

## PERIODICALS AND MILITARY CENSORSHIP DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR: MILITARY SECRETS AND THE FREEDOM OF INFORMATION PROBLEM

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**Abstract:** *The article reveals some of the problems that arose between military censors and the media during the First World War. The article is written on the basis of the military censorship materials of the Supreme Commander headquarters of the Russian army, the censorship department of the Minsk military district and the materials of the periodical press. The authors conclude that the conflict was predetermined both by the imperfection of the censorship legislation, which provided an opportunity for the censors to evaluate the publications of newspapers and magazines at their own discretion, and by the censorship omissions of the media, which printed inaccurate news and placed information that the enemy could use. The result was ineffective military censorship and the failure of the press to fulfill its important mission: to contribute to the formation of public opinion in the rear in the interests of the state.*

**Keywords:** World War I, military censorship, periodical press, propaganda, military secrets, public opinion.

The First World War is impressive not only for its scale, military technical innovations and an unprecedented number of casualties. In addition to the military sphere, it demonstrated new factors of political, cultural and educational influence on the mood prevailing in the theater of operations and inside the country, mastered the new tools of subordinating public sentiments to national and military goals. The periodical press acted as an active participant in this process, which served as an intermediary between the front and rear, shaped the image of the enemy and had to convince the population to bravely endure the inevitable difficulties, to be ready for voluntary military service.<sup>1</sup>

One of the largest Russian newspapers, *Russkiye Vedomosti*, reported to its readers in 1914: „*The head of the Main Department of Press Affairs, Count S.S. Tatishchev notifies the editors of periodicals and those, who are responsible for publications, that the military censorship is introduced from 7 pm on August 3 in St. Petersburg. Materials to be provided for censorship must be delivered to the premises of the St. Petersburg Press Committee (Teatralnaya, 3)*”.<sup>2</sup> This

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<sup>1</sup> V. F. Blokhin, „*Heroic*” on the pages of the illustrated magazine „*Lukomorye*” 1914-1917. *Russia in the era of political and cultural transformations. Materials of the All-Russian Scientific Conference „Printing and Censorship in the History of Russia”*, Bryansk, „*Italics*”, 2016, p. 37.

<sup>2</sup> *Russkiye Vedomosti*, 5th of August (179), (1914), p. 4.

meant that the system of prior censorship was returning to the practice of relations between the government and the press.

Military censorship was introduced „in full”<sup>3</sup> in all territories declared martial law; it was envisaged to view all private correspondence both internal and international, including telegrams, on the basis of the Temporary Statute on Military Censorship, which came into effect on July 20, 1914. The abolished preliminary censorship of "print publications, prints, drawings, photographs, abstracts of public speeches and reports" was returned.<sup>4</sup> Responsibility for publishing something contrary to the resolution of the military censorship or without its permission entailed the imposition of a fine in the amount of 500 to 10,000 rubles or imprisonment for up to one year. In case of a repeated criminal act, the periodical publication could be suspended for a period from one month to one year.<sup>5</sup>

The introduction of „partial censorship” was envisaged for the rest of the localities. For periodicals, this meant that only publications that could contain military secrets were subject to verification by military censors.<sup>6</sup> However, a system of fines was also provided for periodicals in these territories.

During the war years, the press was forced to work closely with the military censorship, on which the fullness of the information provided depended. Moreover, there was general agreement between the military authorities and the press that censorship of news related to military operations was necessary inevitability. However, the execution of this agreement constantly encountered a lack of understanding of the peculiarities of the preservation of military information by the press.

For example, with the beginning of the war, publications, with the aim of satisfying the curiosity of the readers, were filled with articles about military actions with the assessment of various weapons, both Russian and enemy. Various characteristics and methods of use were cited, and references were made to the „weaknesses of our enemies”, that is, such information that could serve the enemy to correct their own shortcomings. In addition, materials were placed that helped to navigate the terrain, take into account the state of the weather in the area of military operations, other details that could harm the warring army.

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<sup>3</sup> *Russian State Military Historical Archive (RSMHA)*, (2019), Op. 1. D. 715. L. 1.

<sup>4</sup> „Collection of laws and orders of the government. Section I”, in *Provisional provision on military censorship*, Ch. I. Art. 2, (192), (1914).

<sup>5</sup> RSMHA. F. 2067. Op. 1. D. 2956. L. 9.

