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Grete Fischer: ‘Outside Writer’ for the BBC

Based on the work of Grete Fischer, this article seeks to demonstrate the high level of official control to which contributors to the BBC German Service were subject during the early years of the Second World War. The inclusion of arguments which did not conform to official policy guidelines often caused a piece to be rejected, and frequently the approach was suggested by the Section which commissioned the work. Fischer’s successes and failures at this difficult task are demonstrated here.

The German Service of the BBC, established in 1938 at the height of the Munich crisis, expanded rapidly, particularly after the fall of France. There were many hours of broadcasting to fill, and although staff appointments were made, freelance contributors were also needed. It is not, then, surprising that contributing to the BBC German Service features in the biographies of many German-speaking émigrés. Yet often the extent of the information is no more than a line or two in their CVs. Examining the correspondence between one such contributor, the writer and former editor Grete Fischer, and Christina Gibson, her staff contact at the BBC, helps to throw some light both on the commissioning process in general and, in particular, the way in which propaganda work was targeted and censored. Furthermore, by examining the scripts themselves, including those that were rejected, I hope to find evidence of the demands made of writers before their scripts could be accepted.

Fischer, who had lived in London since 1934, earning a precarious living from writing and translating, first approached the BBC in the summer of 1940, a time when she was attempting to switch languages and establish herself as a writer of non-fiction for children. It is not clear who recommended that she try this outlet for her creative energies and become an ‘outside writer’ for the Corporation. Possibly it was the actor Walter Rilla, an acquaintance from Germany, then working as an announcer at the BBC, who was later promoted to Head of German Features. Fischer’s initial approach resulted in a detailed correspondence with Christina Gibson, the Head
of German Women's Talks, which lasted for about a year, during which time Gibson went to great pains to nurture the new recruit, suggesting topics for her to write about, pointing out in some detail what had gone wrong and even, as a consequence of the BBC's notorious failure to pay fees promptly, on occasion lending her money.

The Women's Programme opened in the summer of 1940 with daily broadcasts. Although Fischer later attempted to diversify – for example, by submitting a script entitled ‘Ich rufe Dr. Schmidt' to the European Talks Editor, Leonard Miall, in July 1941 and insisting that it was not a women's talk¹ – she need not have worried that she was being confined to a female ghetto, for her scripts were widely circulated. ‘Die Barbarisierung Deutschlands', for instance, had been ‘passed to everyone in the German Talks Department' before being rejected, Rilla informed her on 22 July 1941, and earlier, at the end of 1940, Gibson had passed the ‘Dream of Walhalla' to another section for transmission, with the recommendation that it should be read by Sybille Binder.² Finally, the popularity of the ‘Frau Wernicke' monologues, written by Bruno Adler, those archetypal 'Women's Talks', shows that an origin in the Women's Programme did not necessarily preclude success.

Christina Gibson seems to have been a remarkable woman. Married to the Curator of the National Gallery, she was working in an environment where it was unusual for women to hold senior posts. The journalist Carl Brinitzer, at that time translator in the News Department, paints a vivid pen portrait of her in his memoir.³ Brinitzer ascribes her success to being able to wrap her male colleagues round her little finger. Another, less chauvinist analysis would be that she used appropriate strategies to achieve her goal, which was to fill her allotted air time every day. Brinitzer remarks on her charm, her trick of persuading the colleague she was addressing at the time that he was the only person who could write in the way she wanted. Certainly, the considerable pains she took with Grete Fischer in the first year of their correspondence show that she was also prepared to invest much time and energy in nurturing her freelance contributors.

The summer of 1940 was a good time to be associated with the German Service, for it was expanding rapidly. Moreover, it was felt that the hitherto rather bland commentaries should be enlivened by a degree of dramatization, the task of the newly founded Features