



Why were journalists threatened with execution in World War One?

Video transcript – State censorship of the press

These days governments go to war in the full glare of the world's media. Journalists are routinely embedded with front line troops and their reports can be broadcast across the globe in real time.

But in 1914, here in Fleet Street – the engine room of the British newspaper industry – the boot was firmly on the other foot. When the fighting began the War Office, in an effort to keep up public morale, seized a vice-like grip on all information coming from the front line. And under a new law anyone convicted of spreading information likely to be of use to the enemy faced the ultimate penalty: death.

An old-school Secretary of State for War, Lord Kitchener believed only soldiers belonged in a war zone and he banned journalists from the front lines. Reporters applying to report on the war were fobbed off with false promises. Those who defied the ban risked arrest as they tried to lift the cloak of secrecy on the Western Front.

Faced with a growing public appetite for news about the war, the British Cabinet did relax just slightly its stranglehold in 1915. It appointed five British war correspondents – although their reports were still heavily censored.

By the end of the war a number of these journalists had been awarded knighthoods.

But until March 1915 reporters like Philip Gibbs of the Daily Chronicle had to sneak around France, smuggling his reports back to London any way he could. Threatened with arrest and imprisonment, and even the firing squad, one of Fleet Street's finest lived as a journalist outlaw.