



Why were journalists threatened with execution in World War One?

Video transcript – The dangers of the public knowing the truth

By December 1917 few journalists had spent as much time at the front line as Philip Gibbs. His reports had been published across the world. But despite the many dispatches he sent from the battlefield none had quite the impact as the one that he delivered right here in the opulent surroundings of London's Savoy Hotel.

Back from the front, Gibbs was honoured at a dinner attended by the prime minister, David Lloyd George.

Before Gibbs himself rose to speak, Lloyd George remarked on "the courage which he has displayed in describing the horrors which make this war more horrible than all previous wars."

When Gibbs sat back down his speech had clearly had a profound effect on those gathered in the room – the prime minister included.

Just how much Lloyd George was moved by Gibbs's account of his wartime experiences became clear in a conversation the next day. CP Scott, the Manchester Guardian editor, later revealed that Lloyd George, the prime minister, told him in private: "If people really knew what was going on the war would be stopped tomorrow."

"But of course," he said, "they don't know it and they can't know it. The correspondents don't write it and the censors wouldn't let the truth pass."

Gibbs' speech, just like his dispatches from the front line, had a powerful impact affecting newspaper editors as well as the British prime minister himself.