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CENSORSHIP AND TRADE



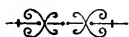
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CENSORSHIP AND TRADE



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CENSORSHIP AND TRADE.

I.

MUCH criticism has been directed against the censorship which has been established by the Allied Governments during the present war. For the policy of the censorship, not Great Britain alone, but France, Russia and all who are fighting with them against the Central Powers are responsible ; nevertheless, criticisms and complaints are more especially aimed against Great Britain, and there is, apparently, in neutral countries, a suspicion that Great Britain uses information obtained

by means of the censorship in order to gain advantages over neutral trade. This suspicion gained support from the misquotation and misapplication of some observations made by Mr. Lloyd George, Secretary of State for War, in the House of Commons. The proper meaning to be attached to these words has long ago been pointed out by Mr. Lloyd George himself, and most emphatic assurances have been authoritatively given. However, in this pamphlet, Mr. Lloyd George's explanation, and other authoritative statements upon the censorship, have been reprinted.

Under the compendious heading, "The Censorship," three distinct processes are constantly confused—the press censorship, the cable censorship, and the censorship of letters or mails. This pamphlet is only concerned with the last of these. Even the censorship of mails itself cannot be discussed as a single thing, because different considerations apply to mails originating in, or destined for, the United Kingdom; mails between European countries and the United States intended to pass through

the United Kingdom; mails carried on neutral ships which voluntarily call at British ports; and letters carried on neutral ships which would not enter British jurisdiction without some form of compulsion. The importance of this distinction, and the general methods of the mail censorship, are described in a letter addressed by Lord Robert Cecil, Minister of Blockade, to a prominent American firm, and subsequently published in the Press. It is as follows :—

“ Foreign Office,
June 23rd, 1916.

“ GENTLEMEN,

“ I AM directed by Lord Robert Cecil to thank you for your letter of May 27th, in which you take issue with a statement made by him to a correspondent of the *New York Times*. This statement was that great care is taken to forward mails between neutral countries taken from neutral ships for examination by the British censors as quickly

as possible. You say that, during the last six or eight months, your correspondence with Holland has suffered great delay.

“ Lord Robert Cecil’s statement was intended as an assurance that the postal censorship had been perfecting its organisation, and that, from the time at which he spoke, Americans could be confident that their letters would suffer only slight delay owing to detention by the Censors. He did not intend to exclude the possibility that delays had occurred in earlier days, when the British authorities first began to examine mails carried on neutral ships. But even if such delays did actually occur, it is by no means certain, and, in fact, it is in many cases unlikely, that those delays were due to the British censorship. Mails only began to be taken from neutral ships for censorship last December, and it is therefore quite clear that delays experienced by you from six to eight months ago cannot have been due to the censorship of these mails. As there has been a great deal of misunderstanding on

this subject, I am to explain the following points :—

“ The American mails censored in the United Kingdom must be divided into two classes, each of which is dealt with by a special organisation :—

“ (1) *Terminal mails, i.e.*, mails originating in, or destined for, the United Kingdom. The censorship of these mails is one of the universally recognised rights of sovereignty, and it has been exercised since the beginning of the war, without any protest being made against it by neutral Governments.

“ (2) *Mails neither originating in, nor destined for, the United Kingdom.*—These must be further subdivided into three groups :—

“ (a) *Transit mails, i.e.*, mails between European countries and the United States intended by the office of despatch to pass through the United Kingdom—for example, mails sent from Rotterdam to this country for re-trans-

mission from Liverpool to the United States. Such mails are forwarded by the British Post Office, and enjoy the facilities afforded by it to British mails, and the right of censorship over them while in transit through British territory in time of war is generally admitted. This right, however, was not exerted at the beginning of this war, and censorship of these transit mails only came into force in April, 1915.

“(b) Mails carried by neutral ships which normally call at a British port or enter British jurisdiction without any form of compulsion.

“(c) Mails carried by neutral ships which would not enter British jurisdiction without some form of compulsion.

