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Reassembling radio histories in Wrocław, formerly Breslau

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BEYOND THE '1945 DIVIDE': REASSEMBLING RADIO HISTORIES IN WROCLAW, FORMERLY BRESLAU

Tweet

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Our joint research works towards 'reassembling' radio broadcasting histories in the Silesian region, located in and around what is today the southern-most region of Poland. Following a first meeting in 2016, we have been developing this shared interest from the vantage of our respective research on radio culture before and after World War II.

Our focus on this region represents an intervention in media histories that still tend to privilege national settings, with capital cities as primary media hubs. This research therefore builds on a recent emphasis on the transnational and regional dimensions to radio broadcasting, which has called for more analytical attention to transborder listening, to technical infrastructures and the broader conditions of radio geopolitics.

We argue that this case is instructive for an understanding of radio geopolitics, since the German-language station in Breslau (now Wrocław) was launched in 1924 against the background of ongoing border disputes between Poland and Germany in the wake of World War I. In this context, the potential for radio transmission to reach listeners across national borders meant that the Breslau station and its programming increasingly gained political significance, with its outlook shaped by ongoing sovereignty conflicts and linguistic nationalism. From the mid-1920s onwards, a significant infrastructural investment is evident in stronger transmitters (located in Żórawina/Rothsürben) and relay stations (from 1927 onwards in Gliwice/Gleiwitz), along with the national German station from Königs Wusterhausen (from 1926 onwards).



As the above image indicates, already from this early period, the Breslau programme magazine projected the imagined listenership of German-language radio as extending to territories to the north into the territories of Poland, which regained its independence in 1918, and to German-speaking communities in Czechoslovakia. Following the National Socialist takeover in 1933, and the subsequent centralised reorganisation of radio, the renamed Reichssender Breslau and a new relay station in Görlitz became significant in broadcasting pro-fascist propaganda to Czechoslovak border areas in the lead up to the 1938 Munich Agreement, which resulted in Germany's annexation of Czechoslovakia's Bohemia and Moravia regions. During World War II, Silesian radio was reduced in importance with fewer transmissions, although a faked attack on the Gleiwitz station was used as a pretext for Germany's declaration of war on Poland on 1 September 1939.

As a result of the Yalta conference in 1945, Lower Silesia was incorporated by Poland and was a region where unprecedented exchange of people took place. One of the goals of Communist propaganda in this period was to "polonise" the region and to erase all traces of German heritage. An illustrative example can be found in post-war cinema, which emphasised the notion of Poland acquiring 'empty' towns and cities in Silesia, which had been evacuated by Germany at the end of World War II.

In the above clip, from the 1964 drama *Prawo i pięść* (Fist and Law, dir. Jerzy Hoffman and Edward Skórzewski), we watch a special group, sent to secure order and establish administration in what is meant to be a small town in Lower Silesia abandoned by the Germans. The last traces of German presence are not only highlighted in the form of signs for street names and shops, but the film emphasises the eeriness of the deserted town with sounds from an unmanned wired radio system with public loudspeakers, and a drunk German radio operator appearing to be the last person remaining.

In what follows, we turn now to the complexities of periodization for a history of radio in Silesia, and the need to challenge a straight-forward notion of a '1945 divide', as population exchanges were carried out gradually, mostly due to the need for the technical skills and know-how of German specialists and technicians in order to launch heavily-destroyed industry. A puppet administration, the Communist government in Poland considered the highly-industrialised region of Lower Silesia to be of great importance, due to their awareness of its significance for Poland's post-war reconstruction. For Polish Radio, which had undergone an almost-complete destruction of its broadcasting infrastructure, Silesia was significant since several radio factories were located in the region in Dzierżoniów/Rychbach, Bielawa/Langenbielau and Duszniki Zdrój/Bad Reinerz. In fact, until 1948, Dzierżoniów, a very small town, was established as a headquarters of the Polish Radio Engineering Industry Association.

Lower Silesia became a place of cultural exchange between the German, Polish and Jewish communities, which settled en masse in Dzierżoniów and Bielawa. Jewish engineers played an important role in the process of reconstruction of the radio engineering industry, many of whom were employed in managerial positions. The Jewish community in Dzierżoniów also organized vocational courses for its members, including one devoted to the repair of radio sets. We can find evidence in written archives of Polish Radio that German engineers were employed in radio station in Wrocław as late as 1947. Also, one of the traces of German-Polish technical heritage exchange is radio set "Ludowe", which was widely known as "Hitlerek", because it was based on the popular, German state-subsidised radio receiver DKE38 (Deutschler Kleinempfänger or German People's Receiver) model from 1938.

Wrocław was one of the last radio stations rebuilt after the war because of the ongoing uncertainty about status of Poland's western borders. Nonetheless, the above newsreel from 1947 shows that its transmitter infrastructure served as a significant setting during these "Recovered Territories" (*Ziemia Odzyskane*) campaigns. This newsreel segment centres on a speech delivered by President Bolesław Bierut from inside the main concert hall of the Wrocław station, in which he reiterated the importance of the official re-launch of regular broadcasting in Silesia amidst these campaigns to regain territories. The official opening of Wrocław Radio station in October 1947 marked a turning point, as after this, the employment of German engineers was considered unnecessary.

Our current research critically engages with the complex situation of Polish-Russian-German-Jewish relations in the period 1944–1948. This consideration includes an acknowledgement of continuities across the '1945 divide' and asks how radio infrastructures might not only be 'read' in terms of political symbolism, but also forms of contention. We also attend to the material traces of radio when studying a historical record that was actively 'displaced' and damaged as a result of World War II and its aftermath. Further challenges to access and language barriers have resulted in a situation where, apart from an occasional mention, pre-1945 radio in Breslau has received little attention in German radio historiography. In Poland, too, Wrocław and Lower Silesia have not received substantial attention in either official or scholarly accounts of national radio history to date.

Our case study, which has been marginalised in national radio historiographies, serves as an impetus to reconsider the significance of transnational radio in twentieth-century Europe. Its complexity may also work as a reminder of the rich potential of a more integrated and connective research agenda for radio history in Central and Eastern Europe during and after World War II, and for which we hope our collaboration is the first step working in this direction.

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