

Broadcasts from the Błyskawica station during the Warsaw Uprising, 1944

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The Warsaw Uprising of 1944 remains one of the most controversial episodes in the history of the Second World War, considered by some scholars as a prologue to the Cold War.¹ It was at this point that Stalin openly demonstrated to the West that Poland was in the Soviet sphere of influence. Despite the calls of Radio Moscow and Soviet-sponsored Radio Kosciuszko to assist the Red Army as it approached the Polish capital, Stalin did not acknowledge that the Uprising was taking place until the second week of the fighting, and, when he eventually did, he blamed the Polish Underground for starting the Uprising prematurely – without coordination with the Soviet Command. In fact, not only had Stalin refused to assist the insurgents, he had also attempted to stop the Allies from helping by denying permission for RAF planes to land on Soviet airbases. Some aid was eventually offered, but it was inadequate to defeat the Germans. After 63 days the Uprising collapsed with catastrophic consequences: over 150,000 civilians were killed and, on Hitler's orders, the capital was razed to the ground.² The Polish Home Army (AK) also suffered heavy losses: 16,000 Polish soldiers were killed, 5,000 were wounded and the Germans took approximately the same number into captivity.³ In many respects, the failure of the Warsaw Uprising facilitated the establishment of Communist rule in Poland.

The discussion that follows of the role of broadcasting in our understanding of these events is based on analysis of BBC official records and, in particular, the BBC Monitoring Service Transcripts and scripts of the BBC Polish Service bulletins, supported by relevant secondary literature.

Both the German and the Soviet occupying forces took a great interest in Polish broadcasting stations and, after the collapse of the September Campaign in 1939, took over all broadcasting facilities and used them for their own propaganda purposes. In the part of Poland occupied by the Germans, listening to, or possessing, a radio set was forbidden, and those who did not follow the orders were subject to the death penalty. Listening to foreign broadcasts was allowed under the Soviet occupation, but harsh action was taken against those who tuned to non-Soviet stations. For this reason, it was mainly the Polish Underground that monitored foreign stations, and the main focus of their listening was the BBC Polish Service and, transmitting from 1942 on the BBC

¹ See Davis, N., *Rising '44: The Battle for Warsaw* (London: Macmillan, 2003); Bell, P.M.H., *John Bull and the Bear: British Public Opinion, Foreign Policy and the Soviet Union, 1941-1945* (London: Hodder Arnold, 1990); Kochanski, H., *The Eagle Unbowed: Poland and the Poles in the Second World War* (London: Penguin Books, 2012); Ritchie, A., *Warsaw Rising: The Fateful Uprising* (London: Harper & Collins, 2014); Siemaszko, Z., *Dziewięć Spojrzeń na Powstanie Warszawskie w latach 1969-2014* (London: Siemaszko, 2014).

² Borodziej, W., *The Warsaw Uprising of 1944* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), p.179.

³ Kirchmayer, J., *Powstanie Warszawskie* (Warsaw: Wiedza i Książka, 1978), p.576.

wavelengths, Radio Polskie, the broadcasting arm of the Polish Government-in-Exile, based in London.

With the exception of two episodes, in December 1941 and September 1942, when former Polskie Radio employees managed to set up a radio station whose broadcasts were picked up in London, there were no Polish broadcasts from Poland until August 1944, when the Polish Underground built their own shortwave station.⁴

This radio station known as Błyskawica - 'Lightening' in English - went on air for the first time on 8 August 1944 and from that day transmitted daily in Polish and in English in order to address an international audience. It was controlled by the Polish Underground, but an arrangement was also made for pre-war Polskie Radio employees in Poland to broadcast on Błyskawica wavelengths. It followed the transfer of English programmes to Polskie Radio airtime, which appear in the BBC Monitoring Service Transcripts Collection as 'the Warsaw broadcasting station of Polskie Radio' whilst those in Polish are referred to as broadcasts from Błyskawica. The English bulletins were prepared by Jan Nowak, the Home Army resister who had couriered news of occupied Poland to London, and were translated and presented by London-born Adam Truszkowski, pseudonym 'Tomicki'. The first English programme went on air on 8 August at 14:30; later versions were broadcast at 10:15 and 22:30. Overall 77 broadcasts in English went on air during the Uprising.⁵

It is, however, very unclear when exactly the first broadcast from Warsaw was picked up by the BBC Monitoring Service. According to Nowak, it was only on 15 August that they received confirmation. As he recollected:

'On 15 August 'a happy event occurred (...). In the evening London for the first time confirmed radio reception of Lightning and repeated the first of the broadcasts given that morning. Incredible excitement! After a fortnight's struggle in the face of great difficulties the technicians had their moment of glory, and the journalists, writers, and poets knew that they were not talking to themselves. From then on, all those involved in programs broadcast in the morning sat next to their sets at night to listen to their own words returning from far away'.⁶

⁴ Kwiatkowski, M., *Polskie Radio w Konspiracji: 1939-1944* (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1989), p.90.