“The first ship from the United States to Holland from which the mails were removed was the *Noorderdijk*. These mails were landed at Ramsgate on the 18th December, 1915, arrangements not having then been completed to remove them at Falmouth. The first ship

from Holland to the United States from which the mails were removed was the *Noord-am*, which entered the Downs on the 5th December. It is to classes (b) and (c) exclusively that the present discussions between this Government and other neutral Governments refer, while class (c) alone is covered by the Hague Convention.

“Most of the annoyance caused in the United States by the action of His Majesty’s Government seems to arise from a confusion between the above kinds of censorship. It is to the last two kinds only that Lord Robert Cecil’s interview referred, and the British authorities are making every effort to perfect their organisation so that the necessity of examining this class of mail may not involve long delays. But during the time that the censorship of these particular mails has been in force, many other factors have occurred causing delay, quite independently of the action of the British Government. Sailings from Holland have been very irregular, owing to the mine fields sown by the Germans out-

side Rotterdam, and have, at times, been held up altogether, as, for instance, after the sinking of the *Tubantia*. As you are aware, the Dutch mail boats now proceed round the north of Scotland and go south, calling both at Kirkwall and at Falmouth before crossing the Atlantic, and this in itself causes considerable delay.

“So far as the censorship is concerned, the delay in the case of mails from Holland to the United States will not be greater than between four and five days from the date when the mails are unloaded at Kirkwall to the date when they are handed by the Censors to the Post Office to be sent on. The delay caused to mails from the United States to Holland will not be longer than six days in all. The Post Office will always forward the mail by the next boat to its destination, and whether delay occurs in this operation will solely depend upon the regularity of sailings. It will be seen that letters contained in the outward mails will sometimes, and those in the inward mails generally, reach their

destination as early as, or earlier than, if left on board the Dutch ship.

“When the urgent need of examining first class mails, in order to intercept those postal packets which are admittedly liable to be treated as contraband, was first realised, it would have been possible at once to have brought the organisation of the censorship to the level of efficiency it has since reached by collecting hurriedly a large enough number of examiners; but it was thought that infinitely more harm would be done to neutral correspondence by allowing their letters to be handled by persons engaged hastily, whose character and reliability had not been thoroughly tested, than by subjecting the letters at first to some slight delay. The necessary staff has now been carefully selected, and this delay eliminated.

“In conclusion, Lord Robert Cecil would be much obliged if you would furnish him with more exact particulars of the letters which you complain of being delayed, giving, where possible, the date of the letter, the

mail-boat by which it was despatched, and, if registered, the registration number of the packet, in order that enquiry may be made into each case.

“As there is so much misunderstanding on these points, and in the hope that the above explanation may do something to make the position clear, Lord Robert Cecil proposes to publish the text of this letter for general information.

“I am, etc.”

II.

In addition to complaints of delay, which are so fully dealt with by Lord Robert Cecil in this letter, a suspicion began to be voiced that Great Britain had established the censorship of mails, not for the sole purpose of carrying on the war, but in order to assist her own traders at the expense of neutral competitors.

This idea was supposed to gain support from an answer to a question given by

Mr. Lloyd George in the House of Commons on the 8th August, 1916, when he said, referring to a neutral lobbyist's letter :—

“ I think I have been able to identify correctly the debate and the letter which my hon. friend has in mind. If so, I may inform him that the letter in question was not stopped in the sense that it was not allowed to proceed to its destination, but it is, of course, the practice to communicate to public Departments concerned any information on matters of public interest, which may be obtained through the censorship, for such use to be made of it as the particular Department may consider desirable. This was done in this instance.”

There was, indeed, no adequate ground for any misunderstanding of this answer, because Lord Robert Cecil very promptly explained its significance in the following words :—

“ Mr. Lloyd George said that information of national importance obtained from the

ensorship was communicated to the Government Departments concerned. The letter in dispute was sent in the mails *from this country*. Our full right of jurisdiction over all such letters has never been disputed by any neutral, and has nothing to do with the discussions pending with the United States in regard to mails taken from neutral ships. All nations, but especially the United States, have always regarded any attempt on the part of foreign commercial interests to lobby or bring pressure to bear on legislators as an intolerable interference in domestic affairs, endangering the independence of the State, and information with regard to any such action is most certainly of national importance.

