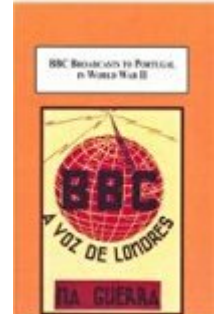


Nelson Costa Ribeiro. *BBC Broadcasts to Portugal in World War II: How Radio was used as a Weapon of War.* Ceredigion: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2011. V, 520 S. ISBN 978-0-7734-1487-7.



Reviewed by Jennifer Spohrer

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (June, 2013)

As the title suggests, the British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC) wartime broadcasts to Portugal are the main subject of Nelson Costa Ribeiro's book. The overall thrust of his argument parallels that of historians studying BBC broadcasts to other parts of Europe. In Portugal as elsewhere the BBC's apparent objectivity masked a considerable amount of influence by the British Foreign Service and the Portuguese diplomatic corps, as the records from the BBC and British and Portuguese governmental archives attest. (In fact, Ribeiro suggests the BBC's foreign services are better understood as "white propaganda", rather than independent broadcasting.) Nonetheless, Ribeiro finds evidence in Portuguese newspapers, radio magazines and other contemporary sources that the BBC won the radio war in Portugal largely because local audiences found BBC newscasts more accurate and informative than anything that Axis or domestic stations offered.

The BBC's success in Portugal might seem somewhat surprising, given similarities between António de Oliveira Salazar's *Estado Nova* (New State) and the dictatorships of the Axis powers.

The Italians and Germans certainly had a head start in establishing radio services to Portugal, offering at least some Portuguese language programming by 1936 and 1937, respectively, though in some cases more with an eye to South American audiences, whereas the British government did not authorize foreign-languages services until the Munich Crisis a few years later. However, Ribeiro notes several factors that worked in Britain's favor. On the one hand, given long-standing diplomatic and trade relations between Portugal and Britain and the Catholic Church's increasingly vocal opposition to Hitler, most Portuguese elites sympathized with the British cause in World War II. On the other, the humorous, populist style of the BBC's chief Portuguese announcer, Fernando Pessa, helped to win over middle- and lower-class Portuguese listeners. By contrast, although the BBC's wartime broadcasts to France, for example, were directed at recent allies, producers had to work hard to overcome longstanding cultural suspicions and outrage over Britain's surprise attack on the French Navy in the wake of their armistice with Germany, and only succeeded in winning over French listeners as the Allies began

winning the war and German news reports deviated more grossly from personal experience.

Such insights demonstrate the importance of Ribeiro's book for media historians and historians of Europe more broadly — namely, that in introducing non-Portuguese readers to Portuguese broadcasting history it complicates our picture of the European media landscape. For example, Ribeiro notes that while Italian fascist, Nazi, and Soviet leaders explicitly embraced propaganda as a means of mobilizing the masses and once in power created state organisms for producing as well as censoring media programming, Salazar neither theorized about nor came to power through mass political mobilization. Although anti-democratic, his ideal was a politically passive citizenry, and his government paid little attention to developing organs of mass persuasion. The *Estado Nova* continued to license privately owned broadcasting stations and radio clubs, although most were prohibited from selling advertising time or airing news and after 1939 were forced to share a single frequency. Only the two largest and, not coincidentally, most connected or sympathetic to the regime, *Rádio Clube Português* (RCP) and the Catholic Church's *Rádio Renascença*, were authorized to broadcast advertisements and news bulletins provided by the regime. This degree of plurality was typical of the *Estado Nova*, and indeed could be useful. For example, the RCP openly supported the Nationalist side in the Spanish Civil War and broadcast Fascist songs, while the *Emissora Nacional* adhered to the government's official neutrality and merely increased its anti-Communist programming and added a Spanish-language news bulletin covering the war. However, the smaller private stations provided openings for foreign influence during the war, as British and German diplomats first offered free music records and then sought influence over editorial content and programming. Although the Portuguese government ultimately blocked these incursions in both cases, a similar incursion would be hard to imagine in a state like Nazi Germany, where media

production was more completely nationalized. Ribeiro argues that Salazar's policy of depoliticization also contributed to the BBC's success in Portugal, as listeners turned to foreign stations to fill the information vacuum created by the dearth of news broadcasting on domestic stations. While German listeners sought foreign alternatives to domestic broadcasting both before and after World War II, it was never for lack of a concerted and sophisticated domestic campaign to provide more compelling news and entertainment programs.

In short, for the historians of the BBC and of World War II radio broadcasting, Ribeiro's book provides a useful case study of policy toward and reception in a country and language not previously covered in the English-language historical literature. It deserves a much broader readership, however, for its portrait of a regime that is less well-known than its contemporaries, but casts light on the complexity and appeal of anti-democratic forces in Europe during this critical period.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

Citation: Jennifer Spohrer. Review of Ribeiro, Nelson Costa. *BBC Broadcasts to Portugal in World War II: How Radio was used as a Weapon of War*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. June, 2013.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=39517>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.