

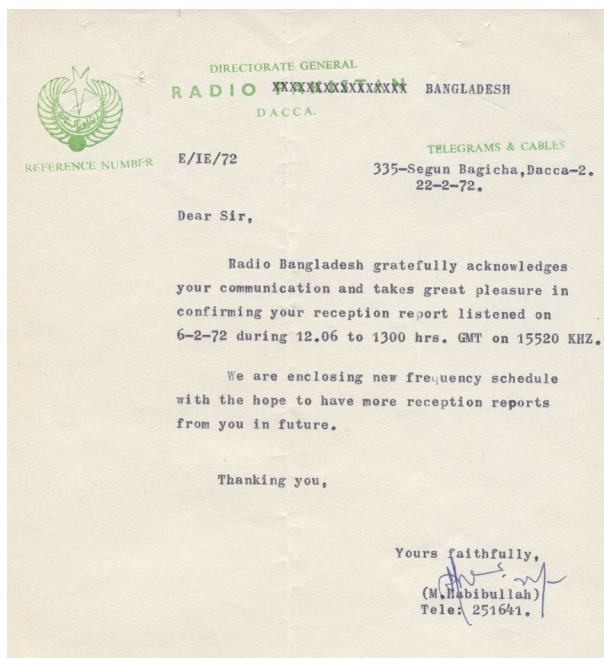
# Looking at QSLs and Seeing History

By Jerry Berg

(Except where otherwise stated, photos and graphics from the author's collection or the collection of the Committee to Preserve Radio Verifications)



*Algeria gained independence from France in 1962 after a bloody eight year revolt. During the years of fighting, Radio Algerie, the shortwave station of Radiodiffusion Television Française in Algiers, was a good verifier. However, on many QSLs the name and address of the station was crossed out. Was it a political statement of a disgruntled employee? The reason has never been established. This card is from 1958. (Courtesy: Don Jensen.)*



*When it was established in 1947, Pakistan was divided into two parts, West Pakistan and East Pakistan, with India in the middle. East Pakistan became the independent nation of Bangladesh in 1971. The capital was Dacca. For a time, QSLs from Dacca were sent on old Radio Pakistan stationery with "Pakistan" crossed out and "Bangladesh" inserted. This one is for reception in February 1972.*

Whether they are full-data confirmations (date, time and frequency), thank you notes, or something in between, QSLs are usually thought of as mementoes of an individual's listening experience. Sometimes they also have broader historical meaning, reminding us, directly or indirectly, of important events of the past. This article looks at QSLs as reflective of political history.

The historical aspect of QSLs is most obvious where the station's country of origin has changed status in some way. There are many examples that are familiar to QSLers and among the most recent are those in Europe. Czechoslovakia was one country until January 1, 1993 when it was divided into the Czech Republic and Slovakia, yielding a new station, Slovak Radio in Bratislava. Yugoslavia was likewise considered one country until the fighting there produced multiple new states: Bosnia & Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia.

No nation has yielded more new countries than the Soviet Union. Although its constituent republics were usually counted separately for radio country counting purposes, the democratization of the former Soviet Union has resulted in a reconstructed Russia and true independence for Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lithuania, and the other Soviet Socialist Republics. As recently as the late 1980s, such an event could have hardly been conceived.

Occasionally countries disappear as separate political entities entirely. The most dramatic examples are East Germany, which, along with Radio Berlin International, was absorbed by West Germany in 1990; and South Vietnam, which was taken over by the north in 1976. Numerous other lesser examples are familiar to DXers. Goa was a Portuguese colony until it was seized by India in 1960. Okinawa was returned to Japanese control in 1972. The Panama Canal Zone became part of Panama proper in 1979. Aden became part of Yemen in 1990. DXers know the special value of QSLs from places whose fundamental identity has been changed by history.

Between new countries and countries that have disappeared are the many that have changed names and political administrations in fairly dramatic ways. Often these changes coincided with the end of the colonial era. That most mysterious of places, the Belgian Congo, became the Democratic Republic of the Congo, then Zaire, then the Democratic Republic of the Congo again. Tanganyika became Tanzania, Bechuanaland became Botswana, Northern Rhodesia and Southern Rhodesia became Zambia and Zimbabwe respectively. In Asia, Burma has become Myanmar. In the Middle East, Egypt and Syria joined for a time as the United Arab Republic. QSLs bearing the old names remind us of history's march.

