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‘The whim of foreigners’: Language, Speech and Sound in Second World War British film and radio

‘I do not consider the names that have been familiar for generations in England should be altered to study the whim of foreigners ... Foreign names were made for Englishmen not Englishmen for foreign names’.¹ Winston Churchill’s 1945 minute to the Foreign Office which he dated ‘St George’s Day’ may have been a little playful. But his campaign on names, extending through the war years despite the weight of other business, was in earnest. In 1941 he told the Foreign Office: ‘I am going to give myself a treat while I am in charge’. He instructed them to use what he called ‘well-known names’ like Constantinople, Adrianople, Smyrna and Siam, while what he called their ‘foreign names’ should appear only in parenthesis, in brackets. In 1942, he instructed that ‘the words “Siam” and “Siamese” should invariably be used in future ... in place of “Thailand” and “Thai”’.²

Churchill’s mania for Anglicisation drew on a long history of imperialism that involved renaming countless mountains, rivers and places. It conflicted with wartime policy at the BBC which issued exactly opposite instructions: ‘always use Thai and Thailand, never Siam or Siamese’.³ Churchill nevertheless made successful wartime interventions at the BBC. In 1944 he sent a telegram to Bernard Bracken at the Ministry of Information: ‘Please try to introduce Aix la Chapelle instead of Aachen, which is pure Hun into your BBC statement’. Bracken’s reply assured him that when the capture of Aachen was announced, the BBC would make use of the ‘more civilised term’.⁴

Churchill's views on place names suggest a hierarchy of language with English at the apex and German, in a wartime context, at the bottom. In both twentieth-century world wars, British propaganda defined English against German — a language propagandists associated with barbarism — but in the First World War, before the advent of sound broadcasting and talkies, portrayals of the 'Hun' in anti-German propaganda could make comparatively little use of sound. The BBC banned the use of the term 'Hun' in 1937 as a 'derogatory reference to an ex-enemy', but it was widely used after 1939 and much favoured by Churchill in his wartime speeches.⁵ The term embedded Nazism in a long history in which the Second World War was just one more episode in an epic tale of aggression, militarism and destruction rooted in the character of German people. In the Second World War, unlike the First, these qualities could be conveyed on radio and film by speech and other sound.

There have been a number of recent calls for more attention to be given to the auditory in understanding modernity.⁶ Bruce Johnson dates an expansion in the voice's spatial and temporal reach from the 1870s when, through the invention of sound recording and related technologies, the radius of vocalised space was no longer limited by the presence of the human body.⁷ The twentieth-century development of radio and film sound tracks meant very considerable further expansion. Joy Damousi observes that from the 1920s: 'There was a move from learning about the world by looking ... to interpreting one's surroundings by listening to the radio, conversing on the telephone and going to the cinema'.⁸

The Second World War is an interesting moment to look at sound in British film and radio. Both played very significant roles in British propaganda. Such

significance prompted the government and the BBC to commission audience research about their reception, both at home and overseas, providing evidence about auditory perceptions. Britain also became increasingly multilingual with the arrival of refugees, exiled governments and troops from continental Europe, as well as war-workers and troops from empire. And it encompassed a wide range of English-speakers from different continents — Americans, Australians, Canadians, New Zealanders, West Indians.

When attention is given to language and speech in wartime media the focus is often on class in the presentation of a ‘people’s war’.⁹ This article traces the increasing diversity of English speech in wartime film and broadcasting not only by class and region, but also by different national identities within the English-speaking world. Such diversity was a key element in the presentation of what I call an ‘allies war’: one that portrayed unity between the Allied nations. But it did not extend to differences of language. The media continued to present a monolingual nation for a domestic audience — the non-English languages of Britain and its empire were rarely heard. Even so, many speakers of non-English languages worked in British cinema and at the BBC. The article looks at some of their contributions to wartime culture and their responses to the media’s investment in a monolingual Britain.

Differences of nationality had particular salience in wartime, signalling enemy or neutral, as well as ally. Language and speech were important markers of national difference, particularly between people of white ethnicity. But continental Europeans, both German and non-German, were rendered as English-speaking in film and radio for a domestic audience, with only occasional short bursts of their own languages.

The article considers how European resisters were nevertheless incorporated into the ‘allies war’ through differentiation of their sound and speech from German.

A view of English as civilised against other languages, particularly those heard as ‘mumbo-jumbo’ with its associations of the primitive, had a considerable history. But there were a range of wartime verdicts on who sounded civilised — a question that was contested both within and between nations. Churchill’s wartime campaign could be regarded as a final chapter in an imperial project that extended English power over language. The erosion of such power predated the war and became increasingly apparent when the war was over, but was signalled in wartime developments. Through a consideration of wartime media, the article traces one episode in the history of that erosion.

Presenting a ‘people’s war’ and ‘allies’ war’

At the outset of the war, there was considerable confidence at the BBC about how traditional British news-reading voices were heard by German audiences. In contrast to what it identified as ‘the abusive and vulgar methods sometimes used by the Germans’, the BBC suggested that its own ‘matter-of-fact style’ was ‘well-suited to the news, and may help to bring home to German listeners the contrast between realities and their own tendencious (*sic*) service. The traditional respect of the German for the English can be stimulated by a voice and a presentation which suggests firmness, dignity and Kaltbluetigkeit’.¹⁰ This assessment took for granted that news-readers and announcers spoke in received pronunciation in the formal

context in which they operated: one where, before 1939, they were required to wear dinner-jackets in the evening even though their audience could not see them.