⁵ Mazur G., *Biuro Informacji i Propagandy: SZP-ZWZ-AK, 1939-45* (Warsaw: Instytut Wydawniczy Pax, 1987), p.354.

⁶ Nowak, J., *Kurier z Warszawy* (Warsaw: Znak, 2003), p.334.

However, the BBC Polish Service Editor, Gregory Macdonald, claimed he had already received a digest of Polish broadcasts from the Monitoring Service on 8 August.⁷ An unpublished BBC paper, written after the war, also claims that, from that date, the reports from the Błyskawica station were re-broadcast in full by the Polish Service every afternoon.⁸ This is extremely puzzling given that, according to the BBC Monitoring Service Transcripts, broadcasts from Poland were picked up for the first time on 12 August, and there is no reference to broadcasts from Warsaw in the Summary of the BBC World Broadcasts, which were based on BBC Monitoring Transcripts, until 21 August. There is a considerable gap, too, in the Monitoring Service Transcripts from 13 to 21 August, most likely because of German jamming. However, from 22 August, 'Błyskawica' appears daily in both the Transcripts and the BBC Summaries, with the last bulletin being picked up by the Monitoring Service on 2 September 1944, although the insurgents continued to broadcast until the collapse of the Uprising on 2 October.

The Monitoring Service records are of particular value, since they demonstrate what was known to the BBC and, by extension, to the British government about the situation in Warsaw during the Uprising. The broadcasts principally reported the progress of the fighting in the capital but also gave accounts of German atrocities committed against Poles, some deeply disturbing such as the mass shooting of civilians or using women and children as human shields. It was the first time that the Polish Underground had been able to use the airwaves to directly address its countrymen, Polish soldiers and, more importantly, western leaders and Stalin.

The decision to start the Uprising was based on the assumption that the Allies and, in particular, the Soviet troops, who in the last days of July 1944 were at the gates of the Polish capital, would assist the insurgents. However, from 3 August the Soviet advance on Warsaw ceased. Stalin failed to even acknowledge that the Uprising was taking place until the second week of the fighting, despite the fact that he had promised to help the insurgents during the visit of Stanisław Mikołajczyk, the Polish Prime Minister in exile, to the Kremlin in the first days of August 1944. The cynical position that Stalin adopted towards the Uprising came into the open only on 13 August when a TASS communiqué claimed that:

⁷ Gregory Macdonald's notes, undated, unpublished. At the moment in the possession of his son, Angers, France.

⁸ BBC WAC (BBC Written Archives), E1/1147, Polish Booklet, English text of unpublished material on the work of the Polish Service, 1939-67.

'No attempt was made by the London Poles to inform the Soviet Command of their intentions (...). In consequence, full responsibility for the events in Warsaw will fall exclusively on Polish émigré circles in London'.⁹

The Polish Underground had in fact made repeated attempts to establish contact with the Soviet Command. However Stalin had not only made his position clear to Poles but also to the western leaders. Both the British and American ambassadors to Moscow were informed that 'Russia does not want to be associated with any adventure in Warsaw'.¹⁰ Moreover, permission for the landing of allied aircraft on Soviet airfields was denied. As the American Ambassador, Averell Harriman, later assessed, 'the Soviet Government's refusal [to help Warsaw] [was] not based on operational difficulties, but ruthless political calculation'.¹¹ Not only was the Soviet Union refusing to help the insurgents, but they were attempting to stop other Allies from doing so. Żenczykowski goes as far as to argue that Stalin issued a 'death warrant on Warsaw'.¹² Yet, the Soviet decision was concealed both from the British public and, more significantly, from the Polish government in London; officially, the allied air forces were still waiting for clearance from the Russians.¹³ Consequently, the Foreign Office informed the BBC that the plan to send both the RAF and the Soviet Air Force to assist the insurgents was still in progress.¹⁴ On 13 September, the USSR eventually granted the allies permission to land on their air bases, but at this point most of Warsaw was already in German hands.

