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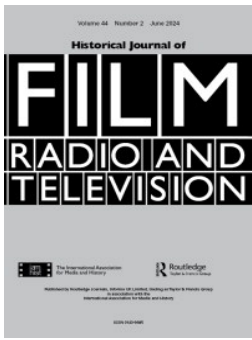
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A SINGLE WOODEN HOUSE STANDING IN STALINGRAD: ALEXANDER WERTH'S 'RUSSIAN COMMENTARY' ON THE BBC DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

James Rodgers

This article studies the reporting of Alexander Werth from the Soviet Union for the BBC during World War II. Werth's despatches, broadcast mostly under the title 'Russian Commentary', sought to bring to life the struggles of an ideologically opposed nation that had become an ally against Nazi Germany. The article analyses Werth's technique as a correspondent, situating it within the wider political and propaganda climate within which he was working. It assesses his work's significance for the study of ideas of journalistic objectivity in wartime. It looks too at the optimism his reporting expressed as the tide of war began to turn in the allies' favour—a change that Werth saw as a sign that the Soviet Union's wartime alliance would endure beyond the end of the conflict—a hope that was crushed by the onset of the Cold War, and renewed enmity between Moscow and the West.

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Introduction

Alexander Werth's assignment to the wartime Soviet Union was both a professional and a personal journey: one that forced him to negotiate political tensions, and made him a participant in 'the greatest propaganda battle in the history of warfare', as Philip M. Taylor put it.¹ The war in which that battle was a front had brought together bitter ideological rivals—'three most unlikely musketeers', in the words of David Reynolds and Vladimir Pechatnov, in their book on Stalin's wartime correspondence with Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt—the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States.² The weapon most suited to a propaganda battle in that media age was radio. The British Prime Minister at the outbreak of hostilities with Hitler's Germany in September 1939, Neville Chamberlain, announced the declaration of war on the BBC.³ The next month, Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, and due to become prime minister the following year, gave his first wartime broadcast on the BBC—one perhaps most famous now for its inclusion of his description of Moscow's intentions as 'a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma'.⁴ Two years later, Hitler's forces had attacked the Soviet Union. Moscow's purpose was then clear: to drive the invader from Soviet soil. The outbreak of war was announced over the radio there, too. Half a million speakers were set up across the Soviet capital so that the people could hear Vyacheslav Molotov—who had given his name to the non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany—broadcast the news.⁵ Eleven days later, it was the turn of the Soviet leader to take to the airwaves to raise the nation's morale. 'Listeners heard Stalin walk with heavy steps towards the microphone, fill his glass with water and begin'.⁶

Radio had risen to dominance in the period since Europe had last been to war, two decades earlier. In his 1942 memoir *Russian Glory*, Philip Jordan, then correspondent in Moscow for the *News Chronicle*, wrote of 'the great lattice tower of the Comintern Radio that hangs above the city like a minaret of the twentieth century' (in this century, it still dominates the skyline of a district south of the city centre).⁷ As the British journalist, and first ever British female correspondent in the Soviet Union, Charlotte Haldane, wrote of her arrival in Moscow in the fall of 1941, 'Every correspondent in a foreign country now, of course, relies on the radio both for news and propaganda'.⁸ Leaders were already aware of the awesome power of the new medium, and feared it sufficiently to want to control it. When war broke out, the Soviet government 'confiscated all private radio sets'.⁹ Life had never been easy for foreign correspondents in Soviet Russia. British and American reporters in particular were unpopular for the way that their governments and publications had fervently hoped for the death at birth of the Soviet regime. They had backed the opposite side in the civil war that followed the Bolsheviks' seizure of power in 1917. With rare exceptions, Soviet borders were closed under Stalin, a leader who believed of foreign journalists that, 'while a few could be usefully manipulated, their real function was to discredit the Soviet Union, which made them essentially spies'.¹⁰

