

CLANDESTINE CORNERThe History of Secret Radio Operations—The Early Years, 1915-1940

Less than two decades after Marconi sent his first faltering wireless message across the garden of his father's estate at the Villa Grifone, near Pontecchio, Italy, radio came of age.

The Great War of 1914-1918 gave wireless broadcasting its first real test. Both the Allies and the Central Powers put the new communications medium to a growing list of tasks, not the least of which included intelligence and espionage activities.

But radio broadcasting as a systematic psychological weapon of propaganda was only in its infancy.

As far as can be determined, the first use of radio for political propaganda purposes was made by the Germans in 1915. The German government turned to radio to a greater extent than the Allies out of sheer necessity for cable communications systems were controlled by the French and British.

The first secret radio propaganda service was instituted in that year and provided radio amateurs and agents in neutral countries with daily news reports from Germany. There were regular news communiques, commentaries in various languages, code messages to secret agents and even messages by foreign correspondents. These broadcasts were mainly directed toward neutral countries, though attempts to influence enemy opinion were not lacking. A shortage of receivers made effective use difficult initially, the common practice was to maintain radio contact with German agents who would spread the message throughout the enemy or neutral territory. A U.S. monitor picked up the following code transmission directed, it said, "to propagandists in North Africa: Spread the following rumors among the tribes..."

Two years later, Leon Trotsky and the Russian Bolsheviki made fairly extensive use of radio for propaganda purposes. The Soviet Union was nearly the only power to sense the political uses of broadcasting in the 1920's. By 1930, Radio Centre in Moscow was broadcasting on shortwave in some 50 different dialects and languages.

But probably the first true clandestine transmitter was one operated from the garret of a hotel at Zahori, Czechoslovakia, 40 miles from Prague near the German-Czech frontier in 1934. These broadcasts, anti-Nazi in tone, were made by Rudolf Formis, himself a former Nazi. On the night of January 23, 1935, a squad of German SS men crossed the nearby border, shot Formis in his hotel room and silenced the station.

Another station, Deutscher Freiheitssender, or the German Freedom Radio, spoke up for the first time two years later. One night in January 1937, the following announcement was heard over the air, "Hallo, hallo! This is the secret transmitter of the German communist party calling..."

The German Freedom station sought to convey the impression that it was broadcasting under the noses of the Gestapo within Germany. Actually, it transmitted from Barcelona, Spain. The advancing troops of General Franco, in the Spanish Civil War, forced the station to leave Spain. It soon resumed operations, supposedly from a ship "somewhere in the Baltic," but more probably from within Russia itself.

The Nazis made great efforts to jam the communist Freiheitssender channel. "Achtung! Achtung!" the freedom station announcer would say, "Turn your dials a fraction and find us near this wavelength. We are changing our frequency slightly to eliminate jamming." The broadcast would then continue, temporarily in the clear.

The Gestapo tried hard to locate the secret transmitter. Eventually, a freedom station—but a different one—was captured in Germany located in a camouflaged truck. The head of the operation, on Ernst Niekisch, was tried in January 1939, along with 20 associates, and was sentenced to life imprisonment. But the broadcasts of the communist Freiheitssender continued.

Another early mobile clandestine station was located in Austria. After sunset on the evening of May 19, 1938, a large grocer's van bearing the label of a butter and eggs concern, backed out of a garage in the little Austrian town of Horn and drove into the country. It proceeded at a good speed for five or six miles, then pulled to the side of the road under a clump of trees and extinguished its headlights.

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The three men in the cab began moving packing cases at the front of the truck until there was room for them to clamber inside the van. In the center on a bench was a small radio transmitter with portable antennas which were rigged on top of the truck. At 8 p.m., one of the men began speaking in German into the microphone: "This is the Austrian Freiheitssender..."

Just over a month earlier, Austria had been swallowed up by the Reich and Austrian troops were forced to serve with the German army, massed along the Czech border. It was to these Austrian soldiers that the station addressed itself, inciting them to sabotage and mutiny.

The Nazis did not take this lying down. Aided by technicians of the German radio, the Gestapo was able to narrow down to within a radius of a few miles the area in which the mobile freedom station was operating. The Germans proceeded to comb the countryside. One night the butter and eggs truck was stopped. The clandestine broadcasters decided to make a break for it. Two escaped to Czechoslovakia; the third was shot dead.

On the Czech-Austrian frontier, the two survivors set up another mobile station, which broadcast three times a day until after the Munich Agreement when Czech police forced the station off the air.

Other countries also had their secret stations before the war broke out in Europe. From somewhere in the Baltic states or the Soviet Union, a clandestine transmitter, claiming to be the mouthpiece of a mysterious "League of Liberators," preached revolution against Stalin and the "Red overlords."

During the Spanish Civil War, Franco and his Italian and German allies originated propaganda broadcasts from stations in Italy, operating as if actually coming from Spain. German and Italian radio facilities were at the disposal of Franco's Nationalists. Some Portuguese stations were given over to the use of Franco's regime also.

About this time, the Spanish communist party initiated a clandestine broadcasting operation known as Radio Espana Independente, which continues today. Probably transmitting originally from the Barcelona area, after the collapse of the Loyalist government, the station is believed to have moved its activities to Russia. A recent Swiss radio report claims that this station is now located in Rumania; other sources say it is situated near Prague, Czechoslovakia. Its controlling body, the Spanish communist party in exile, however, is headquartered in Moscow.

In the years just before the war, a station aimed at the Austrian population, known as Radio Liberte, was operated with French government knowledge and support by one "Rudolf," a name used by an ex-Viennese lawyer, broadcasting from Fecamp, Normandy, France.

Early in 1938, various local African and Middle Eastern stations used propaganda material supplied by the German press news services and rebroadcast it. Sometimes a bit of comedy entered the usually serious clandestine radio scene. An example of this occurred when Iraq's King Ghazi broadcast some anti-British material from his amateur radio station in his Baghdad palace. To English protests, the nation's premier replied that he "could not control His Majesty!"

(First of a series digested from "The History of Clandestine Radio Operations," a publication of the DXplorer Radio Association.)