

CENSORSHIP AT PARIS

BY WADE CHANCE

On January 15 [1919] Mr. Lloyd George complains of insinuations published in certain French newspapers. President Wilson goes even further, and although representing a country in which censorship had been abolished immediately following the armistice, asks that the French censorship should be exercised not only over the French newspapers but also over despatches sent to foreign papers. M. Clemenceau opposes a friendly refusal.—From *Tardieu's "The Truth About the Treaty."*

"I WHOLLY disapprove of what you say—and will defend your right to say it to the death," wrote Voltaire to Helvetius on the publication of the latter's famous book "On the Mind."

It is amazing to those few Americans who were present in Paris during the Peace Conference that so little of what was common knowledge there was not only not known in America, but has not been made known here even to this day.

Have the people of America realized, for instance, to what a great extent the censorship in practice in Paris, exercised mainly at the specific request of Mr. Wilson, was responsible for the failure of the Conference to agree upon a Treaty and a League of Nations plan compatible with both American and European Allied public opinion?

Yet the fact is that America was prevented from knowing the true light in which Europe regarded Mr. Wilson and his methods, and the French press was not permitted to inform the French people how America looked upon Mr. Wilson's foreign adventuring and programme.

Their "right to say it" was not only denied, but active repression was actually put in force by the one man who was most obligated to protect their right to hear and to say.

I sat at the desk of the distinguished French publicist "Pertinax," of the "Echo de Paris," when he showed me scores of cablegrams from his Washington correspondent, Mr. Judson Welliver, blue-penciled by the French censor, whole sentences often struck out, sometimes half or all of the message suppressed, including a speech of Senator Lodge in the Senate on the League of Nations, and a paragraph of one of Mr. Wickersham's Paris messages to the New York "Tribune," cabled back for reproduction in Paris.

Pertinax said:

"About a month before the Peace Conference opened a strongly worded note was received by the French Government from the State Department at Washington, requesting them to give instructions that cablegrams sent over to America by American correspondents in Paris should not be submitted to any kind of censorship. This request was gladly granted, and for a time the American correspondents in Paris, as well as their British colleagues, enjoyed complete freedom in communicating with their papers.

"However, the Peace Conference had not been at work for a week, and the Russian problem was being discussed, when Mr. Wilson and Mr. Lloyd George took exception to the amount of publicity the debates were given in the French press. They wished the exchange of opinion preceding the decisions to be kept secret, and the results only to be published. Mr. Lloyd George said:

"I have come here with the idea that I shall have to change my point of view many times, and I do not want it to be said that I had to give away on such and such points.' When the armistice terms were being renewed, Mr. Wilson said:

"Why do you allow your press to speak so frankly about my policies and make it impossible for me to make any concessions to you?"

"Following this, M. Clemenceau, yielding to pressure, made the famous decision not to allow anything to be published in the French press besides the official communiqué. However, he asked Mr. Wilson and Mr. Lloyd George to guarantee that the American and British press would be treated on the same terms. Both of them stated that they were unable to give such assurances, as the question was too serious to be decided offhand.

"On the following morning, however, the French papers, as a consequence of the warning, were very reticent. At the next sitting Clemenceau and Pichon said they would be unable to apply such a strict censorship if the American and British press continued to enjoy more favored treatment.

"In the meantime, it had been published in the French press that henceforth nothing would be said of what would take place in the secret meetings, and the impression it made in France and abroad was most unfavorable. In order to counteract it, and knowing well that they were responsible, Wilson and Lloyd George proposed that the whole question of publicity should be referred to the press itself—hence the very confusing debate which took place at a conference of the Allied journalists.

"The outcome was the decision that the press should be admitted at the plenary sittings of the Conference. But a reservation on this point was made by Mr. Wilson himself, and he wrote with his own hand on a slip of paper and handed it to the other leaders the suggestion that when necessary even the plenary sittings should be held in camera.

"The whole policy, then, was quite plain. A great show of publicity was to be made in a few instances when solemn and empty debates took place, but the real sittings of the leading men of the Conference, when the real work of the Conference was done, was to be kept hidden from the world.

"A few days before Mr. Wilson sailed back to America (the first time) he

again protested against publicity, and a real censorship is being exercised over the French press. It should interest the American public to know that the French Censorship Bureau enjoys the assistance of two American officials, whose duty it is to advise as to modifying or admitting any expression of opinion which French publicists might make on American policies as expressed by Mr. Wilson. Here is a case in point:

"Last October I said in a leading article that President Wilson had refused to help the Czechoslovaks struggling on the river Volga. The French censor asked for the suppression of the passage, and since we refused, he called to his rescue his two American colleagues, detailed for the purpose, who then came to me with an air which plainly showed they did not relish their extraordinary task.

"As to cablegrams from our Washington correspondent suppressed here by our own censors, but to meet the wishes of Mr. Wilson, after Mr. Wilson's arrival in France several French papers printed communications from their Washington correspondents, American citizens who reported the trend in Congress on Mr. Wilson's policies, such as speeches by Senator Lodge and other leaders. Very soon it was known that these cablegrams had a very disturbing effect on the distinguished visitor at the Hôtel Murat and his entourage, and shortly after the censor cut out more and more of our American cablegrams. Here you see dozens of them which have been blue-penciled. These messages, moreover, did not contain any criticism originating from our own correspondents; they were in most instances merely reports of speeches in Congress, and no instructions whatever had been given our correspondents to take any line contrary to Mr. Wilson.

"The result of this form of 'open diplomacy' has been that France has been led to believe that America indorses Mr. Wilson's policies to the last man, and, moreover, French opinion as expressed in the French press has been represented throughout America as being unanimously in favor of Mr. Wilson's policies. In that way public opinion on both sides of the Atlantic has been prevented from free interchange from day to day, thereby to bring about that close approximation of view-point which is of such great value, and which alone makes mutual agreement and understanding possible.

"We have been mutually duped as to each other's views and feelings, and it is plain, therefore, that the consequences must be regrettable."

This fateful prophecy of "Pertinax" was uttered on February 15, 1918. Warnings of this state of things were sent to America by myself and other correspondents at the time. They were never published, granting they arrived.