

‘The Trumpet of the Night’: Interwar Communists on BBC Radio

by *Ben Harker*

In the summer of 1935 the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Great Britain, Harry Pollitt, was attending to business in Moscow when he received an unexpected invitation from Roger Wilson, Director of the BBC Talks Department. Pollitt was asked to prepare and present a thirty-minute broadcast in a series entitled *The Citizen and His Government*; Pollitt would be permitted to make comparisons between Britain and the Soviet Union, and would enjoy freedom to say what he wished.¹ He wrote back in agreement, adding in a PS ‘Why does the BBC have a black border round its paper and envelope? Or is this a special one for me as a sign of mourning that we have been kept off the air so long?’² The joke was more pertinent than Pollitt realized. On hearing of the scheduled broadcast, the Foreign Office News Department lobbied the BBC to reconsider working with Pollitt, while also insisting that government intervention should not be used to justify the programme’s cancellation. The BBC complied on both counts, albeit reluctantly, and the cancellation was attributed to the delicacy of the international situation.³ Unsurprised by the withdrawal of an opportunity that always seemed too good to be true, Pollitt wrote to remind the BBC that he represented a party with ‘a definite point of view in regard to all current political and social questions’, offering his services for future broadcasts.⁴ He heard nothing in response; his next appearance on the BBC would be his General Election address in the very different context of 1945.⁵

Although in the standard history of the interwar BBC this episode is used to encapsulate the relationship between the Communist Party and the BBC in that period – one of fierce and covert if unflappably courteous censorship on one side and low expectations on the other – it is, in fact, a small detail in a larger and more complex story, an unwritten chapter in the history of both organizations.⁶ This article revisits that relationship, arguing that Communism was a spectre that haunted the early BBC, inhabiting the vision that shaped its formation. More particularly, it argues that Communists proved an influential if uneven presence on BBC radio in the 1930s. It is about Communists on the wireless in both senses: it recovers the Communist presence on the airwaves across BBC departments and regions; it also restores to view a body of prewar Marxist analysis of the technology

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and cultural form of radio, of the institution of the BBC, and of the possibilities for oppositional interventions. Drawing upon a range of sources from radio listings, Communist Party publications, BBC records, and the declassified MI5 files of broadcasting Communists, it situates the work of Communists on the radio – and the ensuing patterns of BBC blacklisting and censorship – in relation to the histories of both institutions through a tumultuous period.

COMMUNISM OF THE MATERIAL

The vision for the early BBC articulated by its first Director General, Sir John Reith, was couched boldly in terms of revolutionary change. He saw in radio ‘the expression of a new and better relationship between man and man’ and described himself as a ‘practical idealist’ who, unlike more dangerous visionaries, would build his ‘Utopia on the foundations, and with the materials, already to hand’.⁷ These foundations – the technology of radio within the emerging institutional outlines of the BBC – were to enable a type of redistribution. What Reith called the ‘natural law’ of stubborn structural inequalities – the fact that ‘most of the good things of this world are badly distributed and most people have to go without them’ – was to be offset by the immaterial democracy of the wireless, ‘a good thing’ to be ‘shared by all alike’; everyone would enjoy the uplift of the ‘best in every department of human knowledge, endeavour and achievement’.⁸ Implicit in his vision of compensatory cultural redistribution was the spectre of those ideologies threatening more material expropriations. (Reith didn’t need teaching the lesson, spelt out by one of his contemporaries, that ‘working class children’ deprived of a ‘share in the immaterial’ would ‘grow into the men who demand with menaces a Communism of the material’).⁹ His monopolized, hegemonic BBC was precisely calibrated to ward off such possibilities by shaping, reinforcing and reproducing a cohesively hierarchical national continuity in which ‘the boys and girls of today’ would grow into ‘the citizens of tomorrow, and the ancestors of the citizens of the future’.¹⁰ Closer to home, he kept his own house in order, expunging collectivist ideologies from day-to-day life at the BBC by opposing unionization.¹¹

But if the threat of international Bolshevism shadowed the thinking of the interwar intellectual elite to which Reith belonged, the airwaves in Britain were in truth relatively untroubled by British Communists in radio’s early years. The more highly developed and theoretically savvy German Communist Party rigorously contested the control of radio by the state, and attempted to mobilize the medium’s oppositional potential for the workers’ movement; communists in the United States, Austria and Holland were able to add their voices to the polyphony of the airwaves through worker-controlled stations.¹² But the nascent Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), intellectually underpowered with fewer than 4,000 members for most of the 1920s, and up against the BBC monopoly which proscribed rival networks, thought little about the medium, a

disengagement sanctioned by the political line the party adopted from the late 1920s.¹³ For in the same period that the BBC received its charter and was becoming, in the words of one of its rising stars, ‘the most powerful and dominating organization in the cultural life of the country’, the miniscule CPGB retreated from engagement with that national cultural life into a new, insular and austere political line.¹⁴ Under the banner of ‘Class against Class’, former allies in the broader labour movement were denounced as ‘social fascists’ whose lack of revolutionary conviction allegedly served to stabilize capitalism.¹⁵ The cultural policy determined by this left turn was a commitment to forging a separate culture authentically rooted in working-class experience and purified of bourgeois contamination; this was to be a culture which anticipated broader political transformation.¹⁶