Shortwave listening was growing during the colonial period of the 1950s and 1960s, and many SWLs learned their international politics and geography while seeking out signals from these stations. Africa was the leading DX target. The many low power stations (4 kW) in what was then called French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa were regular visitors in East Coast afternoons and late evenings. Reception reports brought the good looking SORAFOM QSL-card, showing all the stations. It was prepared for local station use by the Société de Radiodiffusion de la France d'Outre-Mer, a French office established to further the development of broadcasting in French areas.

Also among the most sought-after African targets were the many stations in Portuguese Angola, such as Radio Diamang and Radio Clube do Lobito, as well as Radio Clube de Mozambique, broadcasting from Portugal's East African colony. Perhaps the best known of all the colonial stations was Radio Brazzaville, set up in the French Congo in 1940. It served as the voice of the Free French during the war, and broadcast internationally for many years thereafter.

Over the years, the hobby has taught SWLs much about the role of the United Nations in international affairs. Although U.N. headquarters no longer transmits on shortwave, some of the U.N. missions have had their own radio stations. In recent years these have included Radio UNMEE, operated by the U.N. Mission in Eritrea and Ethiopia; Radio MINURCA, station of the U.N. Mission in the Central African Republic; and Radio UNAMSIL, voice of the U.N. Assistance Mission in Sierra

Leone.

Breakaway efforts in particular countries have illustrated the typically-complicated ethnic and geographic elements of the conflicts. Secessionist Katanga Province declared its sovereignty soon after the Belgian Congo gained independence in 1960. Radio Katanga, broadcasting from Elisabethville (later renamed Lubumbashi), was heard for years and sent out many QSLs. And Radio Biafra brought the Biafran civil war, which lasted from 1967 to 1970, home to SWLs.

More recent examples of breakaway radio are found in the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Pridnestrovie declared itself independent of Moldova in 1991 and is still broadcasting as Radio DMR. The next year Abkhazia, previously part of Soviet Georgia, declared its independence. While Abkhazia is recognized by only a few countries, the radio station in the capital of Sukhumi, Radio Abkhazia, still operates on shortwave.

The connection between shortwave broadcasting and all-out war or other military activities is a natural one, as each side seeks to maximize its impact on the enemy, on its own people, and on the world at large. World War II was the first major international conflict where shortwave played an important role.

There was not a great deal of QSLing, however. Paper and funds were in short supply, as were DXers themselves, most of whom were either in the military or working overtime on the home front. Contact with enemy stations was problematic. Most clubs had shut down or were operating at a nominal level, and many QSLs in Europe were lost or destroyed during the war. The Axis stations – Deutscher Kurzwellensender (“Zeesen”), EIAR-Italy, and Radio Tokyo – all had been good verifiers in the pre-war years.

Many QSLs have been illustrative of military ventures old and new, including verifications from EA9AH, a lead Franco station during the Spanish Civil War; Far East Network, Japan; Radio SEAC, the wartime South East Asia Command station of the British Forces Broadcasting Service in Sri Lanka; Radio Vietnam, Saigon; post-liberation Radio Kuwait (whose QSL included the reminder, “Don’t Forget Our POW’s”); and the BFBS broadcasts during the Gulf War.

The Cold War was played out extensively on shortwave, where high power and high dudgeon were both in great supply and QSLs were plentiful. In hindsight, it was probably the Cold War that gave shortwave broadcasting its *raison d’être*.

From the DXer’s standpoint, the more interesting history of those years was the rise of clandestine broadcasting, which is defined generally as opposition broadcasting that is unwelcome in the target area. Real clandestine broadcasting, where the source of the signal is not known, was used extensively in Europe during World War II, but produced few if any QSLs. The first clandestines that would eventually QSL (albeit many years later) were probably Radio España Independiente and Radio Euzkadi, whose first broadcasts date back to the 1940s.

The Cold War years saw an explosion in clandestine broadcasting not directly related to the Cold War. Most clandestine broadcasting in the 1950s was from, and to, the Middle East. Thereafter, Cuba, Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries, Iran, Iraq and the rest of the Middle East, and East Africa, have all been favorite targets. Best remembered by American listeners were the years of intense anti-Castro clandestine broadcasting (1960-70 and 1975-85), the extensive clandestine broadcasting in Central America (1978-92), and the Southeast Asian years (1969-75).

As clandestine broadcasting has given way to leased time “target” broadcasting, there is now very little that is “clandestine” about opposition political broadcasting on shortwave. Nonetheless, the political conflicts that are at the heart of opposition broadcasting today have made for interesting DXing and QSL collecting. Many of these stations QSL with ease, often by e-mail.

