

‘Objective Operation’ under Swiss Neutrality? The International Broadcasting Union during WWII

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[The] continued activities in Geneva during the war must be seen as a guarantee that the IBU was in a good shape to immediately solve the problem of broadcasting after the war.¹

1. Introduction

This observation about the International Broadcasting Union’s (IBU) activities during the Second World War, made in a letter written by its secretary general Alfred Glogg to the member broadcasting stations in December 1944, conveys the picture that it successfully continued to operate during the war years. Glogg was convinced that the IBU was in a good shape to restart its full services as soon as the hostilities ceased. In fact, the opposite was the case. Members accused the IBU of collaboration with the Nazis. They believed staff were unable to avoid being influenced by political tensions. Ultimately, the IBU was dissolved in 1950 and replaced by two new European broadcasting organisations, the ‘Organisation Interna-

1 Quote taken from: Hahr, Henrik: *Televisionens och radios internationellt samarbete*. (unpublished manuscript taken from Sveriges Radios Arkiv, Stockholm). Henrik Hahr was the head of the Swedish broadcasting organisation’s international department in the 1940s.

tionale Radiodiffusion' (OIR) and the European Broadcasting Union (EBU).

In this short piece, I will discuss the IBU's choice of a 'third way' of dealing with the wartime tensions. Rather than ceasing its activities like the Universal Postal Union (UPU) or the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) or being replaced by a new organisation like the European Postal and Telecommunication Union (EPTU), set up to promote European unification and cooperation under the leadership of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, the IBU continued its existence and work during the war. It was hoping to maintain objective operations under the protection of Swiss law and neutrality. The case of the IBU is made even more interesting by the fact that the EPTU never attempted to address the radio transmission sector and in particular broadcasting, although these topics had been discussed and regulated previously within the ITU.

Below I will focus on the difficulties of balancing neutral operations and the maintenance of a pan-European approach to broadcasting cooperation in wartime. My argument is primarily (but not solely) based on secondary literature as the archives of the IBU are no longer accessible to the public.

2. *The IBU's Origins*

Broadcasting was a new and unique telecommunication service in the first half of the 20th century. Spreading rapidly across Europe in the 1920s, it became one of the key information channels for the general public and political leaders within a decade. On the one hand, it connected individual households to the world, offering news, culture and entertainment. On the other, it enabled political leaders to reach the general public (domestically and abroad), sharing their messages with unprecedented effectiveness. Broadcasting became an effective tool for propaganda several years before the outbreak of the war in 1939.²

From a technical point of view, broadcasting was just one of many aspects to consider in the regulation and standardisation of radio frequencies and equipment. These activities were the responsibility of the national postal and telecommunications (PTT) authorities under the auspices of the

2 Tworek, Heidi: *News from Germany. The Competition to Control World Communications*, Cambridge 2019.

ITU and the International Consultative Committee for Radio (CCIR) set up in 1927.³ The national broadcasting stations, operating under licences granted by their governments, also participated actively in technical regulation, in particular by monitoring broadcast transmissions and interferences from the beginning of regular broadcasting services in Europe. Their aim was to avoid interferences, which were caused by an increasing and uncoordinated number of transmissions, through voluntary cooperation.⁴

To this end, in 1925 the broadcasters founded the IBU with headquarters in Geneva. The new organisation soon designed frequency plans, which allocated broadcasting 'waves' to different stations, including technical specifications such as wavelength, power etc. Only two years later, in 1927, the IBU established a Checking Centre in Brussels to test and monitor the use of broadcasting frequencies and to analyse the origins of interferences in Europe. The Checking Centre became a technically advanced hub that served the purposes of both the member stations and the authorities.⁵

By the outbreak of the Second World War, the IBU had developed into a complex international organisation with three committees (technical, legal and programming), which continually discussed broadcasting issues. They exchanged radio programmes and organised cross-border music festivals to promote peace and mutual understanding among the people of Europe.⁶ The IBU defended the interests of its member broadcasting stations and was subsequently recognised as an expert for frequency allocation plans and the monitoring of transmissions by the national postal and telecommunications administrations. The organisation was even allowed to participate in ITU conferences, where government representatives (mainly from the PTTs and the foreign offices) negotiated and signed broader international frequency plans. The last of these conferences was

3 Codding, George A.: *The International Telecommunication Union. An Experiment in International Cooperation*, Leiden 1952.