Where radio was concerned, the dominant discourse of analysis in the Communist press was typically Soviet-focused: radio was presented as indispensable to stabilizing and developing revolution in Russia, in ‘bringing education, propaganda, and agitation for strengthening the fighting spirit of the people’; the construction of Soviet transmitting stations and initiatives to make wireless sets accessible to new listeners – 1,500,000 by 1927 – were assiduously chronicled.¹⁷ At home in Britain, however, the monopolization of radio by the BBC was seen to place the medium beyond meaningful intervention: the BBC was brushed aside as a tool of ‘capitalist propaganda’.¹⁸ Though the party’s newly launched *Daily Worker* newspaper carried patchy BBC listings, these were printed beneath recommendations for the three Moscow stations (Comintern, Experimental and Leningrad); English-language Soviet broadcasts were digested into handy monthly guides directing readers to programmes on topics such as Marxism-Leninism, the Five Year Plan and Reminiscences of Lenin.¹⁹ To facilitate the widest consumption of these networks, the paper offered regular bulletins on reception quality; from 1934 a technical expert was on hand to guide readers through the wireless-set maintenance required to amplify the sometimes inaudible Moscow signal.²⁰

RETUNING

The minimal contact between the Communists and BBC broadcasting served to reinforce the ‘Class against Class’ analysis that the BBC ‘only want one point of view, a point of view acceptable to the capitalist class’.²¹ Communists were quick to recall the BBC’s role during the 1926 General Strike – in which workers and their leaders were not permitted to put their case – when the Communist-dominated National Unemployed Workers’ Movement (NUWM) was in turn denied access to the microphone.²² In 1933 one lobbying deputation to Broadcasting House led by the communist NUWM leader Wal Hannington was greeted with a disconcertingly heavy police presence.²³ The following year NUWM activist George Staunton was asked to give an account of the recent Hunger March but found his script substantially expurgated: his rousing peroration

'Workers! Build a mighty united front to smash the government and war' was replaced with a bland description of the marchers' 'exemplary conduct'.²⁴ Like William Ferrie, a militant worker whose scheduled talk on British industry underwent a similar transformation, Staunton found a warmer welcome in the Communist press.²⁵ With its worst suspicions confirmed, the *Daily Worker* prominently reported Staunton's story under the headline 'Gentlemen only need apply. BBC bans workers' statements'.²⁶

Such episodes lay behind Pollitt's joke, made from Moscow in the summer of 1935, about Communists being kept from the airwaves. But the occasion for Pollitt's trip, the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International, would itself initiate a fundamental shift in Communist policy with far-reaching implications for activists in Britain and beyond, including those engaged with radio. The new line declared by the Comintern as a belated response to the spread of fascism moved Communist strategy from revolutionary isolationism towards the building of anti-fascist coalitions, or 'Popular Fronts', to defend the structures of national democracy in which Communists could operate freely.²⁷ On this redrawn map fascism was elevated above capitalism as the primary enemy; individual nations and their political structures, traditions, historical narratives and central institutions became central terrains of resistance. Rather than creating a pre-figurative and Soviet-facing proletarian counter-culture, Communists were now required to engage critically but constructively with national cultures, foregrounding and developing progressive elements. The 'ideological struggle' or intellectual work, often marginalized during the itchy-footed revolutionary urgency of 'class against class' insurrectionism, now enjoyed a promotion within the priorities of Communist parties internationally.²⁸

In this British context, the Popular Front turn ushered in a well-documented rapprochement between Communists, intellectuals and the broader national culture, and created for the Communist Party a profile unimaginable a decade earlier.²⁹ In the more accommodating context created by the new line, former sympathizers became paid-up members: mid-1930s recruits included composer Alan Bush, classicist George Thomson, and writers Randall Swingler, Edgell Rickword, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Cecil Day Lewis and, briefly, Stephen Spender.³⁰ The Communist dominated *Left Review* (1934–8) was the nerve centre of the radicalized literati and became the key cultural journal of the mid and late 1930s;³¹ Communist-led and front institutions such as the Left Book Club, the Artists' International Association, the Workers' Music Association, and Unity Theatre functioned as vectors of Communist cultural politics.³² And the *Daily Worker*, originally launched to provide a 'strong antidote to the poison gas of the bourgeoisie', was reconceived – minus the hammer and sickle masthead – as a broad based 'fighting organ... which represents millions'.³³ Opened out to include a broader spectrum of leftist opinion, the paper reached a circulation of 200,000 during the late 1930s.³⁴