The imperatives of a ‘people’s war’ pushed the BBC in new directions incorporating more regional and working-class accents. In 1941 the appointment of Wilfred Pickles as a news-reader was a decisive break with pre-war conventions. Pickles’s speech fell well outside ‘received pronunciation’ and prompted a large postbag at the BBC — a total of 1,878 letters, the majority of which objected to his ‘regional’ voice, heard his accent as ‘ugly’ and regarded his delivery as ‘deficient’. Letter-writers did not have the final word. The war prompted the BBC to introduce audience research which it regarded as more reliable evidence about responses to Pickles than the ‘self-selected sample’ provided by letter-writers. Its findings showed that his difference from all other news-readers was often emphasised to Pickles’s advantage — his voice heard as ‘a welcome change’ since it was ‘more homely and less aloof’, and seemed to give increased vigour to the presentation of the news. The report concluded that opinion about ‘regional’ voices: ‘turns very largely on desire for greater intimacy in place of what is considered colourless perfection of the orthodox news reader’.¹¹

J. B. Priestley had prepared the way for Pickles in 1940 in a series of highly popular Postscript broadcasts he made on Sunday nights in which he spoke about serious matters of national importance with a regional accent. These broadcasts attracted an audience of 30% of the adult population in 1940 rising to 40% in 1941.¹² The autobiographical details with which Priestley furnished his audience established a persona that merged working-class and middle-class, Northern and Southern identities

— his status as a broadcaster and novelist in the Isle of Wight combining with his Bradford origins and celebration of aspects of working-class life. Priestley's origins in Bradford gave him a similar regional accent to Pickles who was also from Yorkshire, although Priestley's was less pronounced. A hallmark of his broadcasts was intimacy, and it seems likely that, like Pickles, he was heard as 'homely' — the autobiographical details he provided certainly reinforced this. He described himself as 'a comfortable pipe-and-slippers man' and 'a civilian in the cheerful muddle of ordinary civilian life'.¹³ The popularity of his broadcasts at the height of invasion fears in 1940 suggests that, however briefly, Priestley was heard as speaking for the nation.

Before the war characters with regional and working-class accents were often comic: in feature films they provided light relief in plots where drama belonged to middle-class characters. Wartime home front films gave them more emotional complexity, showing disparate groups by class, region, gender, and age coming together across differences that were signalled to each other as well as to audiences chiefly through accent. Such groups often incorporated Scottish and Welsh characters. The Ministry of Information issued instructions early in the war that a focus on England should be avoided, and this kept Scottish and Welsh actors like Gordon Jackson and Mervyn Johns in steady wartime employment, although Northern Irishness received scant attention.¹⁴ *The Foreman Went to France* (1942) represents the 'togetherness' of Scottish Welsh and English through a recurrent device of wartime cinema for representing unity through sound: the sing-song. Those who participate are not only the Welsh factory foreman who has gone to France to rescue valuable equipment, but also the two British soldiers he enlists to help him — one

Scottish and the other English. The singsong extends togetherness beyond this male group to incorporate an American woman and French refugee children.¹⁵ *Millions Like Us* (1943) uses the same singsong device, again uniting Scottish, Welsh and English characters. It uses documentary footage to portray a lunchtime factory canteen entertainment and singsong, intercutting this with fictional shots of two factory workers — Celia who is English and her friend Gwen who is Welsh. The singing mingles with the sound of planes flying over, reminding Celia of the recent loss of her airman husband who was Scottish. Gwen gently prompts Celia out of her trance-like absorption in her loss, drawing her into the communal singing, its sound reaffirming the community and its commitment to the war effort.¹⁶

The range of wartime English-speakers in film and radio extended not only by class and the different nations of Britain but by a wide range of nations that were regarded as ‘the English-speaking peoples’. By 1944, the BBC team that reported the D-Day landings incorporated two Canadians, two Australians and Pierre Lefevre, born in New York to French parents.¹⁷ Lefevre had spent most of the war broadcasting on French programmes on the BBC European service. Following his recruitment to the D-Day team, British radio listeners may not have heard his voice as ‘foreign’. Chester Wilmot, one of the Australians on the team, described him as ‘completely bi-lingual’, writing to his wife: ‘There is no trace of an accent in his English and you’d never know he wasn’t an Englishman’.¹⁸ The BBC wanted interviewees as well as reporters to represent a range of nationalities and languages, strengthening the sound portrait of an ‘allies war’. A. P. Ryan, News Controller, instructed reporters to collect: ‘the voices of our home men, of Canadians and Americans, and of French and other liberated citizens. I hope that before the summer

is out you will have been able to give us several nationalities saying in their own language 'Thank God the Boche has gone'. Such voices will be given in the Home and Overseas as well as in the European service.¹⁹

Although white English-speakers dominated sound portraits of an 'allies war', the incorporation of some black English-speakers into British film and broadcasting disassociated them from the sound often attributed to them in 1930s empire films — 'mumbo-jumbo'. In feature film the African-American Paul Robeson, who had starred in a number of British films in the 1930s, made a final star appearance in *The Proud Valley* (1940). He had been voted most popular singer by BBC radio listeners in 1937 and sang in *The Proud Valley*, playing a man off the ships who is incorporated into the life and work of a Welsh mining village as well as its male voice choir. He ends by sacrificing his life for his fellow-miners and the village.²⁰ In the documentary *West Indies Calling* (1943), black Caribbeans have the narrative voice and the role of educating their audience about the Caribbean contribution to the war effort.²¹ They include Learie Constantine and Una Marson. Constantine was a well-known figure to British audiences as a Trinidadian cricketer who had played in the Lancashire League before the war. He broadcast occasionally in wartime to a domestic audience. Marson first arrived in Britain from Jamaica in 1932 and was involved in the League of Coloured Peoples.²² She broadcast regularly, but mainly in the BBC overseas service organising the programme on which *West Indies Calling* was based — one through which West Indians in Britain could send messages to their friends and relatives in the Caribbean.