4 Wormbs, Nina: "Technology-dependent commons: The example of frequency spectrum for broadcasting in Europe in the 1920s", in: *International Journal of the Commons* 1 (2011), pp. 92 – 109.

5 Lommers, Suzanne / Hahr, Henrik: *Europe – On Air*, Amsterdam 2013.

6 Fickers, Andreas / Lommers, Suzanne: "Eventing Europe: Broadcasting and the mediated performance of Europe", in: Badenoch, Alexander / Fickers, Andreas (eds.): *Materializing Europe. Transnational Infrastructures and the Project of Europe*, New York 2010, pp. 225 – 251.

held in Montreux in 1939, but it was already overshadowed by the growing political tensions.⁷

3. *The IBU during Wartime*⁸

Like all international organisations, the outbreak of the Second World War forced the IBU to decide whether it should continue or suspend its activities. In November 1939, Antoine Dubois, the IBU's president called for a full closure of its secretariat for financial reasons. He expected a decline in funds and wanted to prioritise the Brussels Checking Centre in order to maintain at least some of the IBU's activities. However, the IBU's secretary general at the time, Arthur Burrows, voted for a continuation of the operations in both Brussels and Geneva. In his opinion, the Geneva office could provide a platform for exchanging views unaffected by political tensions. At a plenary assembly in Lausanne in April 1940, two weeks before the Nazis invaded the Western European countries, the representatives decided to continue its activities on a reduced scale, but under the protection of Swiss neutrality. The majority of members was still present at the assembly, even though it was relocated from Italy to Switzerland due to the war. The office staff was subsequently reduced from 13 to 5 and the secretary general and his deputy were replaced by the Swiss officials Alfred Glogg and Rudolphe von Reding. The IBU also planned to continue operations in its Checking Centre in Brussels (which was protected by Belgian neutrality). These steps were meant to ensure the IBU's existence for the duration of the war. The daily working routines were already at a standstill. All three committees (technical, legal and programming) had ceased meeting and the programme exchange had also stopped completely.

7 Report of the German PTT administration on the Montreux conference to the foreign office, Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts, Berlin, R116990; see also: Fickers, Andreas / Griset, Pascal: *Communicating Europe*, Basingstoke 2019.

8 The chapters III and IV are mainly based on a synoptic analysis of the following literature: Eugster, Ernest: *Television Broadcasting Across National Boundaries. The EBU and OIRT experience*, New York 1983; Wallenborn, Leo: "From IBU to EBU: The Great European Broadcasting Crisis", in: *EBU Review* 1 (1978), pp. 25 – 34 and 2 (1978), pp. 22 – 30; Hahr, Henrik: *Televisionens och radios internationellt samarbete*. (unpublished manuskript taken from Sveriges Radios Arkiv, Stockholm); Degenhardt, Wolfgang / Strautz, Elisabeth: *Auf der Suche nach dem europäischen Programm: Die Eurovision 1954 – 1970*, Baden-Baden 1999.

The IBU chose a remarkable third way to navigate wartime tensions. While the ITU postponed all its conferences and activities in April 1940, the IBU in the same month decided to continue with its operations. The IBU saw its role in providing a neutral link between warring countries at a time when psychological warfare in radio propaganda broadcasts increased dramatically.