Within this conjuncture entrenched hostilities to the BBC persisted: but whereas the 'Class against Class' line sanctioned disengagement, the new line compelled a different tenor of engagement and an analysis as alert to openings as obstructions. There was no centrally issued 'party line' on radio or any other cultural matter in this period – the CPGB would not form centralized cultural committees until 1947 – but there was a dramatic rethinking of the cultural field in relation to new priorities, and a marked intensification of engagement with the BBC and the medium of radio as part of that process. From the autumn of 1935 the *Daily Worker* beefed up its radio coverage; daily listings were now supplemented with a weekly column, 'George Audit's Radio Talks', in which the radio correspondent, newly personalized for readers, offered running analysis of BBC policies and programming, a body of criticism which fed into Audit's Left Book Club pamphlet, *The BBC Exposed* (1937).³⁵ The same year Communist poet Charles Madge, *Daily Mirror* journalist and pioneer of the social anthropology project Mass Observation, wrote the influential essay 'Press, Radio and Social Consciousness' for *The Mind in Chains: Socialism and the Cultural Revolution* (1937), a Communist-dominated symposium edited by Cecil Day Lewis.³⁶ Articles about the BBC began to appear in party journals;³⁷ Communist novels such as John Sommerfield's *May Day* (1936), plays such as James Miller's and Joan Littlewood's *John Bullion* (1935), and poems such as Jack Lindsay's 'Not English' (1936) were alike in presenting radio as what Lindsay termed a 'trumpet of the night', a medium through which the revolution might be announced and consolidated.³⁸

As these cultural imaginings suggested, Communists were working towards a more supple position in relation to radio's contradictions. Radio in the British context was increasingly conceived as both an insidious institution exercising baleful influence on behalf of the ruling class and a ready-made cultural apparatus whose monopoly status and presence in millions of homes made of it of great relevance to the rising class and its self-styled political representatives. Audit's pamphlet *The BBC Exposed* was emphatic on the strategy demanded by this paradox: the National Government needed to be replaced with a Popular Front government along the lines of those elected in France and Spain; the personnel of the BBC could then be overhauled, transforming the BBC 'into an instrument to serve the people' and to play its part in stabilizing the new ruling bloc.³⁹

In the meantime Audit called for the composition of BBC management to reflect the population – he wanted four of the seven governors to be representatives of the organized working class; his analysis of BBC output, meanwhile, attended to those possibilities inherent in the BBC's commitment to impartiality.⁴⁰ If the BBC existed to stabilize the status quo, Audit and Madge argued, to do so effectively it also had to repeatedly establish and renew credibility with its listeners through a notional balance.⁴¹ And in order to hold any appeal for working-class listeners, Madge added, all

mass media had at some level to engage with their experiences, even if in a highly selective form, and therefore risked becoming ‘an influence subversive on itself’.⁴² This ongoing need for credibility and legitimation, the analysis increasingly registered, created openings that might be exploited: as Madge noted, ‘it would be undialectic to suppose the BBC is unmixed, either as a curse or blessing’.⁴³

Through the Popular Front period Audit’s column duly attempted to hold the BBC to account for its air of unreality and lapses in impartiality. Assisted by three Communists who enjoyed an inside view of the new Broadcasting House while working on the General Post Office Film Unit’s documentary *BBC: The Voice of Britain* (1935), he presented in the *Daily Worker* tales of exploitation and wanton extravagance with licence-payers’ money.⁴⁴ He picked away at the BBC’s anti-Soviet bias variously detected in the coverage of the Moscow Show Trials, in the corporation’s silence over the new Soviet constitution, and in the variety department’s *Red Saracen*, ‘chit-chat by White Russians on the glories of the old regime’.⁴⁵ Matters came to a head over *Revolution in Russia*, a historical feature postponed after concern that its scheduled slot, in autumn 1937, might allow the programme to be construed as a commemorative tribute to the twenty-year old revolution.⁴⁶ He also harangued the corporation for disproportionate coverage of rebel news in the Spanish Civil War (Audit’s research indicated sixteen items of rebel news were presented for every six from the government); correctly suspecting a Foreign-Office led agenda ‘to damp down any sympathy’ for the Republic, he advised his readers to balance their listening by accessing Radio Bilbao on shortwave.⁴⁷ He also accused the BBC of capitulating to political pressure and pulling a scheduled adaptation of Clifford Odets’s cult agitprop play, *Waiting for Lefty* (1935).⁴⁸