As I have argued elsewhere, 'The story of western correspondents in Russia is the story of Russia's attitude to the west. Since the revolution of 1917, Russia has at different times been open to western ideas and contacts; cautious, and distant;

all but closed off'.¹¹ That last, alas, is especially true today when many international news organizations, fearing for the safety of their staff, have withdrawn, or drastically scaled back, their representation in Russia. The dangers are real. At the time of writing, March 2024, two correspondents working for western news media, Evan Gershkovich of the *Wall Street Journal*, and Alsu Kurmasheva of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, are in prison in Russia on charges relating to their work as journalists. Gershkovich is charged with espionage. He strongly denies the charges. Kurmasheva, who holds both United States and Russian citizenship, and who was based in Prague at the time of her arrest, was detained after travelling to Russia for a family emergency.¹² She was charged with failing to register as a foreign agent. The Committee to Protect Journalists called her detention, 'yet more proof that Russia is determined to stifle independent reporting'.¹³ Independent reporting had been similarly stifled for most of the early Soviet period. With the USSR at war with Nazi Germany, the situation changed. Enduring ideological suspicion lived in tension with military necessity. The formation of the wartime alliance between Moscow, London, and Washington offered opportunities to report from the Soviet Union where there had been very few before.

Werth: returning Russian, and newly-arrived foreign correspondent

Alexander Werth was one journalist well placed to take advantage of those new opportunities. Werth had been born in Saint Petersburg in 1901. He left Russia after the revolution. In the summer of 1941, he went back for his first visit since his 'boyhood years', a trip that lasted until November the same year.¹⁴ In the spring of 1942, he returned to the Soviet Union. The BBC in wartime needed material from the Soviet Union, and Werth was settled on as the solution. Given the threat that Britain faced from Nazi Germany, few there had any doubts as to their role in the 'propaganda battle'. As Asa Briggs wrote of the BBC during the Battle of Britain in 1940, 'BBC staff felt themselves to be in the front line'.¹⁵ In keeping with that patriotic, martial, mood, a BBC internal memorandum before Werth's departure mentioned that 'any dispatches which pay a tribute to the extent of British help' would be 'particularly welcome'.¹⁶ If Werth provided an answer to a problem of material from Moscow that the BBC had been trying to solve for some time, he was not the perfect solution. The same memo noted that there had been 'difficulties' with Werth in the past. Additional, handwritten, comments suggest Werth 'was not objective enough in his reporting'.¹⁷ This was something that was to dog his career: a suspicion that his Russian origins meant he was 'too "Russianised" even "Sovietised"'—this despite his family's having fled Russia because his father, Adolf Werth, was 'intimately connected in the political circles of the Constitutional Democrat Party' one of the political organizations banned by the Bolsheviks when they seized power in the 1917 October revolution.¹⁸ From another perspective, though, it was exactly this connection to Russia—and fluency in the language—that made him such an asset to the BBC, and his *Russian Commentary* despatches such an invaluable part of British and

international audiences' understanding of the situation in the wartime Soviet Union. It soon regularly drew in more than four million listeners.¹⁹

Preparing for his return to Russia, Werth broadcast at the end of January 1942 a despatch for 'Britain Speaks' for the BBC North American Service. It is a sign of the age in which the piece was produced that the transcript preserved in the archive has recorded for the future the name of the censor—Lanham Titchener—whereas those of producer, studio manager, etc are not mentioned as they might be in less troubled times. Werth tells his audience, 'I spent the first four months of this war in Russia and am shortly going back again'.²⁰ In the broadcast, Werth reflects on the dual nature of his arrival. 'I knew my Russians. I knew them in the old days when I spent part of my boyhood in old St. Petersburg, before the Revolution. I knew they were tough babies'.²¹ Then he continues, 'But I had not been in Russia for 24 years; and from the moment I landed at the airfield in Moscow, I felt I was in a new country'.²² As he warms to his subject, Werth writes of a people, 'defending their Russia, their Soviet Russia. The two words have become inseparable. They are defending their country, and also a social system'. The despatch concluded with Werth—no doubt bearing very strongly in mind the British media organization for which he was working, and also the audience in the United States to which he was broadcasting—making blunt policy recommendations, 'But remember, Russia has to bear the brunt of the German onslaught, and she must have more and more tanks and airplanes'.²³ According to the archive, Werth even used the American English 'airplane'—presumably part of an attempt to engage his listener in the U.S.—where 'aeroplane' would of course have been more normal in British English. Yet the emphasis on the Soviet war effort being inspired by a desire to defend not only land, but also 'a social system' was also the kind of line that led to Werth being suspected of being too engaged with a particular political perspective.

