THIS FUNNY WAR (I)

It's not as if the Second World War came as a complete surprise to anyone. Nevertheless, the outbreak of hostilities saw the Government, the BBC and their relationship in general go up in various shades of panicked flames. No-one could really decide on the nature of that relationship during wartime, despite desperate negotiations during 1939 between the Corporation and the Government - who swiftly set up the Ministry of Information to fight their corner in the Broadcasting sector - on the subject. The Government's position was, broadly, that in the event of war - which became increasingly inevitable throughout 1939 - they would effectively seize control over the Corporation, and they'd just have to take it. This had been their position for several years by now, and naturally John Reith was less than enthusiastic.

Shortly before his departure he'd met with his counterpart at the Royal Mail, Sir Thomas Gardiner, to try and hammer out some kind of an understanding. They had decided that in the event of a war, the BBC's Board of Governors would, in their term, "go out of commission" - in practical terms, be reduced to two: the Director-General and his Deputy. How much this had to do with Reith's autocratic tendencies is open to question, but any concession to those was obliterated by the other major part of the deal, the carefully ambiguously worded mandation of "regular contact" between the Director-General and the Minister of Information "for other than censorship purposes." This deliberately unspecific language left plenty of room to manoeuvre as regards the full meaning and nature of this contact. The Government, effectively, could use this as an excuse to exercise almost any amount of control, just short of complete and total, over broadcasting policy.

Possibly Reith had hoped that war would break out while he was still in charge and could therefore exercise a certain amount of control of the scenario. But ultimately he resigned in peacetime - if only just - and the consequences of the Reith-Gardiner plan fell on his sunready and unsuited successor. Complicating matters was the unanticipated damp squib of a war having been declared before anyone was actually physically prepared for it - cette drôle de guerre, the French called it. The BBC was reasonably prepared for war, but not a Phoney War.

Immediately, the Corporation's operations were cut down to two wavelengths and a single radio station - or rather, "programme", as the term was at the time. The burgeoning television service was abruptly murdered with no warning whatsoever two days before war was even declared, famously immediately after a Mickey Mouse cartoon - disturbingly cutting to black with no message, no explanation, not even an acknowledgement that anything was happening. The reasoning was that television used UHF technology, which could be picked up by German radar and thereby used for target practice - rather undermining the blackout which had been announced

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even sooner, on September 1st.

All this happened almost automatically, at the behest of the Ministry of Information, the Post Office or occasionally the Governors, leaving Ogilvie a baffled middleman desperately trying to cling on to his place in the narrative while decisions were made all around him.

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