In the spirit of a more constructive engagement, credit was given where due: aspects of the Reithian BBC resonated with British Communism’s moral and social conservatism: Reith was congratulated for keeping ‘dirt off the air’, for promoting serious music and for holding at bay ‘advertising and all its cheap vulgarities’.⁴⁹ Welcome evidence of more radical voices breaking through, such as leftist writer Geoffrey Trease’s *After the Tempest* (‘a beautiful satire on the British ruling class’), or *Sailors of Cattaro*, by Communist playwright Friedrich Wolf, a sympathetic drama dealing with the 1918 mutiny of the Austrian fleet, or the unblinking unemployment drama, *Cold Coal* (1939), by Caerphilly bus driver E. Eynon Evans, was attributed to the BBC’s performing necessary negotiations in response to ‘the rapidly growing weight of left wing opinion’ created through the movement for a Popular Front.⁵⁰

NEGOTIATIONS

Another key site of negotiations in the late 1930s was the BBC Talks Department. Talks was a sphere of the corporation in which impartiality

had traditionally been demonstrated, especially under Hilda Matheson (1927–32), a liberal not unsympathetic to the Soviet Union, and also by her successor, the like-minded Charles Siepmann (1932–5).⁵¹ Pollitt was consistently kept from the microphone at Reith's insistence (although even he found an unsuccessful advocate at Talks in the young left-leaning producer Felix Greene); individual Communists were tolerated on the condition that they spoke on the basis of their professional expertise, a position that notionally displayed impartiality but which consistently threw up controversy.⁵² The mathematician Hyman Levy gave talks on science topics through the early 1930s, even though behind the scenes the Director of Talks found Levy's 'supposedly objective' work 'extremely tendentious'.⁵³ In 1934 the distinguished biologist and Communist J. B. S. Haldane took up an invitation to speak in a series entitled *The Causes of War*; when he used the occasion to analyse the political economy of the arms industry, the BBC asked him to rewrite his talk, reminding him that they had invited him to analyse war as 'a scientist – a biologist'.⁵⁴ Haldane declined, remarking that there were no biological causes of war; when the BBC refused to acknowledge his position publicly, he went to the press.⁵⁵ The entire episode was farcically repeated three years later, when – whether in a spirit of conciliation or a moment of forgetfulness is unclear – he was invited to speak once more, again as a biologist, this time on his recent visit to besieged Madrid. Again Haldane couldn't comprehend what the BBC meant by 'a factual and objective description of the biological side of the siege' and produced a script 'strongly tendentious in the direction of the left'. When it was 'balanced' by that of an outspoken Conservative MP, Haldane embarrassed the BBC once more by again going to the media.⁵⁶ Shortly afterwards the Permanent Under-Secretary of the Foreign Office, Sir Robert Vansittart, made a personal request to Reith that the BBC should take more care in its coverage of Spain and to 'keep off Communism, Nazi-ism [sic] and Fascism' where possible.⁵⁷

Despite this directive, to which Reith was entirely receptive, the Talks Department was by no means homogeneous, and divergent priorities and perspectives continued to make themselves felt, even under Sir Richard Maconachie, a man of conservative views appointed Head of Talks in 1936. His Director of Talks, Norman Luker, was by contrast a liberal intrigued by the far left – he would later prove eager to lunch with the party's notoriously hardline theoretician Rajani Palme Dutt.⁵⁸ Luker was alert to the leftist currents flowing through Britain's intellectual and cultural life, and to the presence of the Communists in that process. In a 1938 memo to Maconachie he argued that the key audience for the 'mental pabulum' offered by BBC Talks lay in an intelligent but under-educated public, the size of which was indicated by serious but accessible cultural and educational initiatives including the new leftist glossy magazine *Picture Post* (1938–57) and the Communist-dominated Left Book Club.⁵⁹ His ambitious series of that year, 'Class: An Enquiry', was pitched at this audience,

and despite Reith's guidelines, Luker was keen to create a platform for a Marxist analysis of the issue. Cambridge communist economist Maurice Dobb, who had appeared periodically on the BBC in the early 1930s, was rejected (he might appear 'an academic tinkering with an important issue') and Arthur Horner, President of the South Wales Miners' Federation and member of the Communist Party's central committee, was invited in his place.⁶⁰

