



**“If People Really Knew, the War
Would Be Stopped **Tomorrow**”:
How the Press, the British
State, and the Public Interacted
During World War I**

“If people really knew, the war would be stopped tomorrow. But of course they don't know and can't know. The correspondents don't write, and the censorship would not pass, the truth. What they do send is not the war, but just a pretty picture of the war with everybody doing gallant deeds....The thing is horrible beyond human nature to bear” – P.M. David Lloyd George, 1917

IN 1899...

With the printing of Britain's first widely-read newspaper, *The Daily Mail*, the British War Office noted that a mechanism would eventually be needed for wartime press control.



UNIQUE CHALLENGES IN WWI

- A widespread lack of coherence about war aims
- A quick chain reaction that required swift mobilization
- Pressure: photojournalism, global connectedness, and an expectation of press objectivity
- Unprecedented devastation paired with greater visibility than ever before
- Every major government turned to propaganda and censorship as solutions to shaping public opinion

HALF TRUTHS AND DISTORTIONS

Public distrust in the press

Solider disillusionment with the home front

Inaccurate national understandings of the war

Demoralized wartime correspondents

Skewed journalistic ethical norms for decades

.....Britain led the charge

“Propaganda is the task of creating and directing public opinion. In other wars this work has not been the function of government...[but in WWI], a struggle which was not of armies but of nations, and which tended to affect every people on the globe, this aloofness could not be maintained.”

British Ministry of Information, 1918

1891-15.XI1944 KURTI.XI1921-6.IX1943 OTA 5.XI1880-4.VIII19
6.IX1943 *VIKTOR 1.II1898 ELIŠKA 17.IX1900-16.XI1944 *ANNA 6.VI
14.IX1943 *FRANTIŠKA 12.VIII1864-15.XI1942 *GABRIELA 1.XI188
IX1943 *KARLA 20.VI1860-3.VIII1942 *LAURA 10.IX1872-19.XI194
*RŮŽENA 18.III1861-15.XI1942 *RŮŽENA 29.III1878-6.IX1943 *RŮŽEN
20.XII1901 MARGIT 18.VI1931-16.XI1944 *ULREICH ELTER GETZEL 4
LEO 11.IX1904 MARTA 28.II1906-20.II1943 *UNGAR ARNOŠT 7.1
IDA 21.II1917 MARTA 23.V 1941-19.XI1944 *MARKUS 12.IX1868-23.XII194
