposed surrender of 'counter-revolutionary groups', for example, at Chain Bridge (11:45am), Baross Ter (12:20pm), and in Rada Street (13:01pm).^{xxxix} The intended impression that order was being restored was, however, somewhat tempered by the multiple extensions to the original amnesty for laying down weapons from midday to 2pm and again to 6pm. As deadlines loomed and passed, listeners were reminded they had 'minutes to go to avail themselves of the magnanimity of our Government to escape summary trial and the death penalty'.^{xl} These pleas for calm became part of the broadcast rhythm of the early uprising:

Working women, do not let Budapest fall into the hands of murderous provocateurs. Do not let yourself be misled by lying slanders. Working women do everything in your power to prevent your relatives from taking part, in their own interest, in the demonstration and rising.^{xli}

They also became increasingly emotional and specific as in the case of the, presumably apocryphal, broadcast message to the seventeen-year-old son of Bela Tarjan:

His parents have learnt that he has taken part in the armed fight. His mother has suffered a nervous breakdown. Her condition is serious. He is to go home immediately if he wishes to see his mother alive.^{xlii}

In its output, and in the minds of listeners in Hungary and beyond (via the headphones of monitors at the BBC in Caversham), Radio Budapest was telling

two different stories: one explicit and one implicit. The first was the restoration of order in the face of imperialist-inspired, counter-revolutionary violence. Janus-like, the reorganised Hungarian government was attempting to indicate real reform and change, with the promise of more, for its domestic audience, while signalling a reconstituted strength of purpose to Moscow. Implicitly, however, a lack of control and sense of desperation was being communicated. And as a second night of fighting loomed, so the unsustainability of the Hungarian government became increasingly apparent.

As the course of the uprising changed over the following days – reflecting an increasingly empowered Nagy and growing equivocation from Moscow – so too did the accompanying broadcast narrative. This was most powerfully demonstrated by two broadcasts on Tuesday 30th October, one week after the start of the uprising. By this time a new Hungarian government led by Nagy, including popular non-communists such as Zoltan Tildy and Bela Kovacs, had come into being. The first, from Radio Budapest, indicated the extent to which Hungary was trying to break from the past:

Dear Listeners! We are opening a new chapter in the history of the Hungarian Radio at this hour. For long years past, the radio was an instrument of lies. It merely carried out orders. It lied during the night and at daytime, it lied on all wavelengths. . . . We who are facing the microphone now, are new men. In future you will hear new voices over the old wavelengths. As the old saying has it, we shall tell “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth”.^{xliii}

Meanwhile, in a broadcast that evening described by Allen Dulles, the Director of the CIA, as ‘one of the most significant to come out of the Soviet Union since the end of World War Two’, Radio Moscow announced:

the Soviet Government has given orders to its military command to withdraw the Soviet army units from Budapest as soon as this is considered necessary by the Hungarian government. At the same time, the Soviet government is ready to enter into corresponding negotiations with the government of the Hungarian People’s Republic and other participants of the Warsaw Treaty on the question of the presence of Soviet troops on the territory of Hungary.^{xliiv}

At the point of seeming success, however, the tide was turning against the uprising as the following day the Soviet leadership reversed their decision and began the build-up of troops around Budapest, rather than their removal.

The end came on the morning of Sunday 4th November starting with that dramatic broadcast by Imre Nagy at 5:19am announcing the launch of a Soviet attack against Budapest.^{xlv} It was followed by a repeat of Nagy’s message the previous day to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjold, in which he asked the UN to uphold Hungary’s declaration of neutrality and independence from the Warsaw Pact.^{xlvi} At 6:44am, Associated Press reported

that the UN Security Council had received the appeal.^{xlvii} At 7:12am, after the playing of Schubert's *Ave Maria* the Hungarian government sent a message 'to the officers and men of the Soviet Army not to shoot. Let us avoid the blood-shed. The Russians are our friends and will remain our friends.' This was repeated immediately in Russian.^{xlviii} At 7:56am there was a further and, as it transpired, final appeal by the Hungarian Writer's Association 'to the writers of the world. Help the Hungarian writers, workers, peasants, scientists. Help. Help Hungary. Help.'^{xlix} Soon afterwards, Radio Budapest fell silent until 11am when BBC monitors at Caversham caught a small fragment of speech on the Budapest wavelength: '... Counter-revolutionary elements have found their way into the movement ...'¹ Hearing that phrase again, they knew that the uprising was over.

