Journalists in the service of British foreign policy: the BBC German service and Chamberlain’s appeasement policy, 1938-1939

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Abstract:
Journalists and the media have not only played a role as political actors in Anglo-German relations, which was independent of their governments. Likewise, they have also worked in the service of their states, surrendering more or less consciously their journalistic independence for the 'national interest'. One such example is the British propaganda campaign directed at the German public during 1938-1939 with the help of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). The campaign is an interesting historical case that shows the enormous influence a government could exert on the media even in a democratic society. This article examines the relationship between the journalists of the BBC German Service and the Foreign Office and offers an insight into the mechanisms of British propaganda production between the Munich Agreement and the outbreak of the Second World War.

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Schroeder traces British policy at Munich even further back, finding continuity from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Ultimately, Czechoslovakia was a far away place with little direct importance to Britain. The Czech issue for Chamberlain and the British boiled down to the claim of three and a half million Germans to join their kinsfolk in the Reich. It simply remained out of the question for Chamberlain that Britain could be committed to war merely on that account. As he broadcast to the British people on 27 September: ‘How horrible, fantastic, incredible it is that we should be 6. Chamberlain and appeasement. of phrase’ but Chamberlain ‘brings a most critical mind to bear not only upon the Office [Foreign Office] minutes which are attached to the questions, but to the answers themselves. These he frequently redrafts in pencil with very little hesitation he does not like vague and polite phrases but wishes to go straight at the opposition and express exactly what he means. The tradition of soothing Members by such phrases as “the honourable and gallant gentlemen will be aware” are usually erased.’ This view was reinforced by consciousness of British military inadequacies.