

Censorship Guidelines (I) (1914)

Abstract

Information was of the utmost strategic importance during the First World War. Here, the German government outlines its reasons for press censorship. This memorandum stresses the importance of withholding critical information about military movements from enemy forces.

Source

I.

In connection with the decree that the Chancellor has issued on the “Prohibition of Publications about Troop Movements and Measures for Defense,” in this critical time the military leadership turns to the press, the medium whose words are being carried far beyond Germany’s borders.

The history of recent wars is rich in examples of how easily the deployment of a country’s forces can be betrayed to the enemy by inadvertent reports, and how the course of a war can in this way be given a ruinous turn. Even German newspapers have unknowingly passed many an important piece of information on to our enemies during our own recent great struggles.

The danger of harming the Fatherland through published information has grown in most recent times with the perfection of news transmission.

More than ever, we are being watched by our political adversaries; every careless publication is being transmitted to them with lightning speed in thousands of ways. Even reports that appear harmless often suffice to give the enemy an accurate picture of our military situation. If we wish to secure ourselves favorable prospects for a war, our military measures must be kept secret from the enemy as well as from our own country.

To be sure, uncertainty and doubt are doubly difficult to bear at this time, but the welfare of the Fatherland demands that we make the sacrifice of strict discretion in all questions that pertain in any way to the German army and navy, or to the military forces of our allies. Publications that pertain to military events in *all* other countries must also be suppressed until the political situation is clarified, since we do not know what attitude these countries will adopt towards us. As soon as this clarification has taken place, the press will be informed.

If the press is conscious of its heavy responsibility and the ramifications of its reports, it will not make itself an ally of our opponents against its own will. It will be grateful to the military leadership for informing it about publications that can harm the Fatherland. By selflessly refraining from reporting any information of a military character, it will spare the military and naval authorities from having to take legal action, which the sovereign interests of the state demand be ruthlessly applied in cases where the prohibition on publication is violated.

The military leadership in its turn will do everything in its power to satisfy the nation’s legitimate demand for news. If these reports are at first necessarily meager, the patriotic efforts of the press will best succeed if it enlightens the nation about the reasons and need for secrecy and urges patience.

Via the Press Office of the General Staff and the Admiralty Staff of the Navy, reports will be sent out – as copiously as possible – to the Commanding Generals and the Commanders of Naval Stations for delivery

to the editorial staffs of newspapers in their respective districts. This will remain a more rapid and secure way for all editors to gain access to the news than if they dispatch their own reporters, who can be permitted into the theater of war only in very limited numbers and with limited freedom of movement.

All inquiries from the press are to be directed to the local Commanding Generals or – if they have moved up to the front, to the Deputy Commanding Generals – to the Commanders of Naval Stations, in Berlin to the Press Office of the Great General Staff, Berlin NW 40 – and to the Admiralty Staff of the Navy, Berlin W 10, Königin Augustastr. 38/42.

II.

It is impossible to designate beforehand all that must be kept quiet in the interest of the Fatherland in the event of war. Circumspection and tact on the part of representatives of the press will make it possible to form a judgment about the matters that should be kept silent until further notice. [...]

The above principles refer to *allied* armies and navies as well. Publications about them in the above-mentioned sense remain forbidden even should war break out. The countries that are to be regarded as “allies” will be announced.

Information that newspapers discover after the outbreak of war via their foreign correspondents about the armies and navies of our *enemies* may be published only after the military authorities have issued their own relevant publications, since it will otherwise be easier for the enemy to draw conclusions about our military countermeasures. However, in order to make possible a timely evaluation of reports from enemy lands, editors who come into possession of such reports will do a great service to their Fatherland if they wire these reports – including the source of the information – as soon as possible to the General Staff in Berlin if they concern army matters, or to the Admiralty Staff in Berlin if they concern naval affairs. The resulting expenses will be born by the army and navy administrations.

It is desirable that none of the information contained under II of this memorandum be published.

As far as possible, every editor in Germany has received a copy of this memorandum.

Publication of a forbidden military report in a paper other than their own does not absolve other editors of the obligation to remain silent, which derives from the Chancellor’s prohibition on publications.

Source: Auszüge aus dem Merkblatt der Militärbehörden für die Presse betr. die Behandlung militärischer Nachrichten, August 1, 1914, Bundesarchiv/ Militärarchiv Freiburg i. Br., MA/Adm, No. 2413, P 18, duplicate; reprinted in Wilhelm Deist, *Militär und Innenpolitik im Weltkrieg 1914–1918*. 2 volumes. Düsseldorf: Droste, 1970, vol. 1, pp. 63–65.

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