Despite the substantial number of black GIs in wartime Britain — 10% of a total of three million Americans who visited Britain between January 1942 and December 1945 — Americans who spoke in British film and radio were invariably white. Notable among them was Quentin Reynolds, London correspondent of the American magazine *Collier's Weekly*. Before America's entry into the war, propaganda addressed to Americans bypassed their difficulties with various versions of English as spoken in Britain by a simple device: a type of ventriloquism. Through Reynolds's narrative voice, films from the Ministry of Information were made to sound like American messages, especially since Reynolds named them 'film dispatches' that he was sending to America. In *London Can Take It* (1940), and *Christmas Under Fire* (1941) there are no British voices to disrupt the impression of an American message: one of unstinting praise for the courage and resilience of Britons. As Antonia Lant observes, Reynolds uses sound to certify the genuineness of his representation *vis-à-vis* American conventions as German planes bomb London: 'These are not Hollywood sound effects. This is the music they play every night in London: the symphony of war'.²³

The voice of Reynolds became familiar to British audiences not only on film but also through his broadcasts to domestic audiences on the BBC. Audience research found that responses to his Postscript broadcast in June 1941 'outclassed all others for which comparative figures are available'. The verdict of 71% of respondents was 'very favourable', while a further 20% were 'favourable'. They liked its 'pugnacity' and 'plain speaking'. They also liked his postscripts in August 1941, describing the first as 'a tonic', and 'as good as was expected', and 'just the sort of propaganda we need', and the follow-up as 'even better than his first'.²⁴ But American speech did not

always find favour in Britain. A 1943 M-O report found that that American language and accent came in for unfavourable comment from one in twelve.²⁵

In their reports on public opinion, M-O and Home Intelligence converged on the same objections to Americans in Britain from those who did not like them: brash, over-confident and boastful.²⁶ In *The Way to the Stars* (1945) — a film about American airmen in Britain — these qualities are conveyed through speech.²⁷ Gill Plain describes the film as ‘a narrative of bemusement and conflict that gradually mutates into an idealised image of international tolerance, cooperation and mutual benefit.’²⁸ Language and speech play a prominent part in this mutation. There are initial misunderstandings and hostility. An American on arrival mimics English speech — ‘Hallo my jolly old fellow’ — stops briefly in his tracks when he finds an Englishman is present, and then proceeds to boast in a loud voice about the superiority of American bombers. In contrast the Englishman is reticent, politely answering questions. But as the film develops, Americans and British not only develop mutual respect; the volume and register of their voices increasingly converge.

The imperatives of presenting a ‘people’s war’ and an ‘allies war’ meant that the British media produced an increasingly inclusive version of English speech: one that encompassed a wide range of English-speakers from different class, ethnic, regional and national groups. But national differences were signalled by accent, not language. Diversity rarely extended to linguistic difference.

Monolingual/Multilingual Britain

In 1946, George Mikes published *How to Be an Alien* — a book that poked gentle fun at the English. Mikes was a Jewish Hungarian who came to Britain as a journalist covering the Munich crisis and stayed on. He instructed aliens to speak English with their former compatriots and deny that they knew any foreign language, including their mother tongue. ‘The knowledge of foreign languages is very un-English’ he wrote. ‘A little French is permissible, but only with an atrocious accent’.²⁹

The monolingual England that Mikes identified was evident on British film and radio throughout the war. Non-English languages were mainly confined to the BBC overseas service, limited BBC services in Welsh and Gaelic, and the short snatches spoken on film, usually in a continental European setting. The only wartime film in which much Welsh was spoken was *The Silent Village* (1943) — a documentary about the Nazi massacre of the inhabitants of the Czechoslovakian village of Lidice.³⁰

The Silent Village was filmed in the predominantly Welsh-speaking village of Cwmgiedd, with Welsh villagers who, in the formulation of its director, Humphrey Jennings, played ‘themselves and themselves as the people of Lidice’.³¹ The *Monthly Film Bulletin* review of the film spoke of the Welsh language as ‘relatively unknown’ but judged that its use enhanced the strength of the pictures.³² Jennings did not expect the audience to understand it, and thought that recording so much of the film in Welsh might even ‘to a certain extent ... suggest that it is Czech’.³³ However it was heard — and the film was premiered at Cwmgiedd Welfare Hall, so that most of its first audience was Welsh-speaking — it disrupts the dominance of English in a ‘people’s war’ and ‘people’s resistance’, celebrating Welsh as the language of community and

resistance.³⁴ Welsh-speaking is also made a significant issue within the film when the first words the schoolteacher speaks in English announce a German order banning Welsh-speaking in schools. This offers a veiled reference to English attempts to suppress Welsh and one of the schoolteacher's lessons is on 'the conquest of Wales'. But the film focuses on the clash between German and Welsh/Czechoslovakian culture, not the clash between English and Welsh. The suppression of Welsh language and culture stands for the German suppression of Czechoslovakian, and the theme of English suppression of Welsh is not developed.

Media investment in the idea of a monolingual Britain found a counterpart in the responses of some Britons to people who arrived before and during the war. The German Jewish Aid Committee advised refugees arriving from 1933: 'Spend your time immediately in learning the English language and its correct pronunciation', and 'refrain from speaking German in the streets and in public conveyances and in public places such as restaurants. Talk halting English rather than fluent German — and do not talk in a loud voice'.³⁵ The view that language and speech were significant elements of anti-alienism was borne out by wartime Mass-Observation (M-O) surveys of attitudes to foreigners. In 1940 M-O interviewed an advocate of mass internment who defined those who should be interned as 'all what don't speak plain English'.³⁶ Responses to a survey in 1943 suggested that foreign voices were heard as a common alien sound: jabbering. 'I'm a bit sick of the foreign jabber everywhere', said one respondent in 1943, 'but I don't mean the soldiers'. A common view that foreign accents were comic informed another comment: 'It's amusing to hear them jabbering away when you pass them'.³⁷ Not all comment was unfavourable. M-O collected two contrasting views of the way in which such voices impacted on the London

soundscape. One was: ‘I can’t fancy the streets all full of foreigners, and all jabbering away the way they do — makes you feel it isn’t old London, sometimes, it sounds like some foreign place’. Another: ‘It makes the streets of London more interesting to see strange uniforms and hear foreign voices’.³⁸