<sup>6</sup> „Collection of laws and orders of the government”, Ch. I. Art. 6

The chairman of the military-censorship commission at the headquarters of the Petrograd military district often received "signals" from the quartermaster general of the Western Front general staff about the appearance in the press of information about the location and number of military units. For example, in No. 14422 of the well-known Petrograd newspaper, *Novoye Vremya* (1915), the correspondence indicated the location of the 31st corps and its approximate number.<sup>7</sup> The telegram, published in No. 14431 of the same newspaper (1915), indicated the location of the Lebedinsky regiment of the Western Front.<sup>8</sup> The information of this newspaper, which represented Suvorinsky publishing houses, one of the largest in Russia, could not be unnoticed either by the general reader or by those interested in searching for such information in print.

Periodicals were regularly punished and continued to print prohibited messages not only at the beginning of the war, but also in subsequent years. So, the chairman of the Petrograd military censorship commission, Major General Adabash, drew attention to the fact that „the names of military units and individual military ranks began to appear again in print” at a regular meeting held on January 10, 1916.<sup>9</sup> He spoke of the „thanks” of combatants for the Christmas gifts that came at that time in large numbers to the front from the rear areas of the country. These „thanks” provided the enemy with the opportunity, according to Adabash, to obtain the necessary information about the location of individual units of the Russian army. It should be noted that the concerns had grounds.

The Russian State Military Historical Archive preserved the censorship case related to the publication in the famous Russian newspaper *Russkoye Slovo* on January 8, 1916, describing the trip of the famous doctor and public figure S.V. Puchkova with holiday gifts from Moscow to Minsk, and then at the location of several armies of the Western Front.<sup>10</sup> The note had a number of subtitles „General A.N. Kuropatkina”, „General V.F. Dzhunkovsky” and „with a list of commanding officers in Minsk, numbers of the visited divisions of their chiefs and locations”.<sup>11</sup> When viewing newspaper pages, the military censor, Lieutenant Colonel Lyashevsky noted and crossed out all geographic names, a list of military units and officials that were found in the text. Nevertheless, he missed a

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<sup>7</sup> RSMHA. F. 2048. Op. 1. D. 907. Part 1. L. 148.

<sup>8</sup> RSMHA. F. 2048. Op. 1. D. 907. Part 1. L. 148.

<sup>9</sup> Russian State Historical Archive (RSHA). F. 778. Op. 1. D. 8. L. 128.

<sup>10</sup> „Gifts of Moscow. Trip of S. V. Puchkova”, in *Russian word*, (5), (1916).

<sup>11</sup> RSMHA. F. 2048. Op. 1. D. 907. Part 1. L. 12-13.

line, which, despite the vagueness of the wording, indirectly indicated the specifics of the reconnaissance of the location of the 20th artillery corps of the 10th Army: „*The positions of this corps are among the marshes. In some places, it is impossible to even dig trenches here*”.<sup>12</sup> The censor, who missed this information to the press, after a short trial, was punished and was dismissed.

In the same newspaper, *Russkoye Slovo*, a note, in which information containing military secrets was disclosed in plain text, was published on March 10, 1916. It was about the intensification of military operations of the Russian army in the sector of the front, where "the famous Sventsiansky breakthrough broke out last fall" (as part of the Vilna operation). The note reported: „*The line of active combat clashes goes from Lake Drisyaty through the town of Twerech and Lake Myadziol and rests on the defile between the lakes Naroch and Vishnevsky*”.<sup>13</sup> The offensive of the Russian army, begun on March 5, 1916, was carried out by the forces of the Western and Northern fronts and was, on the basis of requests from the French command, to ensure the weakening of the German forces on the approaches to Verdun. As a result of the intensification of actions, it was planned to knock out the enemy from the territory of the Western Russian provinces back to East Prussia.

The text of the newspaper article indicated the direction of the strikes of the military units operating in the operation and their ultimate goal: „*to break the enemy position on the Vilno-Dvinsk line*”.<sup>14</sup> The note was discovered by the Chief of Staff of the 67th Infantry Division and handed over to the Chief of Staff of the 35th Army Corps on March 16, 1916 with the following postscript: „*I present the Russkoye Slovo newspaper No. 57 dated March 10 of this year, in which information disclosing military secrets are marked with green pencil*”.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, the criminal „negligence” in the publication was characteristic not only of the rear periodicals, but also of publications at the front headquarters. The newspaper of the North-Western Front, *Nash Vestnik*, for example, on May 26, 1915, placed on its pages information taken from a secret report, which practically revealed „*human intelligence, which was established with difficulty*” as reported by the quartermaster general of the front.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> RSMHA. F. 2048. Op. 1. D. 907. Part 1. L. 13.

