

Tracing Radio Berlin International

by Sabine Schereck

“This used to be a truly international place”, the person next to me told me. I was sitting in a large old building situated in the middle of nowhere in East Berlin. In 2003 I was part of a film crew, which had built its set here because the wide corridors made filming easy. Having grown up in West Berlin, the idea of ‘international’ and East Berlin didn’t quite go together. It sparked my interest.

Photo of author Sabine Schereck



The building’s address was Nalepastrasse 50 in the district of Oberschöneeweide and used to be the home of the East German broadcast service, including Radio Berlin International (RBI), East Germany’s world service, which had its offices on the 4th floor. The building was originally a furniture factory with wide halls and small offices on each side. In 1952, the architect Franz Ehrlich was commissioned to create a broadcasting complex with studios and recording halls. When designing the studio complexes, Ehrlich integrated the latest developments regarding acoustics with the result that the quality of the recording halls is still appreciated by musicians today. Broadcasting ceased in 1991.



Funkhaus Nalepastraße in East Berlin (Photo Andreas Steinhoff)

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=278043>

Seven years after my encounter at the former broadcasting house I took an MA in Radio at Goldsmiths, London, which included a ‘Cultural Enquiry’ in form of an essay. It was the perfect opportunity to investigate this curious radio station called Radio Berlin International and find answers to the questions: Why would a socialist country like the GDR broadcast to the western world? How was it able to create programmes that adhered to reporting restrictions imposed by its government and still appeal to a country like the UK? Who would listen to it and why? With that task in view, what special position did RBI hold among the GDR’s broadcasters?

There was not much literature about RBI, apart from Heinz Odermann’s book *Wellen mit tausend Klängen* (which could be translated as ‘Waves with Thousand Sounds’), which slightly lacked a critical distance, and the odd post on the internet. There was nothing about the station’s English Department itself on which I decided to focus. The only published material about RBI’s English Department exists within Radio Netherlands’ programme *Media Network - Behind the Berlin Wall November 1990* produced by writer and international broadcaster Jonathan Marks in 1990. It reports on the changing media in Berlin after November 1989.

What was left for me to study were the few remaining documents of the station, which can be found at the German radio archive - the Deutsche Rundfunk Archiv in Potsdam-Babelsberg, track down people who worked at the station and find those who listened to it.

Chrissy Brand was one of the listeners and she kindly asked if she could publish the results of my research here. With great pleasure! It comes in three instalments. The first part provides a brief outline of the GDR and its media to understand the context from which RBI emerged. It also presents the origin of RBI and its objectives.



Nalepastraße Recording Hall (photo SS)

Part 1: Between Party Line and the Open World: Radio Berlin International

The media in the GDR was subject to control by the socialist party Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (SED), translated as Socialist Unity Party, which led the country throughout its existence from 1949 to 1990. During that time freedom of expression and freedom of information as it is practiced in the western world did not exist in the GDR. Following Marxist and Leninist principles, the task of the media was to present and support no view other than that of the party. Any critical comments that would harm the party's image, particularly regarding its failures within the system, for example, shortage of building materials and goods, were taboo. In contrast to that, the Western Allies established media in West Germany as an independent body free of the influences of political parties.

In order to work as a journalist in the GDR, a one-year internship was required with either a newspaper or a radio station. During that time, officials could judge if the aspiring journalist was able to conform to the views of the party when reporting. This was followed by training at the Journalism Department at the university in Leipzig. TV Journalists also had the option to go the GDR's Film and Television School. In either case, they were trained as 'socialist' journalists.

Joining the airwaves: Radio Berlin International

In 1953 West Germany's international broadcaster Deutsche Welle (DW) began its operations. Its aim was to broadcast German and European viewpoints in politics, culture and economy and to promote the understanding between people. This included presenting a contemporary Germany. Politicians in the German Democratic Republic however, felt DW portrayed the GDR unfavourably and decided to establish their own international broadcasting in order to counteract DW. With Radio Berlin International the GDR also aimed at presenting itself to the world as a country whose politics fought for peace and humanity.