Horner addressed the National Programme at peak-time on 15 November 1938 and his appearance was widely publicized among the left (Audit noted it was 'one of the very rare occasions on which the BBC has allowed the statement of the Marxist position'.)⁶¹ Though his talk was 'balanced' by his interlocutor, Professor M. M. Postan, a not unsympathetic Cambridge historian, Horner encountered none of the restrictions that had bedevilled Haldane's broadcasts. He ranged freely from Marx's theory of class struggle as the engine of history, through to an explication of the Communist Party's line on fascism, to a description of the Spanish Civil War as militarized class struggle, and into a justification of the Moscow Trials as revolutionary justice against counter-revolution. His talk, which was published unedited in the BBC's in-house magazine *The Listener*, concluded with a familiar Popular Front appeal for what he called 'the cultural, clerical and professional classes' – generally the assumed audience for National Programme Talks – to come over to the working class in the struggle against capital and fascism.⁶² There was some anxiety amongst the new Director General, Frederick Ogilvie, and the BBC governors about the whole series; the Controller of Programmes had been instructed to keep a close eye on proceedings.⁶³ But the sociological seriousness of the programme, combined with the fact that Horner was a democratically elected trade-union representative whose Communism was upfront and therefore open to challenge, seems to have made the broadcast palatable. The Communist Party was delighted. 'What we want now', Audit demanded in his *Daily Worker* column, 'is a series of talks on the history of the working class. We pay for the BBC. They should give us what we want.'⁶⁴

PROJECTING THE NORTH

What Audit wanted – 'programmes reflecting the lives of the people, their struggles and problems' – was increasingly to be found not in London, but in the BBC North Region.⁶⁵ From 1933 the North Region's Programme Director was E.A.F. (Archie) Harding, a controversial figure who, though not a Communist, was sympathetic and well-known to the party.⁶⁶ A Marxist since his Oxford days, Harding kept abreast of the literary avant-garde and had made formally experimental and ideologically driven broadcasts in the early 1930s that set him on a collision course with Reith. His redeployment to the North Region – by no means a promotion – came after Harding's *New Year Over Europe* (1932) offended the Polish ambassador with claims about the extent of Poland's military spending. According

to BBC folklore Reith told him, 'You're a very dangerous man, Harding. I think you'd better go up North where you can't do so much damage'.⁶⁷ But exiled in Manchester – the city reminded him pleasantly of Leningrad – Harding enjoyed considerable autonomy over the North Region's vast area, and two million predominantly working-class licence payers.⁶⁸ His hand was further strengthened by a mid-1930s tranche of regional investment in emerging technology and staff – BBC regional personnel doubled in size in the mid 1930s – enabling him to create around him a sympathetic team sharing his commitment to developing a 'radio projection of the North' which would reflect the region's radical traditions and the textures of its working-class life.⁶⁹ His new circle included the like-minded leftist poet D. G. Bridson (Harding and Bridson were introduced by future *Daily Worker* journalist Claud Cockburn), Olive Shapley, an Oxford-educated Communist Party member whose comrades quickly identified the political possibilities in her working with Harding, and Joan Littlewood and Jimmie Miller, both working-class Communist Party members active in Manchester's leftist theatre scene.⁷⁰ All under twenty-five when they first worked with Harding in 1934 – Shapley recalled him as 'a flame that set all kinds of people alight' – this group imbibed and in turn developed Harding's reading of radio and its possibilities.⁷¹

'It is surely a sign of decadence', wrote George Audit in a critique of BBC radio producers, 'when capitalism's young and still virile offspring is so incapable of finding inspiration in the material of modern industrial life and has to bury its head in a dream of the past.'⁷² It was an analysis shared by Harding who, like his European contemporaries Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht, saw the medium of radio as shying away from contemporary issues and becoming fixed in conventions that repressed what was possible.⁷³ Radio, for Harding, was inclined to be monologic when it should have been dialogic (it had, after all, first emerged as an instrument for two-way communication).⁷⁴ BBC radio's unceasing monologue – 'a platform for old men to lecture us', in Audit's phrase – constructed listeners as passive consumers, which fixed individualist, capitalist logic, offering products rather than facilitating communication.⁷⁵ Harding's own most effective programmes, by contrast, dispensed with the authoritative narrator, forcing the listener to adjudicate between the sometimes bewildering spectrum of voices presented.⁷⁶ Like Brecht, whose radio experiments were occasionally reported in the *Daily Worker*, Harding wanted radio to create in listeners a new expertise specific to the technology.⁷⁷ He regarded 'features' radio – radio documentaries blending reportage and scripted elements – as the natural cutting edge of such developments, the place where radio was most itself in being most free from conventions imported from other media.⁷⁸

