

## **The War of the Airwaves in Portugal during the 1930s**

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The “war of the airwaves” first appeared in Portugal during the second half of the 1930s. Interest in influencing Portuguese public opinion led a number of countries to seek out special relations with Portuguese radio stations and to produce shortwave broadcasts that could be listened to in the country that had been under the rule of an authoritarian regime since 1933 – the Estado Novo (New State).

The paper, which is based on archive research in Lisbon, London and Caversham, will describe and analyse the impact of the shortwave broadcasts to Portugal during the 1930s by the Soviet Union, Germany, Italy and United Kingdom. Furthermore, this will be presented in the context of the Portuguese media landscape in the 1930s, which was marked by a strong censorship apparatus and very incipient broadcasting. Portuguese radio stations were amateur throughout the 1930s. The sole exception was the state-run Emissora Nacional, which started to operate in 1935 and, besides being severely controlled, had only a small budget on which to operate since the Head of Government, Salazar, did not understand the need for or have any interest in creating a powerful official radio station.

The paper will start by addressing the Soviet Union’s broadcasts in Portuguese. Radio Moscow’s transmissions started in 1932 and were dedicated to spreading the Bolshevist ideology, which made them mostly of interest to those who defended communism, an ideology that had been identified by the Portuguese Head of Government as the main threat to humanity. Despite being the first foreign broadcasts in Portuguese, their impact on Portugal was minimal.

Broadcasting in Germany, similar to its role in the Soviet Union, played a particularly important role in the internal and external championing of National Socialist regime. Besides being the country that invested most in broadcasts in Portuguese during the 1930s, Germany was the major power that expressed most interest in cultivating regular contact with the state-run Emissora Nacional station. The Germans clearly dominated this period of propaganda in Portugal, with a reach extending beyond radio to include diverse cultural activities.

The German shortwave broadcasts in Portuguese started in 1936 and were the first to have a significant impact in the country, even though the number of radio sets in Portugal at that time was still very small. Nevertheless, the German broadcasts in Portuguese were reported in the press and they received considerable attention from radio enthusiasts. Following the end of the Berlin Games, the transmission of news bulletins in Portuguese resumed in 1937. This led the British Ambassador in Lisbon to express his concern regarding the impact such broadcasts would have on influencing Portuguese public opinion. Moreover, the Axis powers’ shortwave broadcasts to Portugal were not limited to those of the Reichs Rundfunk Gesellschaft (RRG), the Italians too began broadcasting a Portuguese news bulletin in January 1938.

The British response to the German and Italian broadcasts in Portuguese was very effective. Nevertheless, it is also a fact that the BBC broadcasts in Portuguese appeared much later than those of the Axis powers. Although the BBC Empire Service was one of the first in the world to produce regular broadcasts aimed abroad, the usage of radio broadcasting in foreign languages for propaganda purposes was considered to be something that only dictatorships and not democratic regimes did, due to the derogatory meaning that the concept of “propaganda” had acquired in Britain following the First World War. Furthermore, contrary to its rival stations, the BBC had to deal with a shortage of money, which meant that each language service established by the BBC involved discussions with the Foreign Office for a supplementary budget.

In 1939, the number of countries covered by the BBC Empire Service grew from six to fourteen, including Portugal and Spain, where the main aim was to counterattack the German RRG. In actual fact, shortwave broadcasts to the Iberian Peninsula only began on 4 June 1939, following insistent requests by the British Ambassador in Lisbon. Influencing Portuguese public opinion was a primary aim of all foreign propaganda services operating in Portugal. On the British side, besides counterattacking German propaganda, getting the message across to the Portuguese public was particularly important since the Estado Novo seemed to be ideologically closer to the continental authoritarian regimes. Against that background, the British Ambassador in Lisbon and the Foreign Office considered the broadcasts by the BBC to be essential to strengthen propaganda activities in Portugal.

As will be demonstrated, the German, Italian and British interest in Portugal can only be explained by the nature of its political regime, its geographical location and its relationship with Franco’s Spain. The number of wireless receivers was low compared to most European countries and if the number of potential listeners were in actual fact the only factor of import, then broadcasts to Portugal would not have been considered a priority. Therefore, similar to what had occurred with the Axis broadcasts, the quick investment made in the BBC Portuguese Service was politically motivated. This hypothesis is sustained by the fact that the British Embassy in Lisbon was very concerned that the Estado Novo might not support the British in the event of a crisis that was becoming more inevitable and foreseeable as time progressed.

The research presented in the paper is essentially document-based, drawing on sources that have hitherto been unexplored or that have never been used for a study of radio broadcasting. Since written documents were the major source for the research, these were submitted to triangulation. The representativeness, authenticity and credibility of the documents were also taken into account.

**Nelson Ribeiro** is author of two books and several articles on the history of Portuguese radio, focusing on the influence of politics in broadcasting during the Estado Novo dictatorship (1933-1974) and in the period that followed the Carnation Revolution in 1974.