In 1955 the GDR started broadcasting in French and English. Swedish, Danish and Arabic programmes followed until Radio Berlin International was officially launched in 1959. Then, in 1965, services for Africa, Italy, North and South America as well as South East Asia were introduced.



RBI broadcast in English, French, Swedish, Danish, Arabic, Spanish, Portuguese, Swahili and later in Hindi and Greek. In 1967 RBI founded a DX Club for radio-amateurs and shortwave listeners. From 1969, a German programme was produced for listeners in Europe. From 1967 to 1982, the station produced the RBI Journal that was printed in up to eight languages and sent to listeners of RBI free of charge.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, RBI reported more freely and critically about the GDR. Moreover, RBI offered an East German view on the developments in the country that led to the German reunification on 3 October 1990, before the station was shut down on 2 October 1990. The argument was that there was no need for another international broadcasting service alongside DW in a reunited Germany, where the GDR officially has ceased to exist. A few members of staff, however, were able to join DW.



Clocks at GDR Broadcasting House in Nalepastraße Berlin in the 2000s (photo SS).

Despite producing programmes for South America, Africa, the Middle East, Asia and South East Asia, RBI did not broadcast to other countries of the Eastern Bloc since presenting socialist views and the GDR's development to fellow socialist countries seemed obsolete.



RBI control room in 1965. Photo from <http://zeitreisen.cre-aktiv.com/gestern/gebaeude-uebersicht/index.html>



According to Heinz Odermann in *Wellen mit tausend Klängen* the aim of RBI was to present the GDR to people abroad and to reach people who knew either nothing about the GDR or only heard about it through reports in western media. The programmes were to inform about life in the GDR, to promote peace and instil trust in the GDR as an economic partner. This was done with the interests of the state in mind, particularly with regard to its foreign policy, foreign economy and culture.

In a fact sheet published by RBI in 1975 the station describes its objectives: *"RBI aims to provide its listeners all over the world with a picture of life in the socialist German Democratic Republic. We provide information on our peace policy and put forward our point of view on international events. RBI expresses its solidarity over the airwaves with all progressive*

forces fighting against imperialist exploitation and oppression and plays its part in the struggle for the welfare of mankind, for freedom, peace and friendship between peoples.”

A major issue was the fact that the United States, among other countries, stationed nuclear weapons in West Germany, while the USSR stationed nuclear weapons in East Germany. With the constant danger that a conflict within the Cold War might escalate on German territory, the demand for international security was extremely high. Odermann writes:

“The GDR enters international politics in order to follow the path of understanding with all nations. Therefore it strives for good relations with France, England and the US.”

Nevertheless, Odermann does not hesitate to express a more radical task of RBI:

“As broadcaster of the GDR, RBI has the task to reveal the role West German Imperialism within the framework of America’s global strategy and to expose worldwide its revanchist, neo-fascist and neo-colonial master plan.”

GDR BH corridors in 2000s (SS).

He also points out that issues between the two German states were preferably not broadcast to a foreign audience, which means the Berlin Wall was rarely mentioned in its programme. Reporting conflicts would acknowledge them in the first place. This would have been at odds with the GDR’s desire to portray itself as a peaceful and harmonious country that wanted to be an attractive or ‘better’ place to live in.

How exactly RBI managed to portray the GDR as a ‘better’ place, will be explored in the next part, where I take a closer look at the English Department of the station.