For Harding, as for Audit, 'the material of modern industrial life' was exactly radio's key subject matter, especially the working class, who despite being the biggest audience in the 79.1% of the population whom radio

reached by 1939, were by turns excluded from radio representation – and therefore rendered culturally invisible – or constructed as buffoons, ‘trained fleas to be regarded with patronising benevolence’ in Audit’s phrase.⁷⁹ Harding’s team in the BBC North Region explored possibilities for a more demotic mode of broadcasting: from 1937 their efforts were enhanced by the new technology, notably the mobile recording unit (a van festooned with cable that made on-location recordings possible), and the dramatic control panel (an early mixing desk). They made programmes affirming the labour behind civil-engineering feats, such as the building of the Mersey Tunnel;⁸⁰ they also surveyed the region’s major industries in a four-part series, *Steel, Coal, Wool and Cotton*. Produced by Bridson, these ambitious features drew inspiration from the General Post Office Film Unit, bringing working-class voices to the microphone. (*Wool* was for Audit proof that ‘the pulse of the nation is to be found in the factory and home life’ rather than the ‘creaking artificialities of the drawing room’ favoured by the BBC).⁸¹ The team also developed, in *Harry Hopeful*, a mode of working-class picaresque that melded fictional and documentary elements to chart the regional travels of the eponymous everyman, described by Audit as ‘the first working-class character the BBC has given us in 5,475 days of broadcasting’.⁸² Alert to emerging cultural movements, Olive Shapley recognized the synergies between the North Region, with its emphasis on broadcasting experiences hitherto below the radar of the cultural establishment, and the new movement for urban social anthropology, Mass Observation. Co-founded by Charles Madge, Mass Observation conceived itself as a corrective to the distortions of mass media and its team of recording volunteers as a ‘receiving set’ attuned to the true rhythms of British popular life.⁸³ Shapley commissioned and produced *They Speak for Themselves: A Radio Inquiry into Mass Observation* scripted and presented by its founders; the intercutting of ‘untrained but shrewd’ working-class voices in her own distinct style showcased the common ground.⁸⁴

It was Harding’s view that all radio was propaganda: broadcasts which failed to give voice to the working class silenced it, those which failed to address structural inequalities shored up the status quo.⁸⁵ Some of the sharpest North Region features therefore focused on the region’s submerged populations, those made destitute during the depression. Shapley’s *Homeless People*, broadcast on 6 September 1938, drew praise from the GPO Film Unit’s Alberto Cavalcanti, and surveyed the tribulations of the North’s homeless.⁸⁶ It concluded by contrasting the ‘bustle and light’ of Newcastle’s Saturday evening shopping district – a cornucopia of ‘succulent meats and melting pastries...soft beds and rich carpets, warm, bright clothes and strong shapely shoes’ – to the homeless unemployed ‘a few feet away...lying on the...floor’ of a city-centre refuge. All that separated the two, summed up the narrator Jimmie Miller, was a ‘frail piece of glass’, implying that these divisions were not only anachronistic but vulnerable to breach.⁸⁷

DEFENDING FAILURE

The features produced out of Manchester in the second half of the 1930s effected a well-documented cultural reversal in which the more hidebound London Region and National Programmes lagged behind the North Region, and proved eager to import its programmes.⁸⁸ ‘London producers had better stop defending failure’, Audit jibed in his column, ‘[t]hey have a lot to make up’, an assessment woundingly echoed by one of Bridson’s key influences, John Grierson at the General Post Office Film Unit, who accused the BBC of lecturing to its audience rather than rooting its programmes in their lives and problems.⁸⁹ When Head of Features Laurence Gilliam made a prickly response to Grierson’s criticisms in the *Radio Times* – ‘the documentary film method is not’, he curtly replied, ‘in a position to teach broadcasting its business’ – Audit amplified the charge with his own listener research, knocking on doors in Stepney and inviting his readers to write in.⁹⁰ One correspondent, approvingly quoted by Audit, noted that according to the output of National and London Region, one would suppose ‘that the working class Londoner is an utter nit-wit, unable to appreciate anything but beer and tobacco and entirely unable to enunciate a single sentence’.⁹¹

Gilliam’s sensitivity around charges of class bias and artistic timidity made him especially receptive to the talents of A. L. Lloyd, a working-class Communist and multi-lingual poet, writer and translator well known in leftist cultural circles who earned his primary living as a merchant seaman. When Lloyd wrote to Gilliam in 1938 proposing a feature based on his recent voyage on a whaling ship to Antarctica – a subject on which he’d also written for the *Daily Worker* – he was invited to submit a script.⁹² He ‘represents’, Gilliam enthusiastically noted on reading it, ‘the type of outside contributor who rarely appears’.⁹³ Produced by Gilliam and broadcast at peak-time on the National Programme on 17 December 1938, Lloyd’s debut feature, *The Voice of the Seamen*, was a dramatized survey of the merchant shipping industry’s 16,000 workers: the type of people, as the programme noted, who were either absent from the media or appeared only ‘in a patriotic pageant or a music hall turn’.⁹⁴ Lloyd’s device of creating a medley of regional working-class voices to tell the story evidently resonated with listeners: Gilliam proudly reported in the *Radio Times* that he’d received a letter from thirteen seamen on board a liner thrilled to hear people like themselves on the wireless.⁹⁵ At the same time, however, the price the BBC paid for this coveted credibility with working-class listeners was a programme with an unwelcome political edge. Lloyd dwelt on the exploitative processes that lay behind those everyday commodities that ‘came baled, checked, stowed and tended’, detailing the difficulties of unionization for merchant seamen, the likelihood of death and injury at work, and the especially harsh conditions that prevailed on luxury liners. The programme’s climax was carefully modulated between an acceptable, patriotic discourse about ‘Great Britain’ as