The viability of this 'third way' was challenged just one month later, when the Checking Centre in Brussels came under renewed pressure. In May 1940, Nazi Germany invaded neutral Belgium. The Checking Centre's director, the Frenchman Raymond Braillard, immediately evacuated the equipment to Geneva as he wanted to prevent the Germans from using the technical equipment for military purposes such as the monitoring of allied transmissions. This decision, however, put the IBU into a difficult diplomatic position. Nazi Germany and the German Reich Broadcasting Corporation – the *Reichs-Rundfunk-Gesellschaft* (RRG) – that had remained an active member of the IBU, demanded the immediate return of the technical equipment to Brussels. The RRG argued this would demonstrate the full existence and continued 'objective operation' of the IBU as intended by the plenary assembly's decision just one month earlier. According to this view, the IBU was unable to serve as a neutral platform if it allowed such politically motivated steps. The IBU's neutrality was seriously challenged by the German organisation that threatened to withdraw from the IBU and to put diplomatic pressure on Switzerland. In a 'semi-diplomatic' mission, von Reding travelled to Berlin to convince the RRG to rescind the demand, but without success. Nazi Germany had reached the peak of its military success and took advantage of the political status quo in Europe to put pressure on the IBU's general secretariat. Finally, in January 1941, the secretary general gave in to the pressure and allowed the return of the equipment to Brussels. Afterwards, Glogg justified this decision as a necessary step to keep the IBU alive and to avoid diplomatic tensions between Switzerland and Germany. In March 1941, the equipment was retrieved from Geneva by the German engineers Braunmühl and Schweiger, who were also appointed by the RRG and the German authorities as the new heads of the Brussels Checking Centre and replaced Braillard, who had been put in charge by the IBU. The Checking Centre immediately restarted its activities, but the measurements and documents provided to IBU members differed considerably from those previously received. Unsurprisingly, the occupying military authorities also used the equipment to unofficially monitor allied transmissions.

It was obvious that the IBU had considerable difficulties maintaining objective operation under the protection of Swiss law. Neutrality was no guarantee for a full and unchallenged protection. Instead, Nazi Germany misused the IBU and instrumentalised neutrality for its own purposes. Beyond this, the member broadcasting stations in occupied countries like Belgium, Denmark, France, Norway and the Netherlands were either subjected to strict German control or replaced by new organisations under Nazi rule. It was questionable whether they still truly represented the national member stations as they no longer operated on the basis of licences granted by legitimised national governments.

The events of 1941, albeit justifiable with a policy of (neutral) ‘objective operation’, sealed the IBU’s future. Members from 10 European countries – among them the pioneering British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) – subsequently turned away from the IBU. The accusation of Nazi collaboration permanently damaged the organisation’s reputation. Non-German member stations and governments considered the IBU as a union of axis powers (and occupied countries) protected by Swiss neutrality. The exile governments in London protested against the decisions taken by the IBU and even declared in BBC broadcasts that they felt no obligation to adhere to them. Balancing neutrality and maintaining objective operation proved to be increasingly difficult for the Swiss general secretariat. Nevertheless, Glogg and von Reding decided to continue all operations, including annual general assemblies and contacts with all broadcasting partners from the countries at war, simply to keep the IBU alive.

4. *From Wartime to Peacetime*

The Swiss general secretariat adhered to its ‘line of action’ even when the end of the war was in sight in 1944. It kept contact with both sides: for instance, the general secretariat offered the German heads of the Brussels Checking Centre the opportunity to put their technical equipment under the protection of the Swiss embassy in order to avoid damage as the Allied forces liberated Belgium in 1944. The occupying German forces again demonstrated their lack of interest in the IBU’s aims and simply evacuated the equipment to Berlin for their own use. However, Glogg and von Reding also travelled to Brussels and Paris in December 1944, to discuss the IBU’s upcoming activities. For the general secretariat, the logical next step after the hostilities ended in May 1945 was to convoke a general assembly in Lausanne, scheduled just one month later, in June 1945.

Broadcasting stations across Europe were appalled by the Swiss attempt to continue as if nothing had happened. They rejected the proposed general assembly, although there was an urgent need to discuss the allocation of frequencies as numerous interferences impacted the transmissions when the national broadcasters restarted their services in 1945. For the broadcasters, it was crucial to analyse their wartime experiences and to negotiate a new common agreement on broadcasting operations.

The Belgian radio broadcaster took the initiative to launch the necessary evaluation, with strong support from the BBC. Both were convinced that the IBU was the wrong setting and the secretary general the wrong person for this. The Belgian broadcasting organisation immediately rebuilt the Brussels Checking Centre and invited its foreign partner organisations to an informal meeting in Brussels in January 1946 – outside of the IBU, just *'entre amis'* – to discuss the IBU's future. They not only approached all IBU members except for Germany and Spain, but also Radio Luxembourg and the Soviet Union's broadcasting organisation, both of which had not been members of the IBU before the war.

