

## **‘A Quietening Effect’?: The BBC and the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939)**

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This paper will examine how the British Broadcasting Corporation covered the Spanish Civil War between 1936 and 1939. As such, it connects directly with one of the major themes of the conference (i.e. ‘representations of crisis’). The quoted reference to ‘a quietening effect’ in the title of the paper is taken from a memorandum sent in March 1937 by Anthony Eden, then the British Foreign Secretary, and which summarises the British government’s view as to what it would have preferred the effect of the Corporation’s coverage of the conflict to be. As the principal architects and advocates of international non intervention in Spain, the government was keen to cool domestic debate and ardour about events in a country that had previously seemed remote, but had come to resonate with ideological, political and military significance. It was also very concerned about international impression management, particularly among nations where the principles of public broadcasting were imperfectly understood and the BBC was assumed to operate as the mouthpiece of government.

In the title to this paper I have posed Eden’s quote as a question to signify the purpose and focus of my analysis, which is to assess the extent to which the BBC complied with the government’s wishes. Some versions of broadcasting history in 1930s Britain appear to suggest that the BBC willingly and consistently subordinated itself to the wishes of the British State. For example, Bryan Haworth has written of the ‘staid respectability’, ‘old-guard rectitude’ and ‘unimaginative trustworthiness’ of the BBC senior management during this period (1981: 51-2). It is my contention that this picture of passivity does not capture adequately the political issues raised by the BBC’s response to the Spanish Civil War. Through the detail of my analysis I shall show that the state-broadcast relationship, on this matter at least, was characterised as much by conflict as it was by complicity.

The issues examined in the paper will include:

- How the British government’s news management strategy over the BBC and Spain fitted within its general political and propaganda strategies in the conflict.
- How they perceived the BBC’s editorial coverage of the war.
- The respective significance of news bulletins and ‘news talks’ in the BBC’s coverage.
- How BBC editors were forced to counter ‘flak’ from other national media organisations alongside pressures from government.
- The high level negotiations conducted between the BBC’s senior management and senior Foreign Office sources in 1937 that aimed to diffuse an increasingly acrimonious and distrustful relationship fuelled by the conflict in Spain.

The paper draws upon a lengthy research investigation funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and which has recently been published as a book by Edinburgh University Press (see Deacon, 2008). This research has uncovered new archival evidence about the BBC’s relationship with the government during the war, in particular private

correspondence in March 1937 between Sir John Reith, the BBC's Director General, and Sir Robert Vansittart, then Permanent Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs at the Foreign Office, in which the government spelled out explicit stipulations about how the corporation should proceed in its coverage of the conflict.

**David Deacon's** published work has covered communication theory, media production, journalism, public relations, political communication, cultural studies, audience research, policy analysis and election research. He is the lead author of a major research method text book for media and cultural studies, which has just been published in its second edition (Deacon et al, 2007). His latest book (2008) is on the media and the Spanish Civil War.