

Box 5. Silence of Censorship



5. Silence of Censorship

List of contents

1. Information on journalist, Phillip Gill
2. Field Post Card
3. Poster: *Warning Defence of the Realm – Be on Your Guard*
4. 2 burnt postcards
5. Letter from Babs censored by self-censorship (*Archifau Morgannwg / Glamorgan Archives*)
6. Card written in Welsh
7. Letter to Mabel, censored with a blue crayon (*Amgueddfa ac Oriel Gelf Castell Cyfarthfa/ Cyfarthfa Castle Museum & Art Gallery*)
8. Battle around Verdun postcard censored by self-censorship

Key information

- Censorship was implemented four days after the war began by the introduction of the The Defence of the Realm Act. It gave the authorities power to suppress any negative criticism regarding the war effort. It stated: *“No person shall by word of mouth or in writing spread reports likely to cause disaffection or alarm among any of His Majesty’s forces or among the civilian population.”* This was to prevent anything that could undermine the morale of the British people and prevent negative reporting. Censorship was used by government to protect secrets, cover up mistakes and bad news. By only reporting things in a positive light, they did not want people to think Britain could lose.
- Censorship means any communications are subject to being checked and sensitive or secret information removed or covered to make it unreadable.
- During WW1 these items were subject to censorship from government: newspapers, media reporting, letters, personal letters, films.
- Military letters were censored to prevent secret information being taken from them by the enemy, such as clues to location, conditions, number and names of soldiers and officers, number of weapons and conditions, details of plans of attack, soldiers who were injured or who had died.
- If Welsh soldiers wrote home in Welsh then the entire letter was censored in blue crayon, as very few censors could speak Welsh. Their relatives would receive a letter that was illegible. (See box)
- News reporters: Kitchener banned newspaper reports from the frontline, but two reporters defied this: Phillip Gibbs of the Daily Chronicle (see box) and Basil Clarke of the Daily Mail. They were regarded as ‘journalistic outlaws’ as they reported from the front line. Phillip Gibbs was arrested and sent back to England with the warning that if he was caught again he would be shot. Basil Clarke was known as the man who went to the front line in a bowler hat and a Burberry coat – he reported on the Christmas Truce.
- Self-censorship was used by soldiers who did not want their families to worry about them. Journalist Phillips Gibbs also spoke about implementing self-censorship when reporting *“We identified ourselves absolutely with the armies in the field. We wiped out of our minds all thought of personal scoops and all temptation to write one word which would make the task of officers and men more difficult or dangerous. There was no need of censorship of our despatches. We were our own censors.”*
- Field postcards had multiple choice comments to control the content.

5. Silence of Censorship: questions



1. What do you think is inside this box?
2. Open the box and carefully take the contents out.
3. What is censorship and why do you think the British Government imposed strict censorship laws?

4. From the information on Phillip Gibb:

- Why do you think Phillip Gibb defied censorship laws? What was he trying to report?
- How do you think he felt?
- Do you think he was right?



6. Field postcard and letter with blue crayon:

- Why has blue crayon been used on this letter? What do you think is underneath the crayon?
- How would it feel for one of your letters to have this crayon on it?
- How would you feel to receive this letter?
- In the letter from Babs:
 - Why can't she say what she would like to say?
 - What do you think she would like to say?

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Suggested box combinations

- **Box 6 The Silence of the Aftermath of War**, comparing what was allowed in the letters and press, with the actual impact of war, after war was over.
- **Box 7 Silence of Waiting, Box 15 Silence of Those Who Contributed in Different Ways** – in particular the section on Dorothy Lawrence, a female journalist who dressed as a man, a soldier to experience the front line.

Suggested activities

- Write a letter, telling someone about your life in school or college or home, without revealing location, conditions, any details about other people, what you use to work with or any plans of what you might do tomorrow or next week. How does it feel?
- Use a recent newspaper article and block out with a black pen, anything (including photographs) that mentions: location, conditions, number of people, names of people, tools or equipment, details of future plans. What are you left with? Write a poem with what remains.

Caring for the box after use

- Please place the items carefully back in the box.