Conference room, GDR Broadcasting House in Nalepastraße Berlin-Oberschöneweide in 2000s (SS)

Part II – Between Party Line and the Open World: Radio Berlin International

The second part of the research on RBI focuses on the programmes of the European English Service. The programme began with following announcement: “*This is Radio Berlin International, the voice of the German Democratic Republic, broadcasting to Europe.*”

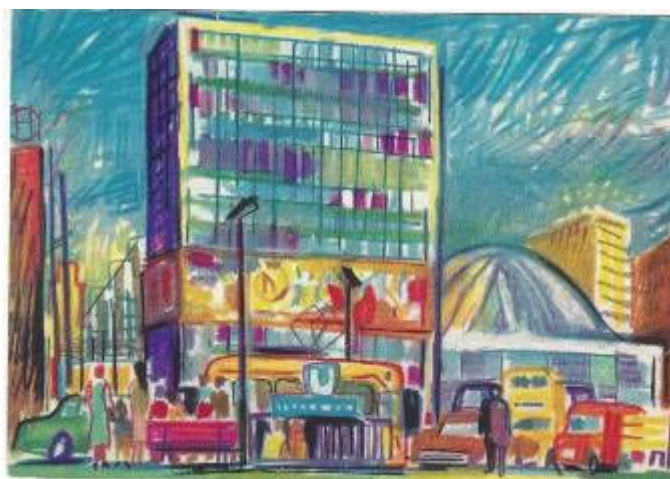
During the first years, the programmes were 30 minutes long. Later they increased to 45 minutes and had a relatively fixed structure. Each programme had daily:

- a) a news bulletin at the beginning, which was ten minutes long and read live
- b) a commentary, the ‘Tageskommentar’, abbreviated as TAKO, which was three minutes long and produced on the day.

The remaining time followed a weekly schedule that changed only slightly over the years and consisted of pre-produced material. An RBI Journal in 1982 published following schedule:

Mon	Spotlight on Sport, DX Meeting
Tues	GDR Kaleidoscope (culture, science and technology, social life, youth affairs, etc.)
Weds	We Answer Listener Questions, Pop Corner
Thurs	The Land We Live In (interesting aspects of life in the GDR) Midweek Sports Report
Fri	Newsreel of the Socialist World (Reports about life and development in the socialist countries) Did You Know?
Sat	News and views of the world peace movement, GDR Report (Reports, interviews etc. on GDR-North America, GDR-Britain relations respectively), Dateline Berlin (John Peet on current affairs)
Sun	Weekend Magazine, Mailbag / Thank You For Writing

Between the individual items, music from the region to which it was broadcast was played. This made it more attractive to the target audience without compromising guidelines for programmes on networks that aimed at the national audience considering some music from western countries was not available in the GDR. The news bulletin consisted of items given by the central news department and items compiled by the individual departments of each specific region. The news covered the GDR, FRG, international current affairs and events of the region to which the programme was broadcasting, all with the party’s viewpoint. In order to obtain the news items for and from Britain, the divisional directors had access to western media, particularly to the British press and its newspapers such as the *Financial Times*.



RBI QSLs: from 1962 www.hobbyradio.se & 50 years ago in 1966. Paul Greaves via <http://swling.com>

A significant aspect in presenting news and programmes of the GDR was the so-called 'ARGU'. The 'ARGU', short for 'argumentation' (and in this context meaning 'line of argumentation'), was a daily meeting of the Secretary of Agitation and Propaganda and the Head of State. They did not only decide which news was to be presented but also how it was worded. Additionally, they dictated which topics were not to be mentioned. At this meeting, representatives of the State Committee for Print and Broadcast and the news agency Allgemeiner Deutscher Nachrichtendienst (ADN) were present so that they could pass down orders to their departments. (RBI stamps from www.oldtimeradio.de)



Hannelore Steer whose career span over 20 years as an editor in the Africa Department of RBI, stated in an interview: *“The programme [of RBI] was a self-representation of the GDR, where the image of the GDR was embellished”*. (Photo of Hannelore, with audio, from www.wagner.tv/?p=21395)

Heinz Odermann admits the same in *Wellen mit tausend Klängen*.