“ This communication of information to Government Departments does not mean that such information is communicated to private persons for the furthering of their commercial interests. We repeat what we have often said: that the censorship is used to defeat the designs of our enemies, and is used for

no other object. It has never, in any single instance, been used to assist British competition with peaceful neutral commerce. It never will be so used, and we ask for details of any case where neutrals suspect that there has been a leakage of information from the Censors to private persons. Up to the present, no such case has ever been brought to our notice, though vague charges have been made for purposes of German propaganda. We absolutely repudiate such charges."

Nevertheless, in spite of this clear explanation, Mr. Lloyd George's observation continued to be misconstrued in certain quarters, and, on September 15th, the Secretary of State for War himself issued an explanation, which was handed to representatives of the American Press. The statement appeared as follows in the *New York American* of the next day :—

"There appears to be a deliberate campaign, set on foot in the United States by

German agents, to throw doubt on the good faith of His Majesty's Government in regard to the use of information obtained through the censorship.

“ These German agents, with whose underground methods of working we are quite familiar, appear now to have resurrected my statement in the House of Commons on August 8th, although that statement was fully explained by Lord Robert Cecil, Minister of War Trade, on August 9th, and most explicit assurances on the same subject were given by him in a later interview on August 25th.

“ In spite of this, these propagandists are trying to dress out my statement as something new, nullifying Lord Robert Cecil's assurances which followed it. Let me now say on behalf of the military authorities, what has already been said on behalf of the Foreign Office, that when information is passed on by the censorship to other Departments, it is for the sole purpose of guiding the action of the Government in the conduct of the war.

“ For instance, when we get information that an American firm, to whom the Foreign Office has given a permit for the export of certain German goods from Rotterdam on the ground that these goods had been paid for before the war, is using that permit fraudulently, as frequently has been the case, we pass the information on to the Foreign Office in order that they may cancel the permit.

“ Again, when we find that a neutral firm is using British banking facilities for the purpose of trading with our enemies, and is deceiving the British banks in question as to the real purpose of the transaction, we pass that information on to the proper Department, in order that they may refuse to license the transaction, or, again, if we learn that a shipment of contraband, ostensibly from one neutral firm to another, is really destined for Germany, we see that the Contraband Committee gets that information.

“ That, frankly stated, is what we do. But we affirm, and challenge anyone to deny

it, that honest business interests and trade secrets of an American merchant or manufacturer are as safe in the hands of the military Censors, and of every other Government Department, as they are in the hands of the American Post Office."

Throughout the whole controversy with the United States upon the censorship, the British Government have given the most formal and definite pledges that the censorship had never been, and never would be, used as a means of capturing American trade. As early as August, 1916, the British Ambassador handed to Mr. Lansing a formal declaration in this sense, and the letter was afterwards published:—

"DEAR MR. SECRETARY,

"Lord Grey wishes me to make the following communication for the information of your Government, in view of certain allegations which have appeared in the press :

“ A suspicion appears to have been aroused in the United States that the British censorship of mails is being used as a means of capturing American trade and American markets by utilising the trade secrets of neutral firms, and that such information is being communicated by officials of His Majesty’s Government to private persons in the United Kingdom with this object.

“ Any such use of the censorship is directly contrary to the policy of His Majesty’s Government, and contrary to their orders. Any action of this kind taken by an official of His Majesty’s Government would, therefore, constitute an offence under the Act to prevent disclosure of official documents and information of 1911.

“ *August 15th, 1916.*”

III.