Emigrés and exiles from continental Europe who worked in British cinema as actors generally had to talk halting English rather than fluent German, at least in working hours. Although never cast as Britons, the rendering of their national languages as English involved a need to learn English in order to gain employment and to speak it while filming. They recorded a range of responses to these requirements. Peter Lorre, a Jewish German-speaking émigré, claimed that he was cast by Hitchcock in *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934) by pretending to know English: ‘Hitchy likes to tell stories, so I used to watch him like a hawk and whenever I thought the end of a story was coming ... I used to roar with laughter and somehow he got the impression that I spoke English and I got the part’.³⁹ Lucie Mannheim — also a Jewish German-speaking émigré — spoke German in broadcasts on the BBC European Services, but English in broadcasts to domestic BBC audiences, as well as in film. She expressed her anxieties about speech when she requested a copy of the script of a programme on Liszt, broadcast in October 1944: ‘I am so utterly lost when I have to read the part on the first rehearsal without having looked at it before. English is still a difficult language for me’.⁴⁰

Emeric Pressburger, a Jewish Hungarian exile, expressed complex responses to monolingual Britain in the films he made. His own linguistic range extended to Romanian, German and French as well as Hungarian and English, but he found English difficult and spoke it with a heavy accent. Kevin Gough-Yates suggests that

he never entirely resolved ‘the difficulties of adjustment to Britain and its language’.⁴¹ In *How To Be An Alien*, George Mikes urged: ‘Do not forget that it is much easier to write in English than to speak English, because you can *write* without a foreign accent’.⁴² As the script-writer in films he made with Michael Powell, Pressburger was in a good position to take this advice. Pressburger was a friend of Mikes —both were Jewish Hungarians. In his script for *One of Our Aircraft Is Missing* (1942), Pressburger’s comedy of monolingual Britons resembled Mikes’s comedy in *How to Be An Alien*. The film shows downed British airmen in occupied Holland where their first encounter is with Dutch children. One airman, feeling the need to address them in a foreign language, mixes a few French words with English, speaking the French words with an ‘atrocious accent’. The children are unlikely to understand his French or English, however spoken, since they are Dutch.⁴³

Comedy was only one of a range of responses to monolingual Britain in films that Pressburger scripted. *I Know Where I’m Going* (1945), set in the Scottish islands, incorporates a good deal of Gaelic-speaking and explores an experience akin to that of many emigrés, but transposed onto the English through the story of an English woman who feels a stranger on these islands because she cannot understand Gaelic.⁴⁴

Pressburger’s first film with Powell, also set in the Scottish islands — *The Spy in Black* (1939) — is framed by German-speaking, and trades on the audience’s inability to understand German to give the film a private meaning. The film was a vehicle for Conrad Veidt, the German émigré actor who plays Captain Hardt — a First World War U-boat commander and German spy. In early sequences he speaks the code he is given for his contact with a female agent on the Scottish island: two lines of a German poem. The agent, played by Valerie Hobson replies — also in German — with the

remainder of the verse. They are whispering under a night sky. German is the language of conspiracy but also signals a romantic plot furthered by Hardt's belief that Hobson is 'Frau Tiel': a fellow-German agent. Hobson speaks German with a heavy English accent which should immediately disabuse Hardt of this belief. As the plot unravels, she is revealed as a British agent masquerading to Hardt as German, who spurns his love and scuppers his mission. The poem by Heinrich Heine that they speak in German on their first encounter is not translated for the audience. But like the mermaid of the poem, 'Frau Tiel' lures Hardt to destruction.⁴⁵

Unlike actors in British cinema, many BBC wartime employees were required to speak their mother tongue in working hours. Although the BBC portrayed a monolingual Britain to its domestic audience, its own staff became increasingly multilingual as the war progressed. The rapid expansion of the overseas services — which broadcast in seven foreign languages at the outbreak of war but forty-five by its end — involved the recruitment of people of a wide range of nationalities and ethnicities.⁴⁶ They scripted, broadcast and translated programmes. Their role in giving British broadcasting international impact is implicit in another wartime letter from the Australian broadcaster, Chester Wilmot, to his wife about his reports on the D-Day landings. He wrote: 'It's quite fantastic i.e. when you think of it — I sit dn somewhere in Holland and belt off a despatch — put it over fr Brussels — and in the next 24 hrs that despatch is heard or quoted — if it's a good despatch — in 30 or 40 countries — in a dozen languages — by anything up to 100 million people. I'm a little over-awed by it all.'⁴⁷

Work by Shompa Lahiri and Ruvani Ranasinha has demonstrated the role played by South Asians in the BBC Indian Service. They broadcast news, features, commentaries and talks to India in Bengali, English, Gujarati, Hindi and Marathi, as well as providing a service through which Indian soldiers could send messages to friends and relatives in India. Several women were employed including Venu Chitale who began by assisting George Orwell — talks producer between 1941 and 1943 — and later devoted her time to programmes in her mother tongue, Marathi. South Asians at the BBC scripted and translated programmes, but their voices were particularly valued. Their broadcasts were considered to inspire more confidence in audiences in India, than would have been possible through a voice that signalled ‘British spokesperson’.⁴⁸

The expansion of the BBC European Services was particularly rapid, and a wide range of continental Europeans were employed. One of the most significant initiatives of their work was the ‘V’ for Victory campaign, begun by Victor de Laveleye — a Belgian refugee who broadcast on Radio Belgique. De Laveleye used the letter ‘V’ as a rallying sign in a broadcast in 1941, choosing this letter because it stood for ‘Victoire’ in French and ‘Vrijheid’ in Flemish.⁴⁹ The campaign was widely reported for domestic audiences and a similar campaign began in Britain in July 1941. The ‘V’ letter, signed with the fingers, became one of the most well-known symbols of the British war effort, much favoured by Winston Churchill, but the sound version was also well-known: the short-short-short-long rhythm which is the translation of the letter V into the Morse code, corresponding to the opening notes of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony. A special programme for Home Service listeners on the ‘V’ campaign told listeners how people in France, Belgium and Holland signalled to one another in

this short-short-short-long rhythm, using it to applaud in cinemas, knock at doors and tap on tables. The BBC also began to use the rhythm as the interval signal in its European and Indian services.⁵⁰ De Laveleye's role in initiating what was at first a symbol of European resistance remained largely unknown.