'Maritime Nation Number One' and the voice of a 'Yorkshire Seaman' who described the industry as hamstrung by private ownership, 'the dunnage – the people who live on us without helping us, the ships that are no good for the job, and the notions that ought to be on the scrapheap'. The shipping companies – disposable dunnage according to Lloyd – complained. That this much hyped and critically acclaimed programme was never repeated was evidence for some, George Audit included, that pressure from these companies had been heeded.⁹⁶ Despite this behind-the-scenes controversy, however, Lloyd was offered a six-month contract: radio writers seldom loomed large in the *Radio Times*, but the BBC's hiring of this 'working seaman' was prominently reported.⁹⁷

DREAMING OF THE PAST

Central to the BBC's growing cultural and political influence in the 1930s, Communists argued, was its increasing significance in the construction of British identity, notably in its power to fashion the national narrative.⁹⁸ By 1939, nine million households were receiving from BBC radio a significant sense of how Britain had become what it was and what, therefore, it could legitimately expect to become in the future.⁹⁹ If programmes like *Homeless People* and *The Voice of the Seamen* hinted at the need for structural redistribution in which the expropriators were expropriated, other leftist broadcasts sought historical precedents for such reimaginings, challenging pervasive narratives which served to make the current state of affairs appear natural, inevitable, and therefore irreversible.

In 1936 the BBC's annual and typically lavish St George's Day pageant drew the fire of Audit in the *Daily Worker* as a 'dream of the past' which suppressed historical facts and contemporary realities; Audit advised the producer, Laurence Gilliam, to read some Marx.¹⁰⁰ By contrast, Audit championed D. G. Bridson's debut feature, *May Day*, a programme originally commissioned by Harding for the North Region in 1934 and considered worthy of being repeated on the National Programme two years later. If the official Reithian vision of history sealed the nation into a Christian, imperialistic and predominantly rural scenario – Head of Drama Val Gielgud's promotional *Radio Times* essay for his 1936 pageant promised 'a succession of men and things worthy to be remembered, soldiers and statesmen, cathedrals and villages' – Bridson and Harding explored the meanings of May Day from saturnalian fertility ritual to modern industrial protest.¹⁰¹ Situating the working class internationally – listeners heard machine guns in the Berlin streets and 'The Internationale' blaring through Red Square loudspeakers – the programme presented not a contented, enduring national family but flashpoints in ever-escalating class struggle, concluding ominously with the words 'May Day, yes... And a new order of things'.¹⁰²

May Day ushered in a distinct formation of broadcasting which recovered moments in Britain's radical history; finding in the radical edges of the national story the outlines of a better future, these programmes brought to the BBC the recognizable cultural politics of the Popular Front, also manifested in late 1930s historiography, fiction, poetry and theatrical performance.¹⁰³ Lloyd's *Saturday Night at the Eel's Foot*, for instance, broadcast on the National Programme on 29 July 1939, transmitted the living traditions of folk song, an increasingly significant location of Communist cultural politics in the Popular Front period.¹⁰⁴ For Lloyd, folksong was the 'people's own poetry', an archive of their creativity and, as he wrote in the *Daily Worker*, 'a foreshadowing of what the masses will be capable of when they are at last free from the stultifying miseries of capitalist industrialization'.¹⁰⁵ Freelancer Jimmie Miller, meanwhile, who under the name Ewan MacColl would later team with Lloyd to lead postwar Communist interventions into folk song, graduated from acting and presenting to writing North Region programmes in the late 1930s.¹⁰⁶ Broadcast on 21 December 1937, his *News of a Hundred Years Ago* took a long view of ongoing debates about the working class and media representation. His script historicized the silencing of the labouring classes in the early nineteenth-century newspapers, celebrating 'the crude underground press' that reflected 'the activity and energy of the poor... slowly crystallizing' into the Chartist movement.¹⁰⁷ His *Chartists March*, for which Benjamin Britten wrote the score, developed this analysis for the National Programme, commemorating the centenary of the charter.¹⁰⁸ Like Bridson's earlier *May Day*, the programme offered a counter discourse to the annual St George's Day pageant. Though the *Radio Times* distanced itself from the broadcast, presenting Chartism as an unpleasant localized matter, 'an ominous, sooty sky' which had loomed over the North's 'industrial districts' one hundred years before, Miller's reading, developed in collaboration with sympathetic producer John Pudney, was in synch with Popular Front communism.¹⁰⁹ Like his own Communist Party educational lectures from the period, or the writing of Communist historian A. L. Morton, the broadcast presented Chartism as 'the basis of all working-class emancipation in this country', an unfinished story awaiting completion by the pioneer movement's modern-day descendants.¹¹⁰