Werth's engagement with the people—the 'tough babies' he claimed to know so well—is perhaps the greatest strength of *Russian Commentary*. Werth wrote of the remarkable sights he saw in wartime Moscow, all of them helping to fit into an overall narrative of unbreakable determination; of a people united behind the Soviet armed forces. In a broadcast from August 1942, he recounted seeing 'a detachment of Cossack cavalry' riding down one of the main Moscow streets.²⁴ The officer at the head of the column lifted 'a little boy of five or six, barefooted and with tattered clothes' up into his saddle 'and gave him a joyride for three or four hundred yards, much to the delight of the populace'.²⁵ Later in the same piece, Werth told of his meeting with Olga, a Moscow factory worker: his account of an apparently chance encounter turning into a tale of strength and sacrifice that also contained a barely-disguised piece of popular advocacy for western military support. Werth told his audience that Olga worked 11 hours, six days a week, and sometimes two to three days on end. 'The thought that Russia might lose the war perhaps never entered her head, though she often repeated, "we really must have that second front."'²⁶ Werth has met Olga and her friend Vera at the theatre. After the show, he walks with them to their tram stop. 'The full moon was shining over the towers and domes of the Kremlin. Olga said pensively, "Our beloved leader working there." She'd said it said it quite earnestly without

the slightest affectation, and added, “And what a terrible lot of work he’s got to do these days.”²⁷ In case his audience has not taken the point, Werth explained, ‘If I’ve dwelt so long on this ordinary factory girl it’s because I think it provides a specially good insight into the life and mood of the Russian working class youth. These young people love life, they love theatres and dances, and yet they’re a hundred per cent in the war’.²⁸ The listener also learned of ‘Olga’s two dead brothers, of whom she doesn’t like to speak’—given by Werth of an example of the link ‘between the factory and the army’. From its delight at seeing cavalry in one of the capital’s principal thoroughfares, to the unbreakable work ethic of bereaved sister, the message is clear: this is a population that sees itself very much as part of the war effort.

It is not surprising, given the extent of Soviet deaths—some 26 million—during the Second World War, that Werth dwells on sacrifice as he does. He would not have had to look far to find those who had lost loved ones. The month after his meeting with Olga, Werth told the story of the man who looked after ‘a little shop where privileged foreigners are allowed to buy at pre-war prices various bits of clothing, toothbrushes, and other odds and ends’.²⁹ The shopkeeper says he was, ‘a much younger man a year ago’.³⁰ He goes on to explain that he has aged because of the fate of his three brothers, the youngest of whom,

was reported missing at Zhitomir³¹ early on in the war. Another brother has a terrible headwound. They cut part of his skull away. He’s back at work now, but when he gets tired he begins to talk awful rubbish. I am afraid his mind’s not all right. My third brother was badly shell-shocked. He’s not right either.³²

Werth was writing for audiences in Britain and beyond many of whom would have known people who had suffered from ‘shell shock’ in the First World War, that had ended little more than two decades earlier. The effect is to bring home to an audience far beyond the Soviet Union a sense of the great sacrifice their ally is making: a sacrifice that echoes, though on a new scale, that of which they had first-hand experience not so long before.

Don’t believe the literary cranks

As a correspondent who was at once a Russian and a foreigner, Werth realized that the task before him was to create for his British and international audiences a sense of a place only a very tiny number of them had ever visited, and which very few ever would. In addition to describing the strength in adversity that he encountered—a quality with which his audiences could identify, or admire—in *Russian Commentary* Werth also sought out similarities between two vastly different societies in order to help his audiences’ understanding. In August 1943, he described travelling by road through the Russian province of Tula, south of Moscow. ‘As we drove along the Tula-Orel highway, though beautiful mellow country, which was like Buckinghamshire or Berkshire, we saw to our right the burnt-out shell of the big school on Tolstoy’s estate, Yasnaya Polyana’.³³ Leaving aside the question of whether that part of rural Russia, devastated and scarred then by two years of

war, really did look like the ‘home counties’ of southern England, Werth’s technique is clear: describing a landscape that his audience either knew personally, or could easily picture, with one they would most probably never see for themselves. For good measure, he adds the detail of a ruined school, that destruction a crime not only against education, but also an act of sacrilege against one of the gods of Russian literature whose name would have been familiar to many listeners. In the summer of 1942, with Leningrad having been under siege since the previous fall—a siege that would eventually lead to the deaths of some 1.5 million people, many from starvation—Werth reported