Wolfram Bielenstein, Head of the European English Department for many years, confirms this in an interview: *“Problems within the country, particularly economic ones, were not addressed. Instead the country boasted with its achievements.”* This can be clearly heard on the programme broadcast on 30 December 1984, which stated that the GDR *“exceeded its target”* and the economy was

overall flourishing. When reporting restrictions were lifted after 9 November 1989, the programme *Thank You For Writing* on 12 November 1989 responded to the fact that many GDR citizens left their country and gave reasons such as *“substantial problems in health service”* and *“insufficient supply of consumer goods”*. The programme also admitted: *“...the media pretended that this country did not have any problems at all and painted a rosy picture as if we were advancing from one success to the next.”*

On 16 November 1989 the programme offered the following explanation as to why this *“rosy picture”* was painted: *“The former leadership of this country (...) were living in a make-believe world of their own. They had so effectively walled themselves in that very seldom did they get a glimpse of real life in this country. Thus the picture the media presented had to match their image. (...) There was an efficient system of censorship installed, which basically boiled down to the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party laying down the rules. (...) The leadership of the Socialist Unity Party (...) had the media, including RBI, play to its tune. (...) There were daily briefings by the respective department of the Central Committee on what to broadcast and what to leave out.”*

Listening to RBI's programmes from the 1980s, their style varied. Some programmes like *Mailbag* were rather slow, conservative and stilted; others, however, like the sports programme were very lively. A noteworthy feature is that some programmes were presented by two people: This allowed one person to quote from letters and the other to provide the answers, which made the programme more interesting. The music often reflected the fashion of the time.

The Team

The English Department of RBI had about twelve members of staff. Almost all were involved in translating, reporting, news-reading, presenting and replying to listeners' letters. The news and commentaries were generally compiled and written by the Heads of Department. The English Department also worked with freelance journalists. It did not, however, have correspondents abroad.

The English Department was predominantly set up by people who returned from exile after National Socialism was defeated. These were mostly Communists who helped to build the GDR. Having been in exile in English speaking countries, they had acquired the language skills needed to produce programmes in English. The English and other departments were also made up of those who had studied either Journalism or languages at university or had a training in interpreting, which, too, was offered at universities.

Important members of the team were the native speakers. What would entice someone from England, for example, to work in and for the GDR? The most common reason was that they believed in the socialist system as in the case of British-born journalist John Peet. Another reason was their involvement in the Resistance and it was important to them to live in a country, whose aim was to eradicate former Nazis.

Despite having to put up with the restrictions in their freedom of expression and a generally lower living standard (compared to the one in West Germany) they had an advantage that GDR citizens did not: they kept their nationality and had the opportunity to travel to the West. In practice, however, this was rarely done as this involved much bureaucracy.

Bielenstein points out that the bonus of having an employment, which might not have been easy to secure in their home country, came at a price: Native speakers had to take into account that – from a western point of view – working for a socialist country could be career-damaging and prospects of finding employment after a return were limited. Also, native speakers were not presented to their listeners by their real name but by an adopted one. Native speakers were recruited through the socialist party of their country, for example in France or Sweden, or through their studies at an East German university.

The task of native speakers was to translate manuscripts, correct translations made by Germans and to present: **Majorie Milner**, for example, presented *Mailbag*, **Jean Jones** presented *Did You Know?* and **Bob Hamilton** covered sport. They were not entitled to compile the news or write the commentary, but were allowed to read the news, if they were trusted. Native speakers usually had a two-year-contract. After two years some of them preferred to return to their country.



Inside RBI Nalepastraße in the 2000s (photo SS)

The English Department was run by people who, on the one hand, generally believed in the socialist system, but, on the other hand, were painfully aware of the system's shortcomings. They hoped that a new government would improve the situation within the state. The majority of staff, however, was less motivated by party politics than by a passion for the English language and the opportunity to employ their language skills and be creative. Additionally, working at RBI offered privileges that most other GDR citizens or even other journalists did not have.

Privileges

Firstly, as RBI produced programmes for listeners outside the GDR, the programme makers were granted more freedom than their colleagues who produced for an audience in the GDR itself. Odermann writes that from the 1970s onwards only some German programmes were spot-checked by the Department for Foreign Information of the Central Committee. This freedom was also a result of the fact that most officials were not able to speak the languages in which the programmes were produced. This is very much in contrast to Radio Moscow, where the news were translated from Russian into a foreign language and then translated back into Russian by another translator to ensure its meaning had not been altered.