Marxist theories of history as unending class struggle – sometimes open, sometimes hidden – underpinned these broadcasts. *The Classic Soil*, written by Miller's Communist wife Joan Littlewood and produced by Olive Shapley, wore its Marx, or Marxism, on its sleeve. Broadcast the summer before the war, the programme used Engels's *The Condition of the Working Class in England* as a lens through which to view contemporary Manchester.¹¹¹ Interviews with contemporary working-class people were framed by passages from Engels, read by Ernst Hoffmann, a recent refugee from Engels's hometown in Germany. Littlewood's up-front claim that Engels provided 'an accurate' study of conditions was blue-pencilled, but

everything in the broadcast programme insisted on that point.¹¹² The effect of the carefully sequenced juxtapositions, as Littlewood intended, emphasized historical and social continuity rather than change, and presented Engels not as a voice of yesteryear but as a dependable guide to the persisting factors – unemployment, pollution, bad food and clothing, overcrowded housing – which were stunting working-class lives in the present. ‘I think we have found’, the programme sternly concluded, ‘that man is still pre-occupied with the struggle for . . . the basic necessities of life. Are these problems never to be solved and recede into the unimportant place where they belong?’ Shapley, now a former Communist Party member and senior full-time BBC producer, soon distanced herself from a programme that caused disquiet in London and complaints from the Manchester Corporation.¹¹³ Littlewood was considered to have over-stepped the mark. Over the turbulent months ahead, she would find her access to the microphone increasingly restricted.¹¹⁴

REALIGNMENTS

‘Almost any evening this week you can get at least one programme that looks like being first class’, Audit wrote in his column in 1939; BBC radio, and the Communist Party’s attitude to it, had travelled far since the 1920s.¹¹⁵ The BBC was now conceived as a contradictory organization, fettered by a reactionary Control Board, but energized from within by a Popular Front cultural mood revolving around a radicalized fraction of middle-class full-timers who worked alongside less cautious freelancers, some of them Communists. Together this group was regarded as committed to democratizing and developing the technology of radio, affirming and developing its collectivist possibilities, and inscribing into it different voices and historical readings. For Audit the work of this circle, especially A. L. Lloyd who was at once organically embedded in the British working class and attuned to international developments in radical radio, prefigured what the medium could become once wrested from the BBC’s monopoly by a Popular Front government.¹¹⁶

The Communist Party and its national-facing Popular Front line was at the organizational core of the late 1930s upsurge in leftist cultural activity that included radio; in its overriding fidelity to the Soviet Union, the party was also the main player in that moment’s fragmentation. In the wake of the Nazi-Soviet pact of 23 August 1939, Communists were required to switch from being opponents of Nazi appeasement to supporting Stalin’s own act of appeasement and to denounce the war as imperialist: the *volte face* split the very leadership of the Communist Party, divided the 57,000 members of the Left Book Club, and created an ideological fault-line running across the British left, including the BBC’s Popular Front alliances.¹¹⁷ The non-Communist Bridson and former Communist Shapley were soon making programmes which mobilized for the war effort the formulae developed in

their North Region back-catalogue, adding an explicitly patriotic twist.¹¹⁸ Communists Miller and Littlewood, by contrast, observed the party line, and publicly opposed the war.¹¹⁹ In one surprising lapse of BBC vigilance, they brought to the newly centralized Home Service the politics of the proscribed Communist front People's Convention in a distinctly morale-lowering programme critical of rationing provision.¹²⁰ But loopholes were soon closed at the BBC, whose formal policy was to exclude those who had 'taken part in Public agitation against the war effort'.¹²¹ Littlewood's application for a full-time BBC post was blocked on account of her well-documented Communist past.¹²² But in real terms the net was cast wider: despite A. L. Lloyd being commended for the 'very high level of political tact' displayed in his work on *Shadow of the Swastika*, the flagship history of the Nazi party broadcast to twelve million listeners in the final weeks of 1939, his contract was concluded in June 1940.¹²³ Six months later the *Daily Worker* was suppressed, silencing George Audit's running commentary on the BBC. It was, however, a hiatus rather than a termination in Communism's engagement with the medium of radio. After June 1941, when the Soviet Union joined the war, detailed knowledge of the history, language and culture of Britain's new ally would become a valued commodity at the BBC and the Ministry of Information, creating new openings for Communists in a very different context.

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I am grateful to the British Academy for their generous financial support of this research project.

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119 Littlewood and Miller produced a play making their position explicit: Harker, *Class Act*, pp. 58–60; Joan Littlewood, MI5 file, National Archives, KV2/2757.

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