<sup>13</sup> *Russkoye Slovo*, no. 57, March 10, 1916.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>15</sup> RSMHA. F. 2048. Op. 1. D. 907. Part 1. L.102.

<sup>16</sup> RSMHA. F. 2048. Op. 1. D.910. L. 104.

The situation with the preservation of military secrets during the publication of reports from the front only worsened after the February events of 1917. The abolition of the Provisional Government of the General Directorate of Press Affairs, and then the adoption of new laws "On Press" and "On Press Agencies" of April 27, 1917, which proclaimed freedom of the media and abolished administrative penalties in relation to them,<sup>17</sup> were understood by the newspaper makers as an exemption from the institution of military censorship as a whole. The military censors of the Kiev district informed the quartermaster general of the headquarters of the South-Western Front commander-in-chief that „*now there is no printed material for them*” already in May 1917. The editors of local newspapers explained this circumstance in some cases precisely by the fact that „*newspapers are not subject to military censorship*”, in other cases they offered to transfer, at their own discretion, instructions received from the censorship agency.<sup>18</sup>

In this connection, the quartermaster general reported to the chief of staff of the Kiev district on May 16, 1917: „*Will there be any specific order of the Commander-in-Chief of the front about the need to enforce the Temporary Provision on military censorship or on the abolition of military censors, receiving involuntarily daily money, because it are powerless to prevent the appearance in the newspapers of information dangerous from a military point of view*”.<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, correspondence from the armies involved in the summer offensive was posted in the Kievskaya Mysl newspaper in the „Latest News” section on June 19, 1917. The report listed all the units involved in the hostilities of June 18, the sectors of the front on which they were located and indicated the junction between the 10th and 11th armies. According to the commander of the 11th Army, Lieutenant-General I.G. Erdeli, published information that „*greatly facilitates the enemy to take into account our forces, and, consequently, counteract our strike*” were „*tantamount to betrayal*”.<sup>20</sup> After the subsequent investigation, it turned out that the information in the newspaper came directly from the Petrograd Agency, whose telegrams, as a government one, were not subject to military censorship.<sup>21</sup> The meeting of the Kiev Society of Periodicals and Literature Figures, on June 27, 1917 on the occasion of the incident, adopted a resolution that vividly demonstrated the attitude to censorship restrictions that had taken shape at that time in newspaper circles. The

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<sup>17</sup> *Collection of laws and orders of the government*, Department I, Art. 597, 598. (109), (1917).

<sup>18</sup> RSMHA. F. 2067. Op. 1. D. 2957. L. 43.

<sup>19</sup> RSMHA. F. 2067. Op. 1. D. 2957. L. 43.

<sup>20</sup> RSMHA. F. 2067. Op. 1. D. 2957. L. 53.

<sup>21</sup> RSMHA. F. 2067. Op. 1. D. 2957. L. 53.

resolution stated that „*the society condemns the charges of treason, betrayal of the press workers, seeing in it the frivolous charges, <...> remnants of years of impunity negligent attitude to publications not yet eliminated <...> it protest against counter-revolutionary attempts to revive the system of massacres prevailing during tsarism with periodicals by forcibly ending them*”.<sup>22</sup>

Considered on the example of Russia, the situation in the relations of the periodical press and military censorship was also characteristic of other warring states. From Edward Cook's memoirs about the activities of the Press Bureau in the UK, it follows that the patriotic press was sympathetic to the limitations of military censorship, but it still made serious mistakes that were used by the enemy. An episode from an abandoned brewery located near the front line was given as an example in the author's book. The soldiers adapted its stoves to organize a bath and laundry, and one of the newspapers told about this "soldier wit." Printed material appeared in the morning, and after lunch, the German artillery, having received an accurate guide from the newspaper, destroyed the brewery, depriving the enemy of the desired at the forefront comfort.<sup>23</sup>

With the outbreak of hostilities, the majority of countries involved in the world war had a situation that was accurately characterized by the example of Germany by an American journalist, William G. Shepherd, who was a war correspondent: „*In the early days of the war, when everything was new and every word was news, the censor was the correspondent's open enemy. The censors made no bones about it. They were afraid of correspondents and-well, the correspondents were afraid of the censors*”.<sup>24</sup> The commonality of views, which both sides hoped for, turned into open differences that were irresistible: the military censors tried to act „with a reserve”, limiting even such information that did not carry the potential threat of divulging military secrets and actively invading their official reports about the course of military events. The press was often poorly oriented in the nuances of the admissibility of information, and most often took care of attracting potential readers, sometimes going to a conscious confrontation for the sake of posting "hot" messages from the front on their pages.