In the wartime documentary *Listen to Britain* (1942), sound is particularly significant as its title suggests.⁵¹ The film pays tribute to the British war effort through what the Canadian, Leonard Brockington, introducing the film, describes as 'blended together in one great symphony, the music of Britain at war'. It offers a portrait of the 'people's war' where sound as much as imagery unites different classes of Britons. But there is a brief sequence showing the work of the BBC overseas services. Beginning with the chimes of Big Ben and the call-sign 'This is London Calling', against shots of night-time London, there are voices on the sound track over shots of sound technology. They speak a range of languages evoking the power of this technology in extensive communication with the world. They are heard speaking simultaneously, one drowning out another, bearing some resemblance to the idea of non-English languages as a common alien sound in the 'jabbering' verdict delivered by some Britons. In 1940 this sound had identified people as deeply distrusted foreigners: 'all what don't speak plain English'. But as the brief sequence in *Listen to Britain* also demonstrates, it was broadcasters who did not speak plain English that gave British wartime propaganda its global reach.

German and non-German European sound

In *One of Our Aircraft is Missing*, Dutch resisters disguise downed British airmen as civilians and take them to church en route to the sea and escape to England. The blaring of klaxons and a long series of barked orders herald the arrival of Germans. The sound inside the church as a German soldier enters is the murmur of prayers. Then the Dutch organist, in an act of defiance, plays a melody described by Pressburger as ‘improbably high and improbably faint, yet still clear and distinct’. A Dutch resister helpfully whispers in English to one of the downed airmen identifying this melody for him as well as for the audience: the Dutch national anthem. As the German soldier leaves there are more barked orders outside the church, while inside ‘the full volume of the anthem roll[s] out’ and the congregation sing in affirmation of their national community.⁵²

This contrast between German and non-German European sound — klaxons and barked orders for Germans, patriotism and Christianity for Dutch — became characteristic of a range of films about European resistance. Barked orders were part of a repertoire of German sound which included the roar of German planes and bombardment and the clamour of martial music and marching feet, quickly followed by machine-gun fire. Germans usually spoke aggressively and gutturally, and often threateningly.

The soldier entering the church was one of the few visuals of Germans in *One of Our Aircraft* — the film registers their presence mainly on the sound track. Michael Powell later attributed to Emeric Pressburger the decision to ‘hear Germans everywhere, but only to see them in the distance, if at all’.⁵³ The film opens with drum rolls followed by commands for execution in German as the camera pans down a

Netherlands Government document listing the names of five Dutchmen executed for their role in assisting the escape of British airmen. The sound of firing follows.

The decision to register the presence of Germans mainly through sound was also taken during production of *The Silent Village*. Humphrey Jennings who directed the film explained in a BBC broadcast: ‘We proposed not to show any Germans ... the main feeling of oppression, the existence of the invisible Germans is carried in the film by a German speaker, sometimes he’s speaking on a loudspeaker, sometimes on radio sets, and so on — one voice’.⁵⁴ The ‘coming of Fascism’ through the German occupation of Czechoslovakia, first announced in an intertitle, is registered in the film by jarring sound — martial music blaring from a loud-speaker van followed by a German order: ‘Achtung! Achtung!’ This contrasts with the sound of Czechoslovakians. The film begins with their singing in chapel before the German occupation. When the men of the village line up outside the chapel to await execution, they sing the Welsh national anthem in Welsh. As in *One of Our Aircraft*, the commands for execution are given in German — during production a request went out for translation to establish the correct German terms: ‘Halt! Attention! Present arms! Lower arms! Load! Take aim! Fire!’ It explained that: ‘our actual intention in the film is to have the orders spoken in German and accompanied by the sound, only, of what each order would involve’.⁵⁵ Following these commands and then the sound of gun fire, the radio announcement of the destruction of the village is also in German, accompanied by Wagner, over shots of the ruins of the village, still burning.

Two films made early in the war — *Pastor Hall* (1940) and *Freedom Radio* (1941) — showed anti-Nazi resistance in Germany and Austria, but the repertoire of

German sound was already developing in 1940, including a characteristic disembodiment of speech.⁵⁶ *Night Train to Munich* (1940) begins with Hitler ranting in German and thumping his fist repeatedly on a map of Austria, followed by the sound of marching feet. As his loud and raging voice continues to resound over maps, first of Sudetenland and then of Prague, it becomes increasingly disembodied to comic as well as threatening effect. Most of his body disappears, leaving only a close-up of his thumping fist.⁵⁷

In *Night Train to Munich*, Charters and Caldicott are inadvertently caught up in European adventures as they had been in their comedy debut in Hitchcock's *The Lady Vanishes* (1938). In *The Lady Vanishes*, they find it perplexing and irritating that some people they encounter in Central Europe cannot speak English while others insist on speaking other languages, particularly their own. In *Night Train to Munich* their adventures involve masquerading as German soldiers and their ignorance of German is dangerous. But in *Crook's Tour* (1941) — a six-part radio series as well as a film — Caldicott admits that he knows three words of German: 'Heil!' 'Swastika' and 'Ersatz'.⁵⁸

Caldicott's knowledge could be regarded as corresponding to that of many members of British wartime audiences. Although actors playing Germans spoke English, this was usually mixed with a little German in which both 'Swastika' and 'Heil' were prominent and needed no translation. 'Swastika' stood for Nazism in countless visual portrayals but also figured in sound portraits including a 1939-40 BBC radio series titled *In The Shadow of the Swastika*. 'Heil Hitlers!' accompanied by much heel-clicking, abounded on film. In *The Secret Mission* (1942), British

agents masquerading as German civilians on a visit to German headquarters in occupied France, perform the ‘Heil Hitler!’ salute six times and worry afterwards that they have indulged themselves: ‘Do you think we overdid the Heils?’⁵⁹ Even Charters and Caldicott manage one subdued version in *Night Train to Munich*. Charters’s comment on Caldicott’s three-word lexicon is comic, but encapsulates the extent to which the association of the German language with barbarism was established by 1941: ‘That’s practically all they know themselves old man’.

