THIS FUNNY WAR (II)

Naturally, there was a great and ravenous desire for news throughout the country, especially after the Germans invaded Poland. Unfortunately, the various outlets for it didn't trust each other and didn't really know what they were doing. The Ministry was running in circles, the traditional press thought they and the BBC were going to fast-track their obsolescence, and the BBC themselves were just flailing about in between. Having been created by Reith as a central hub for very important art, culture and (especially) religion, the news was something they hadn't really thought terribly heavily about in depth. Which is not to say they hadn't tried, but Reith wasn't that interested and, his will being the corporation's will, while he was in charge the BBC weren't that interested either. The result was that now a cataclysmic global conflict was upon them and - despite the existence of the World Service - they had precisely no foreign correspondents, no foreign service for them to work for, and precisely one overseas recording unit, under Richard Dimbleby in France, which wasn't ready yet and didn't make its first broadcast until a month after the declaration of war.

They tried broadcasting hourly news bulletins right through the dead of night, but packed that in after a couple of weeks because so little was happening that all they were achieving with such regular news broadcasts was to depress and panic people. Besides, the newspapers took a dim view of the BBC broadcasting too much news too often; there was a gentlemen's agreement that they wouldn't regularly do it at all before six in the evening or after two in the morning except in extraordinary circumstances and the war wasn't holding up its end of the bargain in that respect.

The main idea coming out of the Director-General at this point concerned the BBC's foreign broadcasting - which was naturally in a kind of limbo at this point - and amounted to Ogilvie suggesting, in all seriousness, that the BBC broadcast a recording of nightingale song to Germany "as a token of Britain's peace-loving intentions"††. What the Germans, or anyone, might have made of such a broadcast remains unknown as, unsurprisingly, it never happened. Ogilvie may have been the man in charge of the BBC, but in this situation he was just one authority figure amongst several, lost among equals.

He attempted to assert himself as the BBC's representative with a broadcast on the 8th of September 1939 aimed at reassuring listeners (and bereft viewers) that the Corporation would go on, providing comfort and entertainment throughout the conflict and promising a "truthful and objective" news service and religious broadcasts that continued to "bear witness to the things of the spirit". Unfortunately, such self-congratulatory rhetoric - inadvertent as it might have been - didn't go down terribly well with the populace, who were simply confused at the BBC suddenly self-decimating, detonating the television service and reducing itself to just two radio stations mostly playing news and gramophone records. Britain just wanted to know what was going on, and it

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wasn't entirely the BBC's fault they didn't. The Ministry of Information was understandably keen on near-psychotic levels of absolute secrecy, which stretched to not telling the people of Britain where the hell their radio and television went.

The confusion spiralled down to the various departments of the BBC. Programme controllers suddenly found themselves rendered all but impotent by mysterious ministerial fiat, while entire sectors of the Corporation were reshuffled or abolished outright according to whatever version of the Reith-Gardiner plan people were using at this point. In the middle of the whirlwind sat a mild-mannered former University lecturer and economist who knew little about Government, less about journalism and next to nothing about broadcasting, desperately trying to reconcile all three while the Government made constant structural changes to the Corporation of which he was nominally in charge, while fending off almost his entire staff's complaints about the BBC's independence being eroded away. He shared their misgivings, but had to bear the brunt of them as the theoretical stopping point of the buck - even though he was effectively powerless against the Ministry of Information, even if that was partly due to his own lack of grit. (Reith would probably have ignored any naysayers and barreled through with his own policy, safe in the knowledge that it was absolutely correct).

There was little Ogilvie could do but complain down the phone (to the young R.A. Butler, then Foreign Under-Secretary, in December 1939) that the BBC had been receiving "contradictory advice from different departments of Government, or even different sections of the same department"††. By then, however, the process was starting to cool down. A wartime schedule that pleased, if not everyone, then as many people as possible was finally settled upon. and by the end of the year the Ministry was assuring him that everything was now running much more smoothly and he would have a lot less work on his hands to please the Government. This cheered and calmed Ogilvie even as he continued to wonder just what on Earth he'd got himself into.

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