

## Abstract

Perhaps if it had been accurately reported, World War I would have been the “war to end all wars” that Woodrow Wilson described in 1917. Instead, it was a period of half-truths and discrepancies as governments tried to manage international conflict during a period of modernity that shifted attention towards photojournalism, global connectedness, and an increased expectation of objectivity in the press. Government policy induced a crisis of conscience for journalists who—beyond tempering their observations—had to blatantly lie about bleakness on the front, atrocities that new technology made possible, ongoing stalemate, and low soldier morale. War correspondents often later expressed regret for having compromised their integrity by submitting to these restrictive measures. Yet, where does the line lay between duty to country and fealty to truth? This study centers on this question journalists asked themselves and focuses on Britain as a case study for how press coverage, state censorship, and public perception shaped each other during WWI. The research extends to comparative examples that similarly resulted in civilian skepticism and soldier disillusionment. At the time, the press pushed up against journalistic standards, governments vied with war correspondents, and reality clashed with published material. This study’s juxtaposition of these dynamics illuminates how what was printed during WWI contrasted with what was actually experienced, and exposes the ramifications of these disparities on ethical norms for decades.

## Research Question

What was the nature, scope, and impact of British press censorship during WWI, did it cause press coverage to significantly depart from the truth, how involved was the state, and how did the British public and military perceive what transpired?

## Methods

This research analyzes the following elements in determining that 1) while the British press remained technically free during the war, it was indirectly controlled and shaped by the state, 2) British war correspondents fell in line with the government’s aims and even produced propaganda but later regretted their actions, 3) the wide disparity between reality and printed coverage led to alienation of the military, and 4) this censorship mechanism quickly inspired duplication in every major power, with lasting consequences.

**- What guided publication?:** Sifted through Britain’s legal code, the Defence of the Realm Act, Ministry of Information and Press Bureau directives, quotations from influential government officials, correspondence from the United States that impacted British policy, and post-war reflections from correspondents.

**- Was there a difference between what happened and what was printed?:** Juxtaposed historical records and statistics of three different phases in the war with the press coverage of them, close-read numerous articles from news archives, and surveyed quotations from military personnel on their view of the coverage.

**- Did this impact other nations?:** Combined secondary source analysis with a survey of each piece of legislation comparable to the Defence Act in WWI’s major powers, brought in the historical record to identify any lasting effects or reversals, and analyzed the starkly different government models in question.

**- How did wartime correspondents and the military respond?** Read a large variety of post-war reflections by correspondents and soldiers, sifted through quotations by government officials about public discontent, identified periphery primary sources of spouses who wrote about their relevant observations at the time, and illuminated the emergence of military newspapers often found in the trenches once soldiers believed that “anything might be true, except what was printed [in the widely circulated press.]”

## Battle of the Mons + Inconsistency, 1914



## U-Boats + Blatant Propaganda, 1917-18



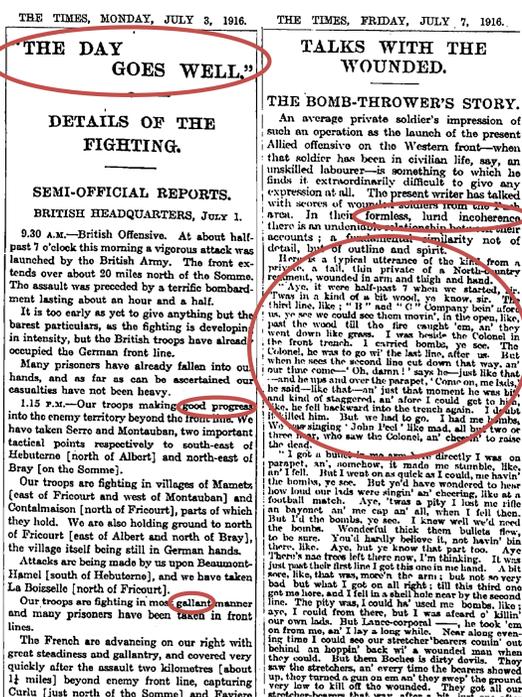
Source: National Maritime Museum, image in public domain



Source: The Canadian Libraries Archive, image in public domain

Source: All newspaper images sourced from the public domain *The Times* digital archive via Gale

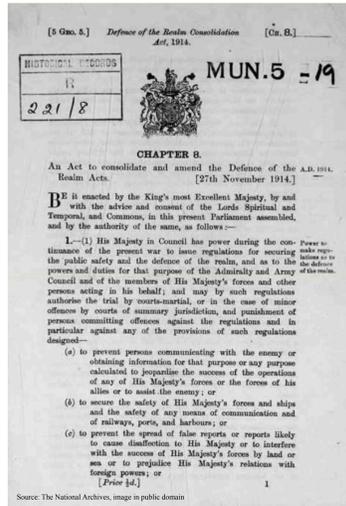
## Battle of the Somme + Uniformity, 1916