I’ve seen a Leningrad film which I hope will be shown in Britain very shortly. Yes, London could take it—it could take the blitz. Leningrad’s people in addition to the blitz, though admittedly not so serious as London, also took hunger and cold, no heating and no water except that drawn from holes in the ice.³⁴

Werth’s phrase, ‘Yes, London could take it’ is a reference to the Second World War propaganda film *London Can Take It*, narrated by the American journalist Quentin Reynolds, who was later in Moscow. Werth reported in *Russian Commentary* broadcast on the 8 May 1943 that he and Reynolds had been to meet a group of women undergraduates who had put aside their books and gone to serve in an artillery unit. The following month, Werth has once again encountered Olga, the factory worker whom he had previously met with her friend Vera at the theatre (given the way that the Soviets were fond of keeping tabs on foreigners by sending loyal citizens to befriend them, the cynical listener might have wondered whether these meetings were purely coincidental), who this time is exchanging letters with a young officer at the front.³⁵ The officer, whose entire family—mother, wife, little daughter—had died in the war, had read about Olga in a newspaper report of her winning a prize for being one of her factory’s best workers. In a broadcast three days earlier, Werth had conjured up an image of the summertime peace in the Soviet Union that had been smashed apart by Nazi invasion. He spoke of ‘holidays in the Caucasus’ or on ‘beautifully comfortable river steamers’. That despatch ended, ‘Don’t believe the literary cranks who say that the Russians are different from other people, that they enjoy suffering. Like you and me, every Russian loves holidays and a good time’.³⁶ Werth sought to impress on his listeners that the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union, together with the United States, were fighting a common enemy; fighting for the right to enjoy civilized, peaceful, lives and the leisure time that went with them. By that summer of 1943, the Battle of Stalingrad had been won, and Soviet forces had begun their advance that would end eventually in Berlin, two years later. Much suffering still lay ahead before victory. The *Russian Commentary* that featured the shopkeeper with the damaged and missing brothers was broadcast as the Battle of Stalingrad was in its early stages. ‘Every Russian has a score to settle’, Werth told his audience.³⁷ Werth would be there as the Soviets triumphed at Stalingrad, a battle which, back in September 1942, he suggested, might ‘prove the turning point of the war’.³⁸

Stalingrad: imagine the centre of Coventry multiplied a hundred times

‘The moral and psychological significance of Stalingrad is colossal’, was the verdict of the then Soviet ambassador to London—and prolific diarist—Ivan Maisky. ‘Never before in military history has a powerful army, itself besieging a city, itself become a besieged stronghold that was then annihilated’.³⁹ The Soviet authorities’ pre-war distrust of foreign journalists had not been swept away by the advent of the alliance with western powers. Haldane herself had conceded, reflecting on the lack of press access she experienced on arrival in Moscow, ‘The Russians, of course, had a very good case. Throughout almost the entire period of Soviet rule, they had not only been criticized, but vilified and calumniated in the world’s Press, particularly in the American Press’.⁴⁰ She went on, though, ‘there is no doubt in my mind, nevertheless, that they exaggerated the dangers of allowing correspondents too much freedom, and under-estimated the benefits that would accrue to themselves and the Soviet Union’.⁴¹ In the aftermath of this ‘colossal’ victory, such reluctance to grant correspondents access briefly evaporated.