Although there was no consistent practice on casting and German-speaking actors sometimes played non-German resisters — but never Britons — the fate of many was also to speak in guttural and aggressive tones as Nazis. Among them were Gerard Heinz, Oscar Homolka, Carl Jaffe, Albert Lieven, Lucie Mannheim, Martin Miller, Walter Rilla and Paul Von Hernreid. But the *Manchester Guardian* praised Anton Walbrook’s voice for its ‘gentle pathos and charm’ in his role as Theo Kretschmar-Schuldorff in *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943).⁶⁰ Walbrook was one German-speaking actor who escaped the fate of playing Nazis, but Powell and Pressburger cast him twice to play anti-Nazi Germans, speaking with considerable eloquence. In *49th Parallel* (1941) he plays a German-Canadian in a Huttite community who denounces Nazis in a set-piece speech delivered in English. In *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* he plays a military officer who has served in the First World War and is committed to chivalry — resembling Germans played by Conrad Veidt in the 1930s. In a set-piece speech, he eloquently urges the uselessness of gentlemanly codes against the Nazis. Pressburger recorded later: ‘though my mother had died in the concentration camp and I was pre-conditioned about the whole thing, I always believed ... that there were also good Germans’.⁶¹

Anti-Nazi Germans in Powell and Pressburger's films are located outside continental Europe. Within the continent, the sounds of resistance belonged to non-German Europeans, incorporating them into the 'allies war' through demonstrating their common values in the anti-Nazi cause. Their patriotism was a repeated reference in national anthems and other music played in film and broadcasting. In *Dangerous Moonlight* (1941), the music of the Warsaw Concerto, composed for the film by Richard Addinsell, dominates the film — its composition attributed to Stefan Radetzky, the Polish hero, and thus to Polish patriotism. Its impassioned lyricism is heard against the roar of German planes and the brutality of the German bombardment of Warsaw. Chopin's Military Polonaise is also heard in early sequences set in Warsaw, broadcast on Radio Polskie: a rallying call and sign that Poland remains unconquered.⁶² In *Tomorrow We Live* (1943) fifty French resisters give a defiant rendering of the Marseillaise as they walk to their execution.⁶³ The BBC also played a wide range of European national anthems in various contexts. From the spring of 1940, all the anthems of occupied countries were played on Sundays, after the nine o'clock news, ending with God Save the King. It was only when the Soviet Union entered the war and the Internationale was banned on — Churchill's instructions — that the BBC dropped the practice.⁶⁴ But the BBC needed no instructions from Churchill to ban enemy anthems. Their ban included Sibelius's *Finlandia* since it was regarded as a Finnish national anthem.⁶⁵

Demonstration of common values extended to non-German European admiration for British sound, including British bombing raids on occupied countries. BBC research showed that reactions to such raids ranged from acceptance and even

welcome, through the view that Britain should focus on bombing Germany, to sharply anti-British opinion.⁶⁶ But the drone of British planes on radio and film elicited an enthusiastic response from non-Germans in occupied Europe. In *One Of Our Aircraft* as a raid over Holland begins, Googie Withers, playing a Dutch female resister, tells the downed British airmen ‘that’s what you’re doing for us’, describing the RAF’s ‘steady hum, night after night’ as ‘that noise which is oil for the burning fire in our hearts’. The radio programme *Salute to Greece* begins with a dialogue between two Greek women who hear the drone of planes:

Penelope: God is good Lina. That is the RAF.

Lina: Come on in friends, come and drop your bombs on us. We don’t mind, do we

Penelope.

Penelope: Not if they kill some of our enemies ... Drop your bombs friends and may they be big ones.⁶⁷

Antonia Lant, commenting on the large number of radio-listening scenes in home front films, observes that repeated reference to the power of radio’s sound waves on screen gave the cinematic space of war ‘an aural character’, showing small units of patriotism, linked by radio and ready to act when required.⁶⁸ But radio-listening scenes were common to films set in continental Europe, incorporating non-German Europeans into this community of BBC listeners. A 1941 cartoon in *Punch* captioned ‘The Secret Hope’ depicted a group of three men and one woman listening intently to the radio in a cellar. It made no reference to the BBC, suggesting the assumption that British readers of a popular magazine would be familiar with the idea of continental Europeans listening to broadcasts from London.⁶⁹ Films reinforced

such familiarity. In *The Day Will Dawn* (1942), Norwegian resisters listen to the BBC awaiting instructions about when to act.⁷⁰ In *One of Our Aircraft*, a female resister maintains contact with her absent husband by listening to his broadcasts from London on Radio Oranje. In *The Secret Mission*, Nazis raid a French woman's farm suspecting her of hiding British agents. Failing to discover them, they attempt to incriminate her by switching on her radio. The audience knows that it is tuned to the BBC. But the Nazis leave saluting the woman. Fortuitously, at the moment when they turn the radio on, the BBC, preparing to analyse a speech by Hitler, is broadcasting his ranting voice. Germans were never shown listening to the BBC and there was little publicity for the work of German-speaking emigrés and refugees in broadcasting anti-Nazi propaganda to Germany.⁷¹ *The True Story of Lili Marlene* (1944) offers an obscure reference to this work when Lucie Mannheim sings Lili Marlene in German but with anti-Nazi words. But the setting of her performance in a BBC studio is the only sign that she is broadcasting to Germany.⁷²