## Global Consequences + Ethical Impact

“We’re **telling lies**, we daren’t tell the public the truth, that we’re losing more officers than the Germans, and that it’s impossible to get through on the Western Front. You’ve seen the correspondents shepherded by Charteris [the director of military intelligence], they don’t know the truth, they don’t speak the truth and we know they don’t.” - Lord Rutherford, newspaper owner 1917

<b>TIMELINE</b>	Aug 5, 1914: No press at front, Press Bureau censors news	Aug. 8: DORA and official reporting	Press Bureau overwhelmed and delay in hard news	Press goes to front, many jailed, public demands news	Aug. 30: “great losses” with “victory,” hurts US ties
	Swinton hired, often wrote “exact reverse of truth”	June 1915, government hires six correspondents	Press officially becomes an arm of the government	News shift from uniformly optimistic to propaganda	Throughout: other nations follow suit, public distrust



Defence of the Realm Act, 1914

“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.”

Prime Minister David Lloyd George, 1917

## Conclusion

- Britain rallied its citizens not through coherent goals—difficult in a conflict that lacked moral urgency—but through a controlled press that downplayed losses, fabricated strategic victories, and avoided the cost of war to its combatants.
- The British government utilized a complex system of censorship, employed correspondents as propagandists, and created a culture of morality as loyalty to state in order to combat the challenges of modern warfare and pursue decisive victory; but their actions, while at times strategically effective, negatively impacted soldier morale, public trust, and ethical norms for decades to come.
- Because of state directives, press reporting gradually shifted from chaotic inconsistency to fictitious uniformity to propaganda. This directly contributed to a widening disparity between lived wartime military experience and public perception. It also led to correspondents’ internal conflict over what they were being asked to do—in essence they were to discard the truth and write fiction.
- This meant that the press missed opportunity to expose flawed norms of WWI, to highlight the humanity of war, and ultimately to accurately report the conflict that Britain was involved in—the one men enlisted for. What the government framed as duty to country won out over fealty to truth or obligation to one’s fellow man.
- The press, used as a tool, demoralized correspondents and challenged their dedication to objective journalistic practice. While Britain succeeded in keeping its populace from rejecting the war, the censorship and propaganda it engaged in culminated in the **most discreditable period in the history of journalism** and inspired a reversal in press freedom around the globe—some of which has never reversed. Britain led this charge from August 5th.
- Ultimately, though the press is just one segment of wartime culture, it had enormous influence on public opinion, and though half-truths and distortions seemed to serve the state’s war interests well, it was not worth the precedent that was set or the turmoil it created.

## Future Work

1. **Examine the British National Archives** non-digitized Ministry of Information memos and write-ups of those who resisted DACA during World War I, to pinpoint the kinds of behavior and speech that individuals gravitated towards when the government became more regulatory. This would build out a better understanding of how different strata of British society engaged with British press censorship and published material.
2. **Utilize methods from the Digital Humanities** to analyze the large corpus of post-WWI writings from wartime correspondents, to identify common themes and sentiments from those with shared experience. This could potentially create a more nuanced understanding of daily life as a correspondent, as well as shed light on what kinds of directives they received from the British government that influenced what they wrote and how they wrote it.

## References

British Headquarters. “The Day Goes Well.” *Times*, July 3, 1916, 10.  
 “Defence of the Realm Consolidation Act.” United Kingdom National Archives. November 27, 1914. [https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/firstworldwar/first\\_world\\_war\\_defence.htm](https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/firstworldwar/first_world_war_defence.htm). Top of Form  
 “Espionage Act of 1917.” Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs. June 15, 1917. <https://www.culture.gov/history/education/educator-resources/primary-source-sets/american-involvement-world-war-i/espionage>  
 “Good Day All Round.” *Times*, July 8, 1916, 8.  
 Harnsworth, G. and R. Pound. *Norfolk*. London: Cassell, 1959.  
 “Letter from Theodore Roosevelt to Sir Edward Grey.” Brigham Young University Library. January 22, 1915. [https://www.lib.byu.edu/index.php?letter\\_from\\_Theodore\\_Roosevelt\\_to\\_Sir\\_Edward\\_Grey](https://www.lib.byu.edu/index.php?letter_from_Theodore_Roosevelt_to_Sir_Edward_Grey)  
 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 Off 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/~rdh72wv1918/usspny.html>. bak  
 Thomas, William Beach. *A Traveller in News*. London: Chapman and Hall, 1925.