-19.XI1942 *DAVID 31.VII1880-17.V1942 *FRANTIŠEK 12.IV 1901-25.V 194
VIK 6.IX1866-2.XI1942 LUDMILA 14.XI1878-6.IX1943 *FRANTIŠKA 18
SANDOR 25.XII1892-1.XI1943 *EDEL 6.II1886-4.VIII1942 *FRANTIŠ
0-6.IX1943 PAVLA 24.VIII1889-6.IX1945 ERVÍN 15.II1890-1.IX1942 JI
RBACH ALFRÉD 14.VI1859-11.IX1942 KLÁRA 2.II1866-4.VI1943 *BEDŘ
11913-16.XI1942 *JAN 22.XII1892 NELY 21.XI1904 ERIKA 6.XI1928 ANI
AMIL 2.VI1893 IRENA 23.III1902-16.XI1942 *KAREL 2.II1871-27.VIII194
15.XII1894 HALINA 6.V 1900-25.VIII1942 *VALTR 1.VIII1892-29.IX1944
RA 12.V 1868-30.VIII1942 *OLGA 15.IV1868-15.XI1942 *UJITZ ANTON
29.VI1888-4.VIII1942 *JULIUS 2.XI1880 ANNA 21.III1887 MATYLD A
3.IV1888-2.VII1942 RŮŽENA 2.II1886 JIŘÍ 8.II1923-26.II1943 *VAI
OVÁ BERTA 8.II1875-19.XI1942 *HELENA 6.II1894-19.XI1942 *VANĚČKO
4 *VANTOCH ARNOŠT 30.VII1887 OTILIE 26.V 1888-28.VIII1942 *EVŽI
VIII1894 ALICE 13.XI1905-10.VI1942 *KAMILA 28.IX1857-18.II1943
KA 6.III1898-6.IX1943 *VASA JOSEF 21.V 1899-28.IX1944 HELENA 2
XI1944 *VEIL JIŘÍ 16.XI1919-6.IX1943 *VEIT ERICH 25.XI1906-8
.III1942 *LAURA 6.VII1862-15.XI1942 *PAVLA 10.II1874-22.VI1943 *RŮŽE
1896 LIANA 28.VII1929-10.VI1942 *VELEMINSKY HUGO 2.VI188
11884 VĚRA 8.XI1909-10.VI1942 *IDA 8.XII1883-1.VIII1944 *MARIE
VIII1911-25.VIII1942 *VERTES JULIUS 2.VII1882 MARTA 10.III18
ALOISIE 13.V 1859-28.XI1944 *VESELY FRANTIŠEK 4.III1883 IDA
228-28.XI1944 *IRMA 9.V 1883-11.V 1942 *MARKÉTA 16.II1885-
A ALŽBĚTA 28.IX1903-12.XI1942 *VIDOROVÁ ALŽBĚTA 10.XII1893-2
GUGIKOVA JOSEFA 8.VI1920-17.III1942 *VICHERA JIŘÍ 6.II192
ŠT 25.XI1903 HERMÍNA 26.VII1878-31.XI1941 *VINCZEFOVÁ FLORA 29
5 JIŘINA 12.II1920-10.VI1942 *VLASÁKOVÁ ANNA 24.IV1894-19.XI194
22-23.IV1942 *VOCÁSEK ARNOŠT 1.XII1897-8.IX1942 *ARTUR 7.VII18
1999 HANA 10.IX1933 PAVEL 21.XII1936-22.IX1942 *OSKAR 12.II1894 RŮŽE I
1943 *VODICKA LEO 16.XI1889-16.XI1944 *OSKAR 17.V 1890 LUDMI
IX1878-16.XI1941 *ADÉLA 8.IV1882-30.IV1942 *IDA 7.III1884-20.V
359-16.XI1942 *VODSTRČILOVÁ OLGA 20.VI1887-4.VIII1942
.VIII1942 *ANTONÍN 21.III1893 VALERIE 1.IV 1901 JOSEF 8.XI1929-
1905 REGINA 21.IV 1915-10.VI1942 *OTA 24.VIII1871-15.VI1944 MARIA
ELENA 30.II1905-8.IX1942 *OTA 13.III1901-1.XI1944 MARKÉTA 2.VI
OLINA 25.III1892-6.IX1943 *RICHARD 13.XI1908-1.IX1942 ALŽBĚ
60.IV1912 PETR 24.IX1938-12.XI1944 *ZIKMUND 9.VIII1867-21.IV19