In December 1940, a group of German refugees, many of them Jewish, who had been interned in Britain, then sent to internment camps in Australia wrote: 'We Germans are regarded as a people of poets and thinkers. Even though the works of poets and thinkers have been burned and banned by those who wrongly call themselves Germans, these works remain alive in us, the German emigrants ... by embracing literature, we are proving that German and Nazism are not one and the same'.⁷³ The British media increasingly abandoned such a distinction between Germans and Nazis. With the exception of films by Powell and Pressburger, the sound of Germans, devoid of poetry, literature or eloquence, conveyed brutality. It bore so little correspondence to British sound that it was effectively untranslatable. In

contrast, the sounds of civilisation belonged to non-German Europeans. Such common civilisation transformed them from alien foreigners into members of the family of allies.

Civilised speech

In 1942, postal censorship of the traffic of letters between the United States and Britain picked up a number of comments on American perceptions of British speech. 'I do wish they would get announcers without an Oxford affected accent to broadcast' one Briton wrote home from America. 'The Americans just laugh at him and won't listen'. Another Briton writing home reported the view of a Washington friend that 'the BBC or Oxford accent is a bad handicap'. The Washington friend was commenting on British speakers sent out to America and recommended 'more working men and more Welshmen, Scotsmen, Ulstermen, Yorkshiremen etc. — in fact anyone who seems to speak with a tongue with individuality in it'.⁷⁴

Although the Washington friend would have had more difficulty in equating 'Oxford' with 'BBC' as war progressed, these letters demonstrate how far verdicts on speech varied between and within nations. A main reason for the increasing diversity of speech on film and radio were concerns on the part of both the government and the BBC about how different versions of English speech in propaganda were received, both at home and overseas. They wanted to make effective propaganda, but also to avoid causing offence to allies.

Harry Watt, a British film director, making a film in Australia in 1943, reported that his Australian friends thought English film audiences would object to what they called ‘our expressionless drawl’. His own view of what he called ‘the Australian language’ was that it ‘often lacks the crispness of English speech’.⁷⁵ But any notion of a hierarchy was increasingly repudiated at the BBC. Had Watt been working there, his comment on Australian speech lacking English crispness would have violated instructions given by the Empire Talks Manager: ‘In no circumstances assume a superiority of thought and action, and hold up England or the English as an example of something’. It would also have violated a further instruction that suggested concerns not to offend Australians on questions of speech: ‘Don’t refer to the Australian accent, other than to say “I knew by his voice that he was Australian”’.⁷⁶ In Australia, English speech had been regarded as a model — the advent of talkies brought particular objections to a ‘filthy American twang’ at a time when ABC radio operated a policy which, in Kenneth Inglis’s striking phrase, was one of ‘imperial preference applied to speech’.⁷⁷ Joy Damousi’s work demonstrates the Australian wartime challenges to this hierarchy in debates about changing ABC policy. Supporters of change argued that Australian speech was: ‘as *good English* as any speech to be heard anywhere in the English-speaking commonwealth’, while opponents argued that change would ‘degrade the cultural level of ABC announcers’.⁷⁸

The BBC received a number of letters protesting about the speech and language in their programmes. They engaged in lengthy correspondence with Rudolph Dunbar who wrote about their use of the term ‘nigger’. Dunbar was from British Guiana, had worked in Paris in the 1920s, and arrived in Britain in 1931. His

wartime activities included conducting the London Philharmonic orchestra — the first black man to do so. An internal BBC memorandum about a letter he wrote in 1941 conceded: ‘As there are, I believe, West Indian troops in the country, the point he made is, you will agree an important one’.⁷⁹ By 1943, awareness of the presence of black troops in Britain was reinforced by the arrival of black GIs. Producers were reminded that jokes about ‘darkies’, and references to ‘a black man as a scare to white children’ would be found offensive in a context where ‘there are a lot of coloured people in the country now — Africans, West Indians and Americans, and there is therefore particularly good reason to be careful not to say anything which might be interpreted as showing colour prejudice’.⁸⁰

The BBC’s concerns not to cause offence through speech and language did not extend to Jews. Sidney Salomon — Press Officer at the Board of Deputies of British Jews — was another campaigner who engaged in prolific wartime correspondence with the BBC. His letters protested against the sound portraits of Jews in BBC drama, including children’s programmes. His main objection concerned: ‘a tendency on the part of certain producers to make people who are presumably, at least judging by their names, Jewish, speak with a ridiculous foreign accent’. He went on to explain: ‘The average Jew, certainly the one who has been born and lives in this country, does not talk with a perceptible “Jewish accent” at all, but almost invariably with the accent of the people among whom he lives’.⁸¹ The BBC took note of objections from Salomon on other matters, but rarely made concessions about speech. In 1941, following his complaint about a production of *Ivanhoe* in which the character of Isaac of York had spoken ‘like a caricature of the stage Jew’ an internal memorandum conceded a change for the last instalment, but only in the context of insisting on ‘the vocal

peculiarities of the Jewish way of speaking' which the last instalment would make 'a little less peculiar'.⁸² Other responses variously argued that what had been spoken was a 'foreign' accent or that of a 'stage villain', with no intention of suggesting Jewish intonation or imitation.⁸³ In 1950, an internal memorandum reverted to the view that Jewish speech had 'vocal peculiarities': 'We cannot omit altogether from programmes the "Jewish dialect" accepted in show business and certainly based on fact for a great many years ... I feel that Mr. Salomon and his friends are being unduly touchy'.⁸⁴