‘I’m writing this message to the BBC from a dug-out in the side of a steep cliff overlooking the Volga’, began Werth’s *Russian Commentary* broadcast on 9 February 1943 (and read out on air, as many of his contributions were, by Joseph Macleod).⁴² The dramatic opening line set the tone for a piece of radio that sought to convey the enormity of what had happened there. Werth’s approach was to pick out details and individuals who could help him tell the story. Werth quoted one soldier who had told him of days when, ‘Normally I should have put a bullet through my own head rather than endure this, but I and everybody here knew we must stick it because the whole Russian people and the whole world were expecting it of us’.⁴³ To reinforce this sense of common struggle, for the good of civilization, Werth also drew on his technique of finding details of Soviet Russia that would resonate with audiences in Britain. From a vantage point outside the dug-out, he sees a cloud of white smoke rising from a fire at the foot of the cliff. ‘What they were burning was something very familiar to so many of us in England – bomb wreckage’.⁴⁴ Later, he describes ‘hundreds of German lorries and other vehicles’, now abandoned by the defeated invader. ‘If you forget for a moment that you’re at Stalingrad, you might think of yourself on some southern beach in England with hundreds of cars parked on it’.⁴⁵ Werth walks through the rubble, where, ‘a frozen hand or leg with a boot protruded, grotesque rather than frightening’. Here his challenge is to give his audience a sense of the scale of what has been blasted away. ‘Can you imagine the centre of Coventry multiplied a hundred times or the worst blitzed patches of London all put together and perhaps multiplied five times and you might get a remote idea of Stalingrad’, is the comparison he settles on. ‘There’s literally not a single house left standing’, he says, then checks himself. ‘No, that’s not true’, he admits, after his eye has been caught by, ‘One little wooden house—and that’s all I could find of normal human habitation in a town the size of Manchester’.⁴⁶ The conversations with soldiers, and the descriptions of destruction evoking the shattered areas of English cities, are all leading up to a dramatic finale that might take away the audience’s breath as they imagine the scene. Early in his despatch, Werth cited official Soviet figures of

90,000 prisoners, including 23 generals and 2500 officers. Now—as witness to a great Soviet propaganda coup—he is brought to see some of them. Werth finds that two ordinary German soldiers have something, ‘rather humanly naïve about them’. The senior officers clearly disgust him. ‘There’s absolutely nothing to choose between the Nazis and the German generals who are supposed to be more gentlemanly’. Werth’s response to them is one of the most striking lines of his lengthy report. ‘Behind lock and key they radiated venom’, he says, then seeks to belittle the medals that stand as symbols of their elevation within an evil system. ‘With their monocles and iron crosses and new Nazi decorations looking like mantelpiece ornaments’.⁴⁷ Werth’s despatch does not refer to the prediction he had made at the start of the battle, that it might prove the turning point of the war. Instead he concentrates on the present, his remarkable access in witnessing such sights as ‘the degenerate sadistic face of a prisoner like General Von Arnim’, and the yard above ‘one of the final German strongholds’—above because the bombardments were so intense that the command posts were underground—where he saw, ‘the remains of a dead horse from which most of the meat had been cut off. At one side lay many German corpses in strange frozen positions’.⁴⁸

Aside from the experience of witnessing such horrific sights, and coming face to face with the commanders of the army responsible, Werth must have had a busy week. *The Times* of February 10th, the morning after the broadcast of his *Russian Commentary* on Stalingrad, published a piece ‘In Devastated Stalingrad’⁴⁹ ‘from our Special Correspondent’. The report includes the same scenes and incidents, including a meeting with the captured generals, that featured in the radio broadcast. Newspapers then did not generally use bylines—hence the ‘special correspondent’—but given Werth’s status as *Sunday Times* correspondent (and the next edition of that newspaper did name him as “Sunday Times” Special War Correspondent’—by then he was back in Moscow), he presumably was also the author of that piece.⁵⁰ In the *Sunday Times* the following weekend, Werth reported on his trip to Stalingrad, and quoted soldiers already anticipating the next stage of the war; the Red Army on the advance. “We are going to the Ukraine to give them more Stalingrads,” said one young soldier, his merry eyes gleaming between his muffler and fur cap.”⁵¹ In this newspaper report, Werth begins to assess the strategic significance of what he has witnessed, yet even in his later writing, after many years of reflection, the face of Von Arnim seems to have continued to haunt him. In a book not published until 1964, *Russia At War*, Werth still recalled, writing of the moment the correspondents were brought before the captured Nazi commanders. ‘The most unpleasant of them was General Von Arnim’.⁵² This was not the only occasion when Werth and other correspondents were shown captured German soldiers. Haldane wrote of an encounter in the fall of 1941, when she concluded of a captured German airman, ‘I could not see any hope, in a civilized world, for such as he’.⁵³ Haldane wrote this after realizing that one of the air crew she had met had not only been responsible for a raid in which she and fellow correspondents had been bombed, but learning too that one of them had flown bombing raids over London, where she had seen ‘corpses of mothers and little children’ in a mortuary after one such raid.⁵⁴ For correspondents during the Second World War, the professional and the personal inevitably merged. Werth