Among the interesting “clandestines” that were decent verifiers over the years are the Democratic Voice of Burma, Voz de Resistencia de Galo Negro (Angola), La Voz del CID (Cuba), Radio Venceremos (El Salvador), Radio Vatan (Iran), Radio Sandino (Nicaragua), Radio Liberation (Vietnam), and countless others. The latest group of target broadcasters are those beaming to North Korea, e.g. Shiokaze. It is thanks to their interest in these stations that many DXers are well informed on political doings in trouble spots big and small.

Alas, with the ebb of shortwave broadcasting, when history repeats itself in the future it is unlikely to be memorialized in many QSLs. But verifications will always be a window into history.

#### About the Author:

Jerry Berg has been DXing and collecting QSLs for over 50 years. He has written several books about shortwave broadcasting history and many articles about DXing. Jerry is a member of the Executive Council of the North American Shortwave Association, chair of the Committee to Preserve Radio Verifications and co-producer of the website [www.ontheshortwaves.com](http://www.ontheshortwaves.com). He is an attorney and before his retirement served for many years as court administrator of the Massachusetts district court system. He can be reached at [jsberg@rcn.com](mailto:jsberg@rcn.com).



### GOVERNMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF BIAFRA

OFFICE OF THE SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE  
IVORY COAST

Telephone: 66544  
Telex: 607 BIAFRACY

No 4 Avenue Jean-Mermos  
Boite Postale 88A  
Cocody-Abidjan

Ref. No. \_\_\_\_\_

23rd January, 1970

Thank you very much for your recent letter.

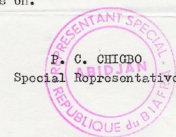
Regular broadcast on Radio Biafra ceased on the 12th/13th January and make shift broadcasts continued until the 13th/14th January.

On the 12th January General Effiong of Biafra made an appeal for disengagement of troops and for surrender terms to be worked out. The people of Biafra faced by decimation from starvation and military operations decided to opt to stop fighting in order to save the remaining millions.

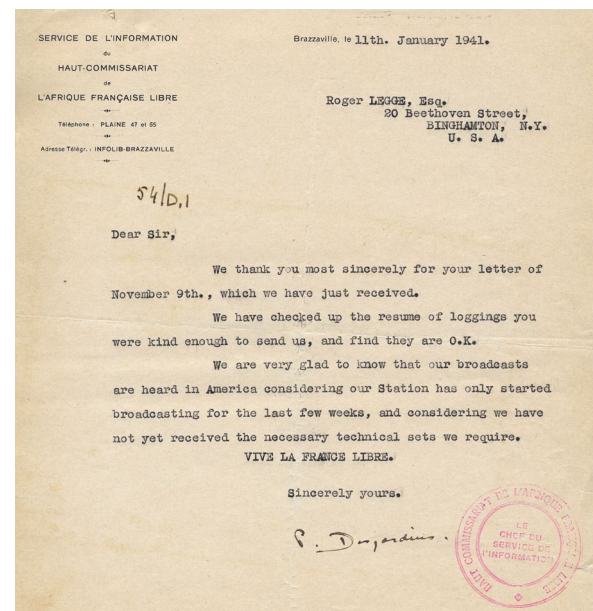
From the 12th onwards therefore the administration at home fell apart as people started fleeing into the bush. I assume only technical personnel continued to man Radio Biafra. In similar circumstances in the past, in the absence of programme staff, music would be played continuously, as actually happened.

However the transmission monitored here was on the 41 meter band 7.301 KHZ (we had lost contact with the 49 meters transmission on the 12th).

From 14th January 1970 Radio Biafra closed down as Biafra Radio after a clear run of 30 months under the most difficult conditions in technical logistics and personnel terms. The Spirit of Biafra lives on.



**On May 30, 1967, the breakaway region of Biafra declared its independence from Nigeria. Soon the Eastern Nigerian Broadcasting Service on 4855 kHz became Radio Biafra, later it was heard on 7301 kHz. An international service known as Voice of Biafra transmitted on 6145. The stations were on the air until Biafra's surrender to Nigerian government forces in January 1970. They usually replied to reception reports via the Biafran office in Abidjan, Ivory Coast.**



**Radio Brazzaville, French Equatorial Africa, was set up in 1940. It was founded by two Frenchmen, Capt. François Desjardins and his brother, Lt. Pierre Desjardins, and had been on the air for only a few weeks when this QSL, signed by Pierre, was sent. As the closing, “Vive La France Libre,” suggests, Radio Brazzaville would be the international voice of the Free French during World War II. It had an extensive foreign service, which continued even after the French Congo's independence in 1960.**