Secondly, depending on the rank and the person's 'trustworthiness', the language skills enabled some RBI staff to travel to countries that were not part of the Eastern Bloc. These excursions, however, were not to gain information about the country to which RBI broadcast, but to support GDR's trade delegation. That meant that if the GDR participated in international trade fairs, the task was to act as an interpreter and spokesperson of the GDR as Hannelore Steer, who travelled to Africa several times, remembers.



Hardy Graupner, who worked as an editor in the English Department from 1983 onwards, recalls privileges regarding the standard of living: access to rare books; doctors, who worked on the premises of GDR's broadcasting centre; special holiday camps for children, and occasionally peaches, which were seldom available in the GDR.

After RBI Hardy Graupner went onto work for Deutsche Welle. Photo from <http://www.dw.com/en/they-said-i-had-a-look-of-uncertainty/a-4809726>

Finally, the opportunity to work with native speakers was a privilege in itself. Not only language skills could be improved, but also ways of making more interesting programmes. Although it could rarely be put into practice, they learned about balanced and objective journalism. Their insight into their country was used to make the programmes as attractive as possible – but considering they had not been to their country for a while, they were slightly out of touch. Information about current events was provided through other international broadcasters such as the BBC.

Who listened to RBI? That question will be investigated in the next part.

Right: Photo of RBI pennant from Marty Delfin's blog <http://shortwavescatter.blogspot.co.uk/2008/10/remembering-radio-berlin-international.html>



Part III – Between Party Line and the Open World: Radio Berlin International

The third and final part of my research on RBI focuses on the listener and the changes after the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989.

One aspect that made RBI stand out from other international broadcasters was their close relationship with their listeners. Their letters had to be replied to by the staff themselves. Some answers were very comprehensive and included promotional material, sometimes even LPs. As with the broadcasts, the answers also had to conform to the party line. That was, of course, not only because the broadcasts and the personally provided information in the letters had to be coherent, but also because letters to and from the GDR to and from western countries were monitored and read by the Ministry for State Security, known as the Stasi. RBI presenter Hardy Graupner revealed that ‘uncomfortable’ questions from listeners were left unanswered. The *Thank you for Writing* programme on 16 November 1989 picked up a letter from John from Glasgow, which illustrated another way with which RBI used to respond to critical queries:

“Some 3½ years ago I sent you a long letter criticising the amount of blatant propaganda churned out on your programmes at the time. In your reply (...) I was informed that RBI is not a debating club in such matters.”

Apart from an active listener correspondence, another way of binding listeners to RBI was its DX Club, which addressed amateur radio operators and short wave listeners. In order to become a member, listeners had to send in three reception reports. After that, only one reception report per month was required. The station rewarded them with QSL cards confirming the correctness of the data and merchandising.

RBI QSL card of summertime in East Berlin 30 years ago in 1986, from <http://ok2xy.mococh.cz/>

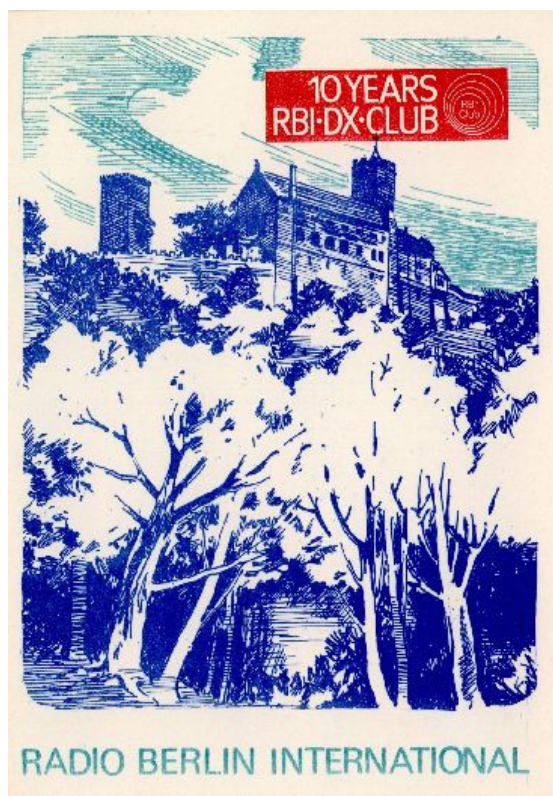


The club was particularly popular in the developing world, for instance in Africa, but also with listeners in Britain. **Tom Read**, member of the British DX Club (BDXC), confirms this:

“Without doubt, the main reason that RBI was so popular with short wave listeners was because of the way it engaged with them, both through interesting programming and mail correspondence. Short wave listeners were as much (if not more) interested in their radios technically, as the programming output they were listening to. So RBI's programmes that dealt with "DXing" (the hobby of tuning the short wave bands), amateur radio and propagation and the listeners' letters ...were very popular.

Short wave listeners enjoy writing to stations they hear with a reception report, and stations reply with a letter, a programme schedule, maybe a sticker, and a QSL (verification) card, which are collected and highly prized by the hobbyists. RBI would have a regularly changing series of attractive QSL cards, and the exact data (date, time, frequency etc.) of your sent report typed on the back of the card. They would send out stickers, pennants, programme schedules, DX Club bulletins and sometimes, colourful hardback books about the GDR! It is not difficult to understand why the station was so popular with listeners. And, in contrast, West Germany's

Deutsche Welle put out relatively boring programmes! The news might have been more accurate and less government-controlled from DW, but its programmes were simply not as interesting to listen to!”



Chrissy Brand, General Editor of the BDXC journal *Communication*, recalls:

“I listened to RBI from about 1976 until its takeover by Deutsche Welle in 1990. Although I listened to many international broadcasters on shortwave then (and now), I felt RBI was one of the best, certainly amongst the eastern European and so-called communist stations. This was because it did not just broadcast long diatribes of propaganda or dull economic figures, but seemed to me to be far more human than other eastern stations such as Radio Tirana and Radio Sofia.

Yes, it broadcast the GDR government’s views, but so did some other radio stations on shortwave - The Voice of America and Radio Free Europe often broadcast the US government views for example. Also, in the UK media we were only given negative views about eastern Europe. I wanted to form my own views. (...).

I was very interested in life in the eastern bloc, especially in East Germany, to see how it was trying to develop a fairer and less consumer-driven society than West Germany. (...) When I first listened, as a young teenager, I thought the style of programming was so sophisticated that it could not possibly be an eastern bloc station, but was actually being broadcast from one of the three western sectors of Berlin – to my young ears it sounded slicker and more akin to western broadcasters such as the BBC, Radio Sweden, Radio Finland and Radio France International.”

Jonathan Marks, international broadcaster from the Netherlands, had a critical attitude:

“I regularly listened to the English Service of RBI in the 1970s up until 1989 as part of my fascination with international broadcasting. (...) RBI was very political, even the letters programme with Marjorie Milner rarely gave you an idea that the GDR has a human face. Having visited the studios in Nalepastraße and seeing that the Stasi used to control who was cleared to read live news, it confirmed my belief that RBI was often broadcasting a fantasy picture of what was really going on in the country.”

How did the English Department create a programme that adhered to the socialist party line and still appealed to the British who enjoy a free press?

RBI was not able to report about – and for – Britain in the way the BBC World Service reported about – and for – Germany during the Second World War and up until nine years after Germany’s reunification to provide a balanced and unbiased view on political affairs. Although RBI expressed the political views of the GDR and shunned political debates, one way of making appealing programmes was to focus on primarily non-political matters such as sport, music and culture. The programme manuscripts of *Thank you for Writing* in the late 1980s reveal reports on topics, which listeners asked about, such as beer breweries in the GDR, the availability of herbal remedies, policies concerning driving licence and castles in the GDR. And, as previously mentioned, RBI’s DX Club addressed some people’s hobby.