had returned to the country his family had fled when he was a boy to witness its suffering under attack from a hostile power bent on destroying its government, and seizing its territory.

Illustration

Book cover of “Leningrad 1943” with caption **Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.**

III

Journalism, the personal and the professional

It is a challenge for any international correspondent in any era to strike the balance between becoming familiar with a country, its people, and its culture, in order better to explain it, and becoming so absorbed that they see it too closely, and thus lack the perspective that might better assist their audiences’ understanding. Even if Werth, as a foreign correspondent from an allied power, enjoyed certain privileges, they did not blind him to the extreme hardship that surrounded him. The piece on the fate of the brothers of the shopkeeper catering to ‘privileged foreigners’ showed the proximity of privilege and great misfortune. Werth’s task was to tell the story of what he saw, but inevitably—given what he witnessed, and his own family history—the listener must also have got a sense of what he felt. This was despite the fact that his actual words were often read by another—perhaps not always for purely technical reasons (these being the difficulty of reliable broadcast connexions between Moscow and London). A BBC memorandum from later in Werth’s career, in 1949, offered the view that, ‘he is not, as you probably know, a great broadcaster’.⁵⁵

Whatever the circumstances of his family’s departure from revolutionary Russia, Werth’s work is shot through with a sense of outrage at what was being done to his native land, and especially his native city, by then called Leningrad. Werth was the only British correspondent to reach Leningrad while it was under German blockade, an experience he wrote about in his later book *Leningrad 1943: Inside a City Under Siege*, ‘even now, after an absence of more than 25 years, I knew every street corner, and the stones of Leningrad had more meaning to me than those of any other town except perhaps London and Paris’.⁵⁶ At times, Werth’s reporting sought to bridge the geographical, cultural, and political distances between those cities he held so dear. ‘What’s the attitude of Russians to their Allies at the present moment?’ he asked in a despatch broadcast in late June 1943. He went on to answer his rhetorical question, ‘I think they’re as friendly as ever, and that lasting co-operation with the Allies will help solve two great problems in their minds: post-war security for their country [...] and, secondly, a vast programme for their country’s reconstruction’. Werth continued in the same piece by reporting on Soviet hopes for a ‘Second Front on the European Continent’.⁵⁷ This, of course, was a long-standing Soviet request to their allies. As Reynolds and

Pechatnov's work has made clear, it was also a frequent theme of correspondence between Stalin, Churchill, and Roosevelt—one which, in a message as early as September 1941 (almost two years before Werth wrote that line) conveyed something close to 'gut-churning panic'.⁵⁸