Lack of Soviet assistance and, in particular, the reasons why the advance of the Soviet troops towards Warsaw had suddenly halted, were the main issues discussed in *Błyskawica* broadcasts. On air Poles openly challenged Stalin's claims both that the Soviet army was not in a position to assist the Uprising and allegations that the Polish Underground had not attempted to make contact with the Soviet Command.¹⁵ Whilst they thanked Britain for her contributions, the Polish Underground voiced their anxiety that the reasons for the Soviet troops' withdrawal were not solely military. For instance, the broadcast in English from 24 August included statements such as: 'We do not want to make any charges or to cast suspicions (...) but we cannot understand why help did not

⁹ *The Times*, 13 August 1944, The Times Digital Archive.

¹⁰ TNA (National Archives), FO 371/39499, Rising in Warsaw, Molotov to Clark Kerr, 16 August, 1944.

¹¹ Cited in Davies, op. cit., p.321.

¹² Żenczykowski, T., *Samotny Bój Warszawy* (London: Wydawnictwo LTW, 1990) p.66.

¹³ NA, CAB, 65/43, WM (44) 107 Conclusions, 16 August 1944.

¹⁴ Bell, op. cit., p.147.

¹⁵ J75, the BBC Monitoring Service Transcripts, 24 August 1944, broadcast in English.

come' as they were 20 km from the capital, demonstrating that insurgents used the airwaves to bring the issue to western leaders' attention.¹⁶

Their suspicions were not without foundation since Stalin had given orders to capture and disarm all members of the Polish Home Army (AK).¹⁷ On 23 August Błyskawica reports included the Polish Underground estimate that from the beginning of the Uprising over 2,700 AK soldiers and officers, as well as representatives of the political parties in Poland, had been arrested by the Soviets and imprisoned in the former German concentration camp at Majdanek, liberated by the Red Army in July 1944.¹⁸

The BBC was aware of these developments. However, not only were they never re-broadcast, but the BBC continued to report on the Soviet army's progress. Maintaining the unity of the Allied coalition was considered a priority by the British government, and consequently news about Soviet misconduct was withheld from the public. Moreover, the BBC claim that it reported the Uprising in detail is also questionable. An analysis of the BBC Home Service bulletins demonstrates that it was not given prominence. Rather it made the headlines just twice, on one occasion to report the Uprising's collapse. The Polish Service Editor, Gregory Macdonald, admitted himself that the Uprising was played down by the BBC.¹⁹ Concerned that the British press had also failed to give adequate space to the Uprising, Macdonald wrote two memoranda, which circulated in Whitehall and Fleet Street, openly attacking the Soviet Union for political maneuvering.²⁰ The Polish Service Editor was not alone in his observation; on 23 August Churchill directly complained to the British Minister of Information, Brendan Bracken, about the suppression of information in the British press. In his view, 'there (was) no need to mention the strange and sinister behaviour of the Russians', nor was there any reason to avoid publicity on the situation in Warsaw overall.²¹ In response, Bracken argued that the British press did not have access to reliable sources and thus evaded the subject.²² However, if the Prime Minister insisted, he would try to persuade the papers to report on the Uprising in more detail.

This argument, however, seems to be spurious as John Ward, a RAF Flight Lieutenant who escaped from a German POW camp in 1941 and joined the Polish Underground, had sent over 65 Morse

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Davies, *op. cit.*, p. 321.

¹⁸ BBC Monitoring Service Transcripts Collection J75, 23 August 1944.

¹⁹ Macdonald's notes, 24 March 1983, unpublished.

²⁰ Ibid, Macdonald wrote two memos, on 16 and 24 August 1944.

²¹ Churchill to Bracken, 23 August 1944, in Churchill, W., *The Second World War: Triumph and Tragedy*, vol. VI (London: Cassell, 1954), p. 122.