At the meeting in Brussels, the broadcaster's representatives had to answer difficult questions: What lessons could be learned from their wartime experiences? Should the IBU be replaced or reorganised? Should it be transformed into a global organisation within the UN? From the beginning, there was a consensus among participants that the IBU should not continue in its current form. The Soviets in particular demanded the dissolution of the IBU and a rollback of Swiss influence. Nevertheless, a compromise could not be found at the Brussels meeting as the Soviets blocked a majority vote for the continuation of the IBU under the condition of a comprehensive reorganisation. By this stage, the IBU no longer had any say in the matter. To mitigate the tensions, Glogg and the IBU staff refrained from any further action and put the IBU's fate in the member organisations' hands. Glogg took part in all the meetings, but only in his capacity as the director-general of the Swiss broadcasting organisation, and he abstained from influencing the discussion. According to Henrik Hahr, he "was fed up".

Additional meetings in March, May and June shifted the focus towards the creation of a new broadcasting organisation, with the intention to extend it from a European to a global body. For this purpose, the majority of broadcasting organisations in Europe set up the *'Organisation Internationale Radiodiffusion'* (OIR) on 27/28 June 1946. However, the BBC was unwilling to join the new organisation as long as the UN and the ITU were still discussing a reorganisation of global telecommunication regulation.

By its refusal to join, the BBC indirectly prevented the IBU from being dissolved by its remaining members two days later.

In the following three years, the discussion about the future organisation of international broadcasting cooperation became increasingly entangled in Cold War politics. The telecommunication authorities of the ‘big five’ dropped the idea of founding a global broadcasting organisation (for long and medium wave broadcasting) as early as November 1946. Subsequently, both the IBU and the OIR unsuccessfully aspired to become expert organisations with voting rights at the World Radio Conference (WARC) in Atlantic City (1947) and the European Broadcasting Conference in Copenhagen (1948). They had to content themselves with an observer status. The competition between both organisations was overshadowed by a dispute about voting rights within the OIR. The Soviet broadcasting organisation in particular strove for an Eastern Bloc quorum and demanded voting rights for their individual Soviet republics. The political tensions of the Cold War hampered cooperation within the OIR and changed Western European broadcasting organisations’ attitude. In 1949, they decided to leave the OIR, but were also not prepared to rejoin the IBU. The creation of the ‘European Broadcasting Union’ (EBU) in 1950 was the Western European compromise. The IBU (as a pan-European broadcasting organisation founded in the interwar period) became redundant and was dissolved when the EBU began its operations. The IBU’s assets were transferred to the EBU, which in many respects stepped into the IBU’s shoes: for example, it retained its seat in Geneva, its Checking Centre in Brussels and the committee structure.

5. Conclusion

The third (neutral) way to navigate political tensions in wartime in the end proved too difficult for the IBU and the Swiss general secretariat. While the organisation managed to maintain the institutional capacities to immediately restart the IBU’s activities after the Second World War, the attempt to continue operations during wartime completely undermined the IBU’s reputation. When the Swiss secretary general Alfred Glogg invited members to a general assembly in June 1945, he envisioned ‘business as usual’. It became immediately obvious that this was impossible. The directors of the broadcasting organisations, particularly from formerly occupied countries did not share his view that “continued activities in Geneva during the war must be seen as a guarantee that the IBU was in a good

shape to immediately solve the problem of broadcasting after the war". The IBU did not succeed in balancing objective operation and maintaining a pan-European approach to broadcasting cooperation. Therefore, its members demanded a thorough evaluation of the IBU's administration during the war, although there was a general consensus that the work carried out by the IBU in the interwar period had to be continued as soon as possible. The fact that the IBU was replaced by two new organisations rather than one was not a consequence of the 'third way', but rather of the looming Cold War. The IBU's interwar structure, vision and even the individual representatives survived the rupture during the war and continued their work within these new organisations.

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