Did Werth himself experience something similar at times? It must have been hard not too, being in Moscow in the fall of 1941 as German forces approached the Soviet capital. In addition to the passages in *Russian Commentary* where Werth strove to stress similarities between Russia and the cities and countryside of England, he was also happy sometimes to be more direct, relaying Soviet propaganda, one example being in the summer of 1943, as the Battle of Kursk began. In the *Russian Commentary* broadcast on July 7th, Werth translated a lengthy extract from an editorial that had appeared in *Red Star*, the Soviet military newspaper. 'We are sons of the Soviet Union, sons of Russia. Great is our anger and our fury and our hatred towards the base invaders; great is our love for our country'. Hit back hard!⁵⁹ Later the same month, the battle won by the Soviets, Werth sought to correct perceived shortcomings on the part of his fellow journalists. 'I think there was some feeling here that the Kursk victory didn't get a good enough showing in the British-American press'.⁶⁰ This seems to have been a sensitive matter. The copy of the script held in the BBC archives has hand-written corrections: 'feeling', for example, is written in over a crossed-out 'annoyance' in the original typescript. It is impossible to be certain at this distance whether such corrections were agreed with Werth, or simply added by editors. This despatch was broadcast about a year and a half after the BBC internal memo, cited above, that had referred to earlier 'difficulties' with Werth, and had questioned his objectivity—so this seems to have been a continuing internal debate at a time when the BBC was acutely aware of its role in the propaganda battle that was part of the war that was consuming so much of Europe. Nor did Werth balk writing of some of the grimmer details of that war. On July 21st, he reported in *Russian Commentary*, 'the public hanging of eight traitors' in an area recently liberated from Nazi occupation.⁶¹ The execution, he said, 'was unreservedly welcomed by everybody in Russia. It is no use being squeamish. The Russian people have suffered at the hands of the Gestapo what most of us never dreamed of'.⁶² A more objective account of these hangings might have considered whether such a spectacle was justifiable. Werth, having admonished any audience member tending to squeamishness, conveys the propaganda value he sees it carrying. 'It is a signal that the day of reckoning is near. It is a stern warning to all Russians who in the occupied parts of the country may still be co-operating with the Gestapo'.⁶³

For a discussion of Werth's objectivity, it is instructive for context to look beyond his BBC work, too. Werth was technically freelance—hence his work at the same time for the *Sunday Times*—and also a prolific author, including of *Moscow War Diary*, published in 1942. Here, the BBC had little control over what a freelance contributor might write. Recounting discussions with westerners in Moscow, Werth suggests that, 'Stalin has been severely handicapped by the absence of effective propaganda on his behalf'.⁶⁴ Werth also defends Stalin's decision to purge the Red Army (although he concedes it 'probably became more extensive than was at first considered necessary') and the Soviet policy of 'appeasement towards Nazi

Germany' on the grounds that for the Soviets 'another year without war meant invincibility'.⁶⁵ One of Werth's interlocutors questions the Soviets' 'turning Estonia and Latvia into Soviet Republics, instead of leaving them their old régime'. Werth suggests—in a turn of phrase that to contemporary ears cannot fail to echo some of the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, in his justification of his invasion of Ukraine, that the answer is 'perhaps because Estonia and Latvia aren't really *countries*' (italics in original).⁶⁶

Yet Werth's vision then was not of Europe today where large-scale war has returned. In common with his reporting in *Russian Commentary* of the Russian hope for post-war security and reconstruction, Werth too hoped to see such a future for Europe. *Moscow War Diary* concludes with the uplifting vision that, 'With a *rapprochement* between Russia and Britain, Russia will, I am convinced, become increasingly democratic and European—the Russian people want to be both'.⁶⁷ It was not how things were to turn out. This kind of idealism was soon dashed by the coming of the Cold War. Werth, though, did not lose faith in the Soviet system. His 1969 book, *Russia: Hopes and Fears*, praised 'The Soviet Union, with 236 million inhabitants', as 'the world's greatest welfare state'.⁶⁸ The book had 'been intended as a companion volume to my *Russia at War* first published in 1964'.⁶⁹ Its original title had been *Russia At Peace*. With the Soviet Union having sent troops into Czechoslovakia earlier in 1968, as Werth was finishing the book, the title was changed on the grounds that the original would have been, as the author himself admitted, 'slightly incongruous, if not downright offensive'.⁷⁰

'Russian Commentary': the historiographical significance of a twentieth century window to the West

Werth remained in the Soviet Union until after the end of the war. In the fall of 1943, he was able—with the permission of the Soviet authorities—to make a return to the city of his birth, Leningrad, as the day approached that the murderous blockade of the former Russian imperial capital, and 'cradle of the revolution, as Soviet mythology termed it, approached. The following year, he became the first correspondent to enter the Nazi death camp at Majdanek in Poland. According to Werth's son, Nicolas, the BBC refused to broadcast the report in which Werth 'described the gas chambers, and the methods of mass extermination of the Jews'.⁷¹ Werth, previously suspected of not being objective enough, was now told he had been caught up in, 'a Soviet propaganda operation, a set-up. You have been tricked'.⁷² Even eyewitness testimony could not make the distant listener believe the monstrous horrors they heard described. It was too shocking to be true.