THREE-PRONGED STATE APPROACH

- 1) Censor the free press
- 2) Employ correspondents
- 3) Pass legislation for enforcement of strict speech and demonstration protocol



TIMELINE

Defence of the Realm Act

Press Bureau and Delays

Ernest Swinton

Team of Six+



Source: Cornell University Library; image in public domain

“...above all to avoid helping the enemy. This appeared to me even more important than the purveyance of news to our own people...For home consumption—that is for those who were carrying the burden and footing the bill—I essayed to tell as much of the truth as was compatible with safety, to guard against depression and pessimism, and to check unjustified optimism which might lead to a relaxation of effort.” – Ernest Swinton



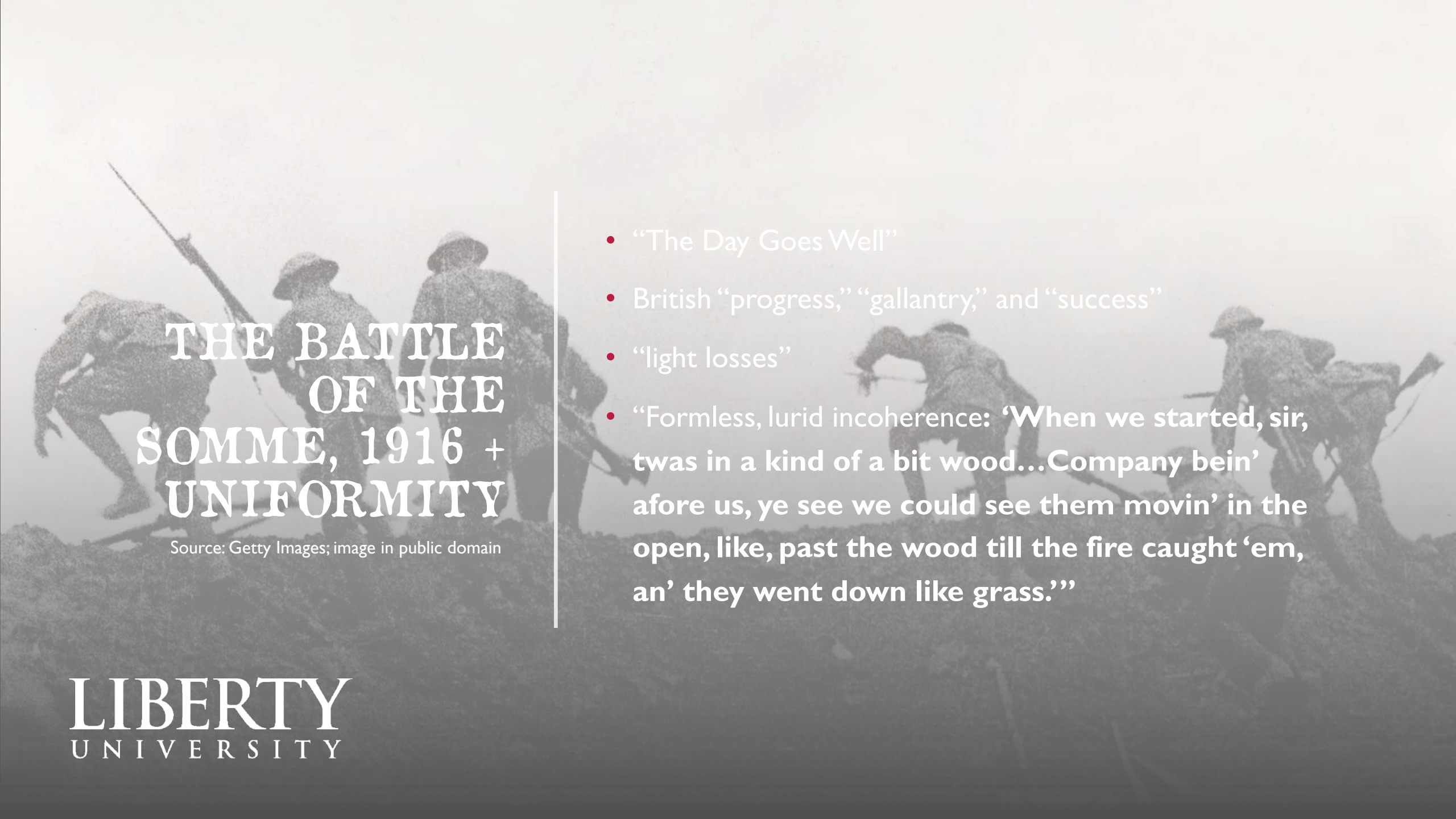
ILLEGALITY ON THE FRONT TO SIX EMPLOYED CORRESPONDENTS

Source: Getty Images; image in public domain



THE BATTLE OF MONS, 1914 + INCONSISTENCY

- Germany's "great demoralization and disorder"
- The Germans "retiring rapidly"
- **"Mons and its tragedy" for the British**
- **Germans "outwitting" the Anglo-French forces**



THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME, 1916 + UNIFORMITY

Source: Getty Images; image in public domain

- “The Day Goes Well”
- British “progress,” “gallantry,” and “success”
- “light losses”
- “Formless, lurid incoherence: ‘When we started, sir, twas in a kind of a bit wood...Company bein’ afore us, ye see we could see them movin’ in the open, like, past the wood till the fire caught ‘em, an’ they went down like grass.’”

U-BOATS AND PROPAGANDA, 1917-1918

- The press centered its efforts on “**demonizing**” the Germans U-boat activity while “**ignoring**” Britain’s no-holds-barred tactics
- “**Atrocity stories**” became commonplace
- Successful on home front; stirred the populace against Germany when it had become apathetic

CONSEQUENCES

The most “discreditable period” in the history of journalism;
inspired a reversal in press freedom around the globe

Source: Unsplash Images; image in public domain

“I was thoroughly and deeply ashamed of what I had written, for the very good reason that it was untrue. Almost all the official information was wrong. The vulgarity of enormous headlines and the enormity of one’s own name did not lessen the shame.” – William Beach Thomas

PRIMARY SOURCES:

Bishop, Elizabeth and Robert Lowell. *Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence Between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell*, ed. Thomas J. Travisano and Saskia Hamilton. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010.