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<sup>22</sup> RSMHA. F. 2067. Op. 1. D. 2957. L. 72.

<sup>23</sup> E. T. Cook, *The press in war-time, with some account of the Official press bureau*, London, 1920, p. 93.

<sup>24</sup> William G. Shepherd, *Confessions of a war correspondent*, New York, London, 1917, p. 22.

For example, on August 14, 1914, the St. Petersburg mayor suspended the publication of the newspaper „Last Telegrams” for the entire period of martial law in St. Petersburg, on the basis of clause 14 of article 19 of the rules on locality declared on martial law. The punishment was followed by repeated communication of fictional news from the theater of operations, as it was established, the text of which was drafted by the editors themselves „for the purpose of exploiting the public”.

The metropolitan newspaper „Birzhevye vedomosti”, better known than the one mentioned earlier, which was distinguished by a much higher level of its information, also failed to avoid the temptation to place unverified or made-up facts. It was said in the article „The Disappearance of Turkish Consuls” that the Turkish consuls to be expelled abroad (due to the participation of Turkey in the war on the side of the opponents of Russia) arrived in Petrograd from Odessa. The semi-detective story was set forth further: „... a car with Turkish consuls from the Tsarskoye Selo railway station headed for Finland: along Gorokhovaya, Morskaya and Palace Embankment, and, passing by the Turkish embassy, the car turned into Liteyniy Prospekt and along Nevskiy Prospekt headed toward Smolensky”.<sup>25</sup> The next day, according to the newspaper, the name of the owner of the car that carried the Turkish consuls became known, but he mysteriously disappeared. Following this, the refutation was published in the „Birzhevye vedomosti”: „A note under the title: „The Disappearance of Turkish Consuls was published „In the newspaper „Birzhevye vedomosti” (evening edition of November 19 of this year). The article contained information that the Turkish consuls, who had arrived from Odessa to Petrograd, were to be deported abroad while hiding on cars from Tsarskoye Selo station disappeared and measures were taken to search for them. The indicated message was fictional”.<sup>26</sup>

The result for the Russian press was deplorable. In the summer of 1915, the New York Tribune reprinted information about the severity of the Russian censorship from a Danish newspaper, which contained statistics from 1914, demonstrating how many of the issues that were of temporary or permanent importance for covering military events were closed by the censorship. According to this information, censorship prevented the publication of 465 articles in periodicals and 230 in non-periodicals. Of these, the ban was only temporary in 96 cases in periodicals and in 24 cases in non-periodicals. As a result of the activities of the Russian military censorship, 44 newspapers, because of the

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<sup>25</sup> „Disappearance of the Turkish consuls”, in *Birzhevye vedomosti*, (14505), (1914).

<sup>26</sup> „Denial”, in *Birzhevye vedomosti*, (14549), (1914).

placement of unwanted information on their pages, were forced to close.<sup>27</sup>

It should be noted that the censorship severity had practically no effect on the growth of circulation of published media. Thus, in the article „War and Newspapers”, published in October 1914 in the Petrograd newspaper „Birzhevy vedomosti”, it was noted that „*exciting military events*” increased public interest in the daily press. Before the war, the number of registered newspaper reporters, that is, persons who were engaged in the spread of the press did not exceed 4,000, then with the start of the war there were more than 6,000 people. According to the newspaper, the total daily circulation of all metropolitan newspapers reached at least 4 million during the war years.<sup>28</sup>

Such statistics have a completely logical explanation: on the one hand, the country’s military interests demanded protection against penetration of dangerous information into the press, and on the other hand, the censors’ excessive zeal should not lead to unreasonable restrictions on the media that played a special role in the war.

Therefore, the command of the Russian army aimed military censors at a balanced assessment of information published in newspapers and magazines. In August 1915, the Supreme Commander drew attention to „*the increasing incidence of incorrect actions by the military censors, indicating that not all military censors are aware of their duties and understand them correctly, and often allow arbitrariness in their attitudes to the press*”.<sup>29</sup>

Newspapers and magazines not only transmitted news from the front, but also carried out extensive propaganda that helped shape public opinion in the rear. Cinema, poster, other visual methods of influencing people’s consciousness became widespread only by 1916; at the beginning of the hostilities, the periodical press performed these important functions, providing a link between the front and the rear.

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<sup>27</sup> *Russian newspapers suffer from censor*, New York Tribune, 1915, p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> „War and newspapers”, in *Birzhevy vedomosti*, (14419), (1914).

<sup>29</sup> RSHA. F. 778. Op. 1. D. 8. L. 83.