'Russian Commentary' was in one sense very much a product of its time, and of the correspondent who provided it. Yet in precisely this sense it raises broader questions. The wartime Soviet Union Werth saw was the one about which the BBC's audiences heard about: in short, the Soviet Union he saw was the one they saw. And the Soviet Union Werth saw was, in turn, one he wanted to see: the one whose people he 'knew'. For, despite his family's history in having fled Russia when the Bolsheviks took power, Werth clearly desperately wanted to believe in the noble and democratic intentions of the regime. The BBC's internal debates

about his objectivity—reliability, even—or otherwise are echoed wherever a correspondent is suspected of having sympathies in war or other conflict, especially when those sympathies are suspected on grounds of nationality, or faith. In his book on the Six Day War, the BBC's Middle East editor, Jeremy Bowen, refers to the incredulity with which despatches by the corporation's correspondent in Jerusalem, Michael Elkins, were received in London. Elkins was ahead of the rest of the press corps when he correctly reported Israel's stunning military victory, but, because he was an Israeli and a Jew, he was thought to have 'spoken with the tongue of the prophets', and his work was suspected of being overly influenced by Israeli propaganda.⁷³

The USSR shown to BBC audiences was seen through Werth's own personal and political lens, yes, but he was able to show—by talking to shopkeepers, soldiers, and factory workers—a picture others could not capture. One is reminded of Hobsbawm's assessment of the work of another British correspondent seen, in his time, as too close to the Soviets: Morgan Philips Price. 'Talking to peasants, merchants, soldiers, overhearing conversations on Volga boats, Price recorded what he correctly described as "the only true voice of Russia". And he got it right'.⁷⁴ Price got it right in the sense that he predicted that the Bolshevik regime would survive, when the British and American political and editorial establishments, as noted above, confidently, and wrongly, predicted it could not. Werth's optimism about Soviet society after the war was not vindicated, and the comparison of the Stalin-era Soviet constitution with the Magna Carta made in one 'Russian Commentary' broadcast did not age well.⁷⁵ Yet a journalist writing material to be broadcast almost immediately cannot be too harshly criticized for failing to predict the future. One strength of Werth's work today is that it gives us a sense of what life was like in the wartime Soviet Union, and it gave him a starting point for more profound reflections in his work of later years.

A comparative study between the predictions in his journalism and his more considered later writing on Soviet history and politics is potentially an interesting field for future research. Such inquiry might further understanding of the relationship between journalism and history written by journalists, especially if it were to consider too the disaffection in the later work of correspondents such as Haldane, Jordan, and Malcolm Muggeridge. In each case, their experience of living in the Soviet Union left them deeply disaffected, even disgusted, with a system in which they had once fervently believed. In her later memoir, *Truth Will Out*, Haldane recounted the experiences that destroyed her faith, particularly the memory of seeing in 1941 a toddler who had starved to death. This, she wrote, made her resolve never again to take to a platform in an attempt to convince people 'that the Soviet Union was the hope of the toilers of the world'.⁷⁶ This too is a reminder of the methodological imperative of considering the circumstances in which journalism is created—and therefore the nature of news reporting as a source for historical research. Correspondents' own political transitions, and the passage of time to reflect on the longer term significance of events experienced in the moment, are all important influences on their later work—while Werth's witnessing of the single wooden house speaks to us who never saw Stalingrad in a way that subsequent analysis of military strategy never could.

From a human point of view, much of what Werth witnessed in wartime would have been distressing in the extreme. From a professional point of view, he was one of a small number of international correspondents (although he proudly identified with his Russian roots) who were privileged to witness an extraordinary moment in Russian history and share it with a global audience of millions through the new medium of radio. In his poem *The Bronze Horseman*, Alexander Pushkin imagines the Russian tsar, Peter the Great, deciding on the location for the new city, Saint Petersburg, that will bear his name. The site is chosen to threaten western foes, in this case Sweden, and to 'cut a window' through to Europe. Werth's reporting did that for audiences during the Second World War, telling the stories of one of those times in European history when Russia made common cause with allies on the other side of the continent, and eventually intervened to change the course of that history.

Disclosure statement

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