British Headquarters. "The Day Goes Well." *Times*, July 3, 1916, 10.

Brownrigg, Douglas. *Indiscretions of the Naval Censor*. London: Cassell and Company, 1920.

"Defense of the Realm Consolidation Act." United Kingdom National Archives. November 27, 1914.
https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/firstworldwar/first_world_war/p_defence.htm. Top of Form

"Espionage Act of 1917." Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs. June 15, 1917. <https://iowaculture.gov/history/education/educator-resources/primary-source-sets/americas-involvement-world-war-i/espionage>.

"Good Day All Round." *Times*, July 8, 1916, 8.

Harmsworth, G. and R. Pound, *Northcliffe*. London: Cassell, 1959.

"Letter from Theodore Roosevelt to Sir Edward Grey." Brigham Young University Library. January 22, 1915.
https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Letter_from_Theodore_Roosevelt_to_Sir_Edward_Grey.

PRIMARY SOURCES, CONTINUED:

Lowell, Robert. *The Dolphin*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973.

Masterman, Lucy. *C. F. G. Masterman: A Biography*. London: Nicholson and Watson, 1939.

Moore, Arthur. "Broken British Regiments Battling Against Odds." *Times*, August 30, 1914.

Our Own Correspondent. "Position South of The Somme." *Times*, July 7, 1916, 7.

Our Special Correspondent. "Battle Of the Ancre." *Times*, July 7, 1916, 8.

Press Association. "Enemy's Rapid Retreat." *The Sun*, September 12, 1914, 9.

"Press Bureau Opening To-Day." *Times*, 11 August 11, 1914, 4.

Shepherd, William G. *Confessions of a War Correspondent*. New York: Harper & Bros, 1917.

Swinton, Ernest D. *Eyewitness, Being Personal Reminiscences of Certain Phases of The Great War: Including The Genesis Of The Tank*. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1933.

"The US Sedition Act." Brigham Young University Library. May 16, 1918. <https://net.lib.byu.edu/~rdh7/wwi/1918/usspy.html.bak>.

Thomas, William Beach. *A Traveller in News*. London: Chapman and Hall, 1925.

SECONDARY SOURCES:

Blokhin, Valery F., Irina Viktorovna Alferova, Julia Nikolaevna Ustinova, and Ekaterina Sergeevna Fisher. "PERIODICALS AND MILITARY CENSORSHIP DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR." *Astra Salvensis: revista de istorie si cultura*. VI, no. 13 (2019): 93–100.

Cornwall, Mark. *The Undermining of Austria-Hungary: The Battle for Hearts and Minds*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000.

Farish, Matthew. "Modern Witnesses: Foreign Correspondents, Geopolitical Vision, and the First World War." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 26, no. 3 (2001): 273–87.

Farrar, Martin. *News from the Front: War Correspondents on the Western Front 1914-1918*. Stroud: Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1999.

Fussell, Paul. *The Great War and Modern Memory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975.

Glover, Jonathan. *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001.

SECONDARY SOURCES, CONTINUED:

Hopkin, Deian. "Domestic Censorship in the First World War." *Journal of Contemporary History* 5, no. 4 (1970): 151–69.

Kisanovici, Ioana Elena Ignat. "CENSORSHIP IN TRANSYLVANIA DURING FIRST WORLD WAR: CORRESPONDENCE OVERVIEW." *Research and Science Today* 2, no. 11 (2016): 24-31.

Knightley, Philip. *The First Casualty*. London: Prion Books, 1975.

Lovelace, Colin. "British Press Censorship during the First World War." In *Newspaper History: From the Seventeenth Century to the Present Day*, ed. by George Boyce, James Curran, and Pauline Wingate, 305–319. London: Constable, 1978.

Sondaus, Lawrence. *German Submarine Warfare in World War I: The Onset of Total War at Sea*. London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017.

Taylor, Philip M. "The Foreign Office and British Propaganda during the First World War." *The Historical Journal* 23, no. 4 (1980): 875–98.

Wilke, Jürgen. "Censorship and Freedom of the Press." In *European History Online*. Leibniz Institute of European History, 2013.