In contrast to the BBC's dusty answers to Salomon, propagandists went out of their way to avoid offending Americans. Pre-war concerns about American auditory perceptions had been evident mainly in commercial cinema, but became a preoccupation of the government in wartime when concerns about American reception of films and broadcasts outstripped concerns about any other nation. Evidence collected during the war from postal censorship and from the British Information Services in New York was not encouraging. Nicholas Cull observes that, before America entered the war: 'The Foreign Office reported that, while Americans warmed to an English accent as spoken on stage or screen, they found the BBC voice "too self conscious" and even "Pansy"'.⁸⁵ There was discussion about replacing the Oxford accent with a Canadian or Scottish accent in broadcasts to America.⁸⁶ The British Information Services identified a range of British speech in documentary film as unsuitable for American audiences — prosy, verbose, over-poetic, lacking vigour.⁸⁷

Michel Chion observes that when talkies were first screened in Britain, 'the voices of American actors brought British audiences to laughter'.⁸⁸ Hollywood producers had little need to concern themselves with this response: the dominance of

Hollywood at British box offices and throughout the English-speaking world quickly familiarised audiences with Hollywood versions of American speech. Complaints about the unintelligibility of speech were confined to the American side of an unequal filmic traffic. Two picked up by postal censorship concerned a broadcast series titled 'Britain to America', criticised for its use of what one letter-writer called 'workpeople's talk in dialect' and for its incorporation of Cockney: 'To the American ear, the straight King's English is tough enough to catch; Cockney on short wave is almost unintelligible'.⁸⁹ There were no corresponding complaints from the British side. In the wartime British film *This Happy Breed* (1944), there are shots of a British audience viewing the Hollywood musical *Broadway Melody* and one British audience member comments: 'I don't understand a word they say'. But this observation is set in the past, in 1929, the year that *Broadway Melody* was released.

Debates in Australia, the BBC's dusty answers to Salomon, complaints from America about the way the English spoke English — all demonstrate the range of verdicts on a hierarchy of English-speaking. If assessments of speech often involved moral judgements about individual and national probity, there was little agreement either within or between nations about which kinds of English speech were more civilised than others. Who sounded civilised was a complex and contested matter. One letter-writer from America commenting on 'the smooth, well-bred English voice' suggested that it 'conveys artificiality, insincerity'. He or she went on to call it 'over-civilised'.⁹⁰

Conclusion

Language, speech and sound were highly significant in British wartime propaganda and the presentation of Britain and its allies as civilised against German barbarism. Britain became increasingly multilingual with the arrival of refugees, exiles, troops and war-workers, but continued to be presented as monolingual, obscuring not only the changes caused by such arrivals, but also the non-English languages of Britain and its empire. Britain's multilingual wartime population nevertheless played a significant role in the global reach of its propaganda, particularly through their work in the BBC overseas service, while the range of English-speakers on film and radio extended not only by class, region, and the different nations of Britain, but also by a range of English-speaking nations. Misunderstandings and suspicion prompted by differences of speech and language — whether between Britons and Americans or Britons and continental Europeans — were overcome in mutual respect and common effort. At least, that was the case in propaganda presenting an 'allies war'. As those arriving changed the soundscape of Britain in streets and other public places, American speech did not always find favour, while non-English languages were heard by some Britons as a common alien sound: 'jabbering'.

In the 1950s there was reversion to the attribution of 'mumbo-jumbo' to black speakers in a number of British films set in Africa.⁹¹ German sound continued to be associated with barbarism in a prolific cycle of British films about the Second World War. Churchill, campaigning on language, did not foresee the post-war erosion of English power over language and speech, apparent in the de-Anglicisation of place names in the post-war period as decolonisation gathered pace. As an ardent supporter of the British-American alliance whose mother was American he may not have been

disturbed by wartime reports on the American reception of British speech. In 1942 he recommended the use of ‘aircraft’ and airfields’ rather than ‘aeroplanes and aerodrome’ not only as ‘better English’, but also as ‘more in accord with American practice’.⁹² But the accumulating evidence of how far a transatlantic auditory asymmetry had become established — one in which Americans complained about the unintelligibility of British speech but the British had little difficulty in understanding Americans — was symptomatic of the erosion of English power. The term ‘Anglicise’ retained currency. ‘English’ remained the name of the language. But such asymmetry signalled wider cultural, political, economic and technological developments through which all versions of English, written and spoken, including those in Britain, became subordinate to American.

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² Winston Churchill to Sir Alexander Cadogan, 16 February 1941; Foreign Office to J.M. Martin, 30 March 1944, NA, PREM 4/68/8

³ Empire Talks Manager to Programme Directors, 13 January 1942, BBC, Written Archives Centre (WAC), R34/282.

⁴ Churchill to Bracken, 16 September 1944; Bracken to Churchill, 18 September 1944, NA, PREM 4/68/8.

⁵ Memo, 21 May 1937, BBC, WAC, R34/282.

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- ⁹ See for example Jo Fox, ‘Millions Like Us? Accented Language and the “Ordinary” in British Films of the Second World War’, *Journal of British Studies*, 45 (October 2006): 819-845.
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- ²¹ *West Indies Calling* (John Page, 1943).
- ²² See Delia Jarrett-Macauley, *The Life of Una Marson, 1905-65* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).
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- ²⁴ Home Intelligence Weekly Report, No 45, July 23-30, 1941; Weekly report no. 45, August 6 -12 1941; Weekly report No 46, August 13 -20 1941, NA INF 1/292.
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- ²⁶ See for example Home Intelligence Weekly Report, No 112, 26 November 1942; No 144, 8 July 1943, NA, INF 1/292; Panel on the Americans, Feb to March directive, 1945 Report No. 2222, March 1945, MOA.
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- ²⁹ George Mikes, *How to be an Alien* (London, Allan Wingate, 1949, first published 1946), 83.
- ³⁰ *The Silent Village* (Humphrey Jennings, 1943).
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- ⁵⁴ Jennings, 'The Silent Village', 72-74
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