²² TNA, FO 371/39493, Status of the Polish Underground Army, Bracken to Churchill, 23 August 1944.

code and telegraph despatches to London during the Uprising.²³ Not only did *The Times* offer him a position as a war correspondent but his despatches were circulated in the Ministry of Information, Cabinet and War Office. Even more curious is the fact that Ward's name is not mentioned in any history of *The Times*, whilst his contributions to the Uprising are widely recognised in Poland. Churchill, however, was aware of the importance of Ward's articles and approached Bracken in order to influence the British press to publish them.²⁴

The BBC also maintained after the war that *Błyskawica* programmes were re-broadcast by the Polish Service.²⁵ Yet, these broadcasts were in fact only occasionally mentioned and prominence was given to the war situation in general.²⁶ *Błyskawica* broadcasts were also monitored and recorded on discs by Polish telegraphists at the long-distance radio-telegraphic station at Barnes Lodge, responsible to the Sixth Bureau of the Polish General Staff in London. Thus it could be concluded that the claim that they were 're-broadcast' refers to these discs. However, when discs with music or speeches were played by the Polish Service, the title and length of the recording was indicated on the bulletin scrips. Yet, there are no references to these recordings in the scripts of the Polish Service programmes. Moreover, all broadcasts were subject to political and military censorship and had to follow the Political Warfare Executive Directives, responsible to the Foreign Office. Hence it is unlikely that reports of Soviet misconduct would have been allowed to be aired. There were also other issues mentioned in *Błyskawica* broadcasts which were very likely to have been censored, including references to the eastern cities of Wilno and Lwów as 'Polish'.²⁷ These cities had been had been seized by the USSR as part of the Red Army invasion in September 1939, and their post-war status remained unresolved so, in compliance with the Foreign Office directives, the BBC was banned from reporting about the eastern part of Poland in general.²⁸ Polish officials in London, too, were forbidden to talk on air about claims to the Polish eastern territories in their speeches or even address people living in this part of the country. Therefore the insurgents' proclamation that 'Warsaw pledges herself never to abandon the cause of the Fatherland (...) Long live Polish Wilno, long live Polish Lwów' would not have passed the censors.²⁹ It is worth noting that

²³ Nowak, op. cit., pp.332-3.

²⁴ TNA, FO 371/39494, Polish Home Army and help for Warsaw, Bracken to Churchill, 24 August, 1944.

²⁵ BBC WAC, E1/1147.

²⁶ BBC WAC, Polish Service Bulletins, 1 August -2 October 1944.

²⁷ BBC Monitoring Service Transcripts Collection, 25 August 1944.

²⁸ TNA, FO 371/31092, Roberts to Kirkpatrick, 24 June 1942. See also Hułas, M., *Goście czy intruźi?: Rząd polski na uchodźctwie, wrzesień 1939-lipiec 1943* (Warsaw: PAN, 1996).

²⁹ IWM, Monitoring Service Transcripts, 25 August 1944.

the communiqués of Polish Home Army Commander, Tadeusz Bór-Komorowski, some of which complained about the absence of British and American help, were also redacted by the censor.³⁰

In short, the BBC Monitoring Service Transcripts have considerable historical value as they demonstrate what was known to the BBC and, by extension, to the British government, about the situation in Poland during the Warsaw Uprising and what was withheld. The BBC reported the Uprising as a 'symbol of the united efforts of the British Empire, USSR and USA' and, acting as the mouthpiece of the British government preoccupied with maintaining the unity of the Allied coalition, suppressed information about the deliberate stalling of the advance by the Red Army, Stalin's refusal to allow the Allied air forces to land on Soviet bases and his political maneuvering.³¹ In fact, the suppression of the news by the BBC in this period led Moray Maclaren, the head of the Polish Region Political Warfare Executive (PWE),³² to admit after the Uprising had collapsed, that the Poles had been betrayed.³³ The responsibility for what had happened weighed heavily upon him – he suffered a nervous breakdown and retired from the political world.³⁴ The 'Battle of Warsaw' became the prologue to the Cold War; it was at this point that Stalin demonstrated to the West his uncompromising position on the Soviet political sphere of influence. As Macdonald observed: 'the Cold War was simply the process by which the West lost its illusions about Stalin's policy'.³⁵ The contribution of broadcasting is thus crucial to our understanding of both the Uprising and its consequences for subsequent political developments.

³⁰ For example see: BBC WAC, Polish Service Bulletins, 6:15pm, 12 August 1944.

³¹ BBC WAC, Polish Service Bulletins, 10:15pm, 19 September 1944.

³² The Polish Region Political Warfare Executive was the body responsible for issuing directives for the BBC Polish Service.

³³ Sykes, C., *Evelyn Waugh: A Biography* (London: Penguin books, 1985), p.390.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Macdonald's notes, undated.

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