

Diplomatic flurry over a radio programme during the war

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DIPLOMATIC FLURRY OVER A RADIO PROGRAMME DURING THE WAR LONDON CALLING: THE SWISS DISLIKE IT

An episode which strained Anglo-Swiss relations for a short time during the war was recently recalled in a long series of articles in the *Tribune de Genève*.

On 13th April, 1941, the BBC began to beam its first broadcasts to Switzerland, the only country of continental Europe which hadn't until then been the target of a special service. Those broadcasts had to be interrupted three weeks later. They were received with shocked surprise by the Swiss and brought immediate reaction from the Swiss Government. What the British had forgotten was that the Swiss took their neutrality very seriously, and would not risk its credibility by being subjected to a radio service beamed from one of the warring parties.

The broadcasts gave rise to angry criticism from the public and the Federal Council was urgently requested from every quarter to demand a halt to the BBC service.

Marcel Pilet-Golaz, then Head of the Political Department, immediately called the British Chargé d'Affaires in Berne, Mr. David Kelly. He expressed appreciation of Britain's well-meant intentions, but told him that it was in her best interest to stop the broadcasts.

The archives of the Public Record Office in London show that these unwanted programmes (beamed every day alternately in French and German) were launched amid considerable confusion.

The idea of launching a Swiss service seems to have originated during unofficial discussions between Mr. Eric Kessler, Press Attaché at the Swiss Legation, and officials of the Ministry of Information. Mr. Kessler had suggested that there were good arguments in favour of a BBC Swiss Service. On 7th February, 1941, Mr. Kessler was informed by the Ministry of Information of its intention of going ahead with such a Service. The following day, the Ministry contacted Mr. Walter Thurnheer, Swiss Plenipotentiary Minister, with the purpose of discussing what the most appropriate contents of the planned programme should be. According to the Ministry, Mr. Thurnheer had supported the idea and never led their officials to doubt for one minute that a Swiss war-time service would not be welcomed by its intended public. Mr. Thurnheer was on the contrary kept regularly informed of preparations for the new Service and appointed two Swiss journalists in London as "counsellors". The Ministry of Information had stressed all along that there was no question of beaming "propaganda".

The Foreign Office apparently knew nothing of these plans. They were first

brought to the notice of its higher spheres when a senior official in charge of information at the Foreign Office, Sir Roger Vansittart, learnt from a telegram addressed to Mr. David Kelly in Berne about the existence of the programmes and their planned suspension. Sir Roger was angry at not having been informed, but his indignation was even stronger when he learnt that the Service was going to be scrapped as a result of Swiss representations. Sir Roger could only explain this situation as the consequence of pro-German pressures in Switzerland. He wrote an angry memo to Sir Anthony Eden telling him that the suspension of the broadcasts was inadmissible and that the BBC should on no account bow down to pro-Nazi pressures.

Eden appears to have been under the impression that the broadcasts, although planned, had been cancelled because radio equipment was more urgently required for a Turkish service. He was not informed of the Swiss Government's displeasure until after considerable delay and eventually urged a speedy conclusion to the whole affair.

Sir Roger Vansittart continued to

campaign for the continuance of the Swiss Service and rallied supporters in the Foreign Office. Eventually, Mr. Roger Makins, Head of the Central Department of the Foreign Office, realised that a special BBC service was incompatible with Swiss neutrality after talks with Mr. Charles de Janner, Commercial Counsellor at the Swiss Legation, and reports from Mr. David Kelly.

Thus the ill-fated programme was discontinued only three weeks after their inception. The episode shows the ignorance of the British Government of the meaning of integral neutrality. Pilet-Golaz was known to be particularly concerned that other warring countries should not take the BBC broadcasts as a pretext for beaming their own services. There is no doubt that he would have been pressed to jam the British broadcasts if they had been continued much longer. The Swiss public didn't feel any particular need for a special service. The BBC had an extensive audience in Switzerland during the war, but the services broadcast in French, German and Italian to her neighbours were sufficient for a trilingual people.



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