Shortly afterwards, Lord Robert Cecil dealt fully with all the criticisms put forward against the mail censorship of the Allies in

an interview which was widely published in the United States :—

“ A suspicion is apparently entertained in certain quarters in the United States that the British censorship is being used as a means of capturing American trade. It has already been denied in the most formal manner that the censorship is put to any such use, but this opportunity may well be taken to add something to the statement which I have made in the House of Commons. It cannot be too strongly emphasised that the general and statistical information extracted from trade letters, which has proved so invaluable to His Majesty’s Government in checking the supply of materials through neutral to enemy countries, and in suppressing the export of enemy goods, is used for these purposes solely, and never for the purpose of substituting Allied for neutral trade. The activities of neutral traders are of no interest whatever to the postal censorship, except in so far as they involve transactions for the advantage of the enemy in the war.

“ It has been suggested that, although information regarding purely neutral trade may not be obtained by the censorship for official use, the individuals engaged in reading the correspondence may divulge its contents to British firms, who may themselves make use of it for their own benefit. The answer to this suggestion is that a man who would break his solemn obligation to secrecy in this manner would be equally likely to break it in matters of greater importance from a purely British point of view, for example, by revealing to one British firm the trade secrets of another British firm, or even by using his opportunities to make money himself by transactions of the very kind which it is his duty to prevent. A censorship conducted by such persons would be worse than useless, and they are excluded from employment by the most careful enquiry into the credentials of all applicants. It is true that, as in every other service of this kind, a black sheep is occasionally admitted in spite of all preliminary precautions ; but any irregularity

is sure to be discovered by the vigilance which is exercised, and the offender dealt with in a suitable manner.

“ The accusation against the British Censors is only one of many made, or inspired, by our enemies, who, no doubt, suffer, and are intended to suffer, by the censorship, but who prefer to make themselves the champions of neutral interests rather than of their own.

“ It is noticeable that no evidence has ever been brought to our notice to support the vague charges made, and, until such evidence has been produced, we must attribute these charges to the malevolence of our enemies, and not to any sense of injury on the part of genuine neutral interests.

“ Foreign Office,
August, 1916.”

IV.

Not a few of the complaints of delay made against the censorship have been voiced by those who are supplying material for use

in the Press. It may be interesting, therefore, to set out the arrangements made to accommodate representatives of newspapers, which are embodied in a letter addressed to each of them by the Foreign Office :—

“ Foreign Office,
June 9th, 1916.

“ DEAR SIR,

“ FOR the convenience of the representatives of the Press of the United States in London, the censorship authorities are prepared to make the following arrangements :—

“ 1. *Urgent mail matter outward bound.*— Letters and manuscripts sent unsealed directly to the Censor . . . by 4 p.m. will be forwarded to the United States by any mail boat sailing the following day. Correspondents may designate on the envelope particular steamers, including the ‘ via Canada ’ route, and the Holland-America line vessels.

“ 2. *Inward mail matter of an urgent character.*—Important letters for correspondents should be placed in an unsealed envelope

bearing the proper address and posted in an outer sealed envelope, addressed conspicuously to 'The Censor.' It is desirable that this outer envelope should be rather large and conspicuous, so that it may be readily picked out from among the mass of mail arriving at Liverpool. Newspapers and periodicals intended for correspondents should bear, in addition to the address, a conspicuous label, 'Care of the Censor.' Correspondence thus marked may be called for directly the addressee receives a telephone message from the Censor that there is mail matter awaiting his application for it. Mail matter not so called for on the day upon which the telephone message is sent will be forwarded by post late in the evening. . . .

"Only such persons are admitted to the above privileges as are included in the Censor's list drawn up for this purpose, and the privileges are liable to be withdrawn at the discretion of the censorship authorities. . . .

"I may add that it is hoped that the correspondents will show their appreciation

of these comprehensive facilities by not taxing them needlessly ; and it may be pointed out that it would be an excellent arrangement if the correspondents can arrange with the United States' postal authorities at New York to provide special post-bags for inward mail matter thus specially addressed, an arrangement which would enable the Censors at Liverpool to pick out the special matter with the least labour and delay.

“ Yours truly.”