Conclusion

What these examples from the BBC Monitoring Service Transcription Collection powerfully demonstrate is the sheer pace and fluidity of events in Hungary at the time and the palpable uncertainty about where this was all leading. The transcripts reveal the messiness of history, detailing the temporal chaos of the moment alongside the competing political, cultural, strategic and ideological influences at play. They also offer an extraordinary level of detail and insight into what it was like to live through the Hungarian uprising. They add richness, depth and context to our historical understanding.

More broadly, the Collection opens a window onto the operating assumptions, tactics and techniques of broadcasters and the governments and organisations that stood behind them. In the case of Radio Budapest, one can observe the evolution of narrative strategies as the broadcaster and the nation tried to comprehend the course and the meaning of unfolding events. This necessarily had to accommodate the radically shifting nature of governing Hungarian attitudes and actions on the home front, but was also calculated to appeal to specific regional and global audiences, particularly in Moscow, Washington, and at the United Nations. At the BBC, its broadcast response to the uprising was fundamentally shaped by monitored material, indicating a feedback loop between the listening capacities of open source communications intelligence and the editorial agenda and product of broadcasters.

The real-time character of the transcripts also reveal, on one hand, the nuanced accretion of the everyday alongside, on the other, the atomisation of the extraordinary. Yet, as with most historical documents, these are not objective accounts, and require careful handling and interpretation. Variability in the technical proficiency of the monitoring operation, the skills, insights and prejudices of monitors, and the reliability of the originating broadcast material all weigh heavily on the significance and credibility of monitoring as a historical source. Nonetheless, as the BBC Monitoring Service Transcription Collection demonstrates, the opportunity to "listen in" to the mediated experience of the past is a compelling analytical tool.

Moreover, the transcripts offer an inherently interdisciplinary approach to understanding recent history from a number of simultaneous perspectives and scales of enquiry: from the granular to the global. Grand diplomatic narratives, for example, are interwoven with sociological, geographic, economic and scientific insights. Throughout, one is left with a very strong sense of how and why words matter. In broadcasting, as in our own lives, words are not simply a substitute for other actions: they enact themselves. Accordingly, the Collection, with its fifteen million pages of words, is a treasure-trove of information with the potential to fill an evidential gap in our understanding of the multi-faceted relationship between mass communications and the societies they serve.

ⁱ Hobsbawm, Eric. 'Could it have been different?' *London Review of Books* 28(22), 16 November 2006, p.3.

ⁱⁱ BBC Monitoring Service Transcription Collection (BMSTC), BBC Monitoring Service, Caversham, Berkshire. L139 Hungary (Home) Budapest, 3:30am (GMT), 24 October 1956.

ⁱⁱⁱ BMSTC, L140 Hungary (Home) Budapest, 4:19am (GMT), 24 October 1956.