Last but not least, another aspect of RBI's appeal must have been the voices of native speakers and those who mastered the English accent to that extent that they were perceived as native speakers. These voices gave the programme a certain quality and its content, perhaps, more credibility.

Changes after the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989

Manuscripts from *Thank You For Writing* on 12 and 16 November 1989 demonstrate that free reporting was now possible and applied. The manuscript from 12 November 1989 reads: *"We here at RBI like our colleagues in the other GDR media do not encounter any obstacles in telling the whole truth about this country."*

They reported about what was actually happening in the GDR and explained to its audience, why people were rebelling. The programmes reported on subjects that were previously taboo such as environmental and housing problems. Of greater interest were possibly their reports and views on the changes and developments that were made to achieve Germany's reunification. Topics included the renaming of streets and towns in the GDR, changes in media and the introduction of the West German currency in the GDR, but also GDR tourism to Britain.



Reflections on working at Radio Berlin International



Although the GDR denied its citizen basic rights such as the freedom of expression, it did not discourage them from learning English. In fact, English was taught in primary school and could be taken up to university level. One motivation to learn English was to understand the lyrics of songs that could be heard on radio stations picked up from outside the country. Bielenstein regrets however that the quality of the teaching was relatively poor as the teachers had no chance to visit the country to improve their language skills.

Nevertheless, despite having to broadcast socialist views in the news and the commentary, RBI offered the opportunity to improve one's language skills through everyday contact with native speakers and be creative without having to touch on politics. Working at RBI could be regarded as a window to a wider world, which was usually closed to GDR citizens. Also, the different languages in which RBI broadcast made the station a place of international and multicultural encounters that could not be found anywhere else in the GDR.

Reflections on RBI's British audience

A statistic produced by RBI in December 1989 shows that, within Europe, the highest number of letters in that year came from Britain, 9,601 letters altogether. The second position was held by the Soviet Union with 3,139 letters and the third position held the Netherlands with 814 letters.

The statistic unfortunately does not disclose whether these letters were general enquiries, comments or reception reports for RBI's DX Club. Also, it is not clear if the letters were specifically addressed to the English Department or to RBI in general. Yet, the question remains: What could have caused this interest in RBI's broadcasts? At this point of research, the answer can only be assumed: The late 1970s and early 1980s in Britain were a period of economic crisis, which brought the Winter of Discontent in 1978/79 and miners' strikes in 1984/85. This dissatisfaction with Britain's leadership and the country's low level of social security, might have motivated Britons to inform themselves about a country that promised its citizens social security with employment, low rents and free education. The 'price', however, at which GDR citizens 'enjoyed' employment, low rents and free education was publicised in western media. The GDR was seen by many as an experiment that tried to create a better society, but failed.

Last, but not least, Britain also has socialist groups, the Socialist Party of Great Britain and the Socialist Party of England and Wales. Members of these parties would also have had an interest in the developments in a socialist country. The fact that some listeners addressed the English Department of RBI with "Dear Comrades" indicates their solidarity.

Conclusion

Apart from the frustration about not being allowed to report freely until November 1989, the former members of staff I spoke to made the impression that RBI was a happy place to work as it gave them the opportunity to use their language skills, engage with people from other nations and be relatively free in their creative work.

Moreover, letters and statements from listeners demonstrate that RBI's English Service was heard in Britain - despite the socialist party line it had to adhere until November 1989.

Radio Berlin International can be seen as a window, which not only offered a view to the world outside the GDR for those who worked there, but also a view into the GDR for those who listened to it.



*Above left: RBI Bulletin: <http://rainbow.chard.org/radio/radio-berlin-international-east-germany/011-11>
Right: Back of 1975 QSL <http://babulgupta-dxer.blogspot.co.uk/2012/10/german-democratic-republic.html>*



Above: A December 1989 press card of DDR Radio employee Wolfram Bielenstein (Sabine Schreck).

Left: photo of the HQ of Radio Berlin International taken in the 2000s by Sabine Schreck, author of this article, and below, the station's logo.



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