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- iv Some Radio Free Europe monitored recordings of Radio Budapest (Kossuth Radio) are preserved at the Hoover Institute, Stanford University, USA (<https://www.hoover.org/library-archives/collections/radio-free-europe-radio-liberty-records>) and at the National Szechenyi Library, Budapest, Hungary (<http://www.oszk.hu/en>).
- v For a perceptive and engaging reflection on the importance of sound in historical context, see: Hendy, David. *Noise: A Human History of Sound & Listening*, London: Profile, 2013
- vi BMSTC, L139 Hungary (Home) Budapest, 9:40am (GMT), 24 October 1956.
- vii Ibid., 11:09 (GMT), 24 October 1956.
- viii BMSTC, L140 Hungary (Home) Budapest, 18:54 (GMT), 1 November 1956.
- ix Andrew, Christopher. *The Defence of the Realm: The Authorized History of MI5*. London: Allen Lane, 2009, p.329; Hughes, Rosaleen. 'Attention! Moscow Calling: BBC Monitoring and the Cuban Missile Crisis', *Listening to the World*, Imperial War Museum. Accessed 8 March 2018.
<https://www.iwm.org.uk/sites/default/files/images/gallery/Attention%21%20Moscow%20Calling%20BBC%20Monitoring%20and%20the%20Cuban%20Missile%20Crisis%20-%20Rosaleen%20Hughes.pdf>
- x Hitchcock, Tim. 'Big Data, Small Data and Meaning', *Histrionics*. Accessed 20 March 2018. http://historyonics.blogspot.co.uk/2014/11/big-data-small-data-and-meaning_9.html
- xi BMSTC, L139 Hungary (Home) Budapest, 3:30am (GMT), 24 October 1956.
- xii Ibid., 'Note on the behavior of Radio Budapest on 24th October 1956', 9:30am, 24 October 1956.
- xiii Ibid., Hungarian (Home) Budapest, 19:00 (GMT), 22 October 1956.
- xiv This was done by Sigmar Hillelson, a former Sudanese Civil Servant who had started monitoring Italian Arabic broadcasts in for the British Foreign Office a few months before. Briggs, Asa. *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom, Volume II: The Golden Age of Wireless, 1927-1939*, Oxford: OUP, 1995, p.373.
- xv Briggs, Asa. *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom, Volume III: The War of Words*, Oxford: OUP, 1995, p.40.
- xvi BBC Written Archive Centre (WAC), Caversham, Berkshire. WAC, R34/408/2, Note of General Liaison Meeting held in the Council Chamber, Broadcasting House, on 23rd November, 1945.
- xvii Seaton, Jean & Hughes, Rosaleen. 'The BBC and the Cuban missile crisis: private worlds and public service', in Gioe, David., Scott, Len., Andrew, Christopher (eds.). *An International History of the Cuban Missile Crisis: A 50-year retrospective*, London: Routledge, 2013.
- xviii The National Archives (TNA), Kew, London. PRO, CAB 129/23, CP(48)8, 'Future Foreign Publicity Policy', 4 January 1948.
- xix WAC, Programme as Broadcast (PasB), 'The BBC and the Hungarian Revolution', 23 January 1957.
- xx Renier, Olive & Rubinstein, Vladimir. *Assigned to Listen: The Evesham Experience, 1939-43*, London: BBC External Services, 1986, p.138.
- xxi WAC, R1/82/1, G34/46, 'Monitoring Service', Note by the BBC, 5 April 1946.
- xxii WAC, R1/85/1, G5, "Report by Director of Overseas Services: November 12th 1948 to January 20th 1949", 12 January 1949.

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- xxiii The traces of this relationship can be found in the BBC Monitoring Service Transcription Collection. Where, for example, it is noted that ‘amplification’ has been requested, it means FBIS have a particular interest in obtaining more information about a specific broadcast.
- xxiv WAC, Programme as Broadcast (PasB), ‘The BBC and the Hungarian Revolution’, 23 January 1957.
- xxv Ibid.
- xxvi United Nations, *Report of the Special Committee on the Problem of Hungary*, General Assembly Official Records: Eleventh Session, Supplement No.18 (A/3592), 1957.
- xxvii WAC, E40/151/1, *Rumblings in Hungary*, General News Talk by F.G.Rentoul, 30 June 1956.
- xxviii BMSTC, L139 Hungary (Home) Budapest, 6:00am (GMT), 24 October 1956.
- xxix Ibid., 14:00 (GMT), 24 October 1956.
- xxx Ibid., 19:00 (GMT), 24 October 1956.
- xxxi Ibid.
- xxxii Mikes, George. *The Hungarian Revolution*, London: Andre Deutsch, 1957, p.80.
- xxxiii *A clearer version of this document will be made available for publication.*
- xxxiv BMSTC, L139, Note on the behaviour of Radio Budapest, 9:30am (GMT), 24 October 1956.
- xxxv Ibid., Hungary (Home) Budapest, 4:25am (GMT), 24 October 1956.
- xxxvi Ibid., 4:53am (GMT), 24 October 1956.
- xxxvii Ibid., 7:45am (GMT), 24 October 1956.
- xxxviii Ibid., 8:00 (GMT), 24 October 1956.
- xxxix Ibid., ‘Note on the behaviour of Radio Budapest on 24th October 1956 from 0930 GMT onwards’.
- xl Ibid., Hungary (Home) Budapest, 16:48pm (GMT), 24 October 1956.
- xli Ibid., 13:12pm (GMT), 24 October 1956.
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- xliii BMSTC, L140 Hungary (Home) Budapest, 14:06pm (GMT), 30 October 1956.
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- xlvi BMSTC, L140 Hungary (Home) Budapest, 4:19am (GMT), 4 November 1956.
- xlvi Ibid., 5:08am (GMT), 4 November 1956.
- xlvi Ibid., 5:44 (GMT), 4 November 1956.
- xlvi Ibid., 6:12 (GMT), 4 November 1956.
- xlvi Ibid., 6:56 (GMT), 4 November 1956.
- l Ibid., 10:00 (GMT), 4 November 1956.

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