



EUROPE OF KNOWLEDGE

Censorship in Europe (seventeenth-eighteenth century)

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ABSTRACT

While during the Middle Ages the *censor* was the person who read and corrected the work of copyist monks, in the early modern period the term referred to an authority (political, administrative, religious, etc.) exercising the right to control—and where necessary to hinder or ban—the communication of writings to the public. The initiative fell to religious authorities who, beginning in the late fifteenth century, tried to verify in advance of publication the orthodoxy of works that were starting to be printed at the time. States subsequently intervened to prevent counterfeiting and protect printers. As a result, beginning in the sixteenth century, privileges did not solely serve to grant a publisher a monopoly over a text for a given period of time, but also to provide a framework for norms of production and to verify content. Censorship was thus part of a complex system of control, one that was based on a dual tension between administration and justice on the one hand, and policing and commerce on the other. It was only with the end of the Ancien Régime that authorities succeeded in applying relatively homogeneous and effective regulation, paradoxically by reducing the attribution of privileges.



“A number of those who practiced magic collected their books and burned them publicly.” The incident in which Saint Paul had books on magic burned (Acts of the Apostles 19:19) served as both a model and frontispiece for the Index of Forbidden Books, published on the orders of pope Benedict XIV in 1758. The Roman Index was the official list of books censored by the Catholic Church. © Private collection.



“De vrijheid der drukpers” (Freedom of the Press), 1787. Liberty repels the censor trying to chain up a female writer, seated below a monument to the glory of the printing press. The engraving defends the liberal tradition of the Netherlands at a time when the government of William V, Prince of Orange, was trying to ban the dissenting press. © Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum. Source : [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Since its origins, censorship has brought into play multiple and competing actors, varying and even contradictory criteria of judgment, and considerable albeit limited means of execution. In fact, in early modern Europe there was not just a censorship, but rather censorships. Two primary types can be distinguished, depending on whether it intervened before or after publication.

Censorships

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, most states engaged in pre-publication censorship. In France, all new books had to receive authorization from the royal chancellery (Edict of Moulins, 1566). Up until the eighteenth century, this involved a royal act—a privilege or approval—that was given after examination of the work. However, faced with the rapid rise of printing, the chancellery created other, less solemn forms of authorization: tacit permission, tolerance, and simple permission, which made it possible to print without privilege. The police lieutenant could also take the place of the chancellery for smaller works. This increase in the types of authorizations during the eighteenth century was indispensable to the prospering of commerce. These simplifications also attest to a genuine softening of censorship, notably under the authority of Malesherbes (1750-1763). Control was nevertheless a reality, as over a third of works submitted to the administration between 1706 and 1788 did not receive explicit authorization. This system of pre-publication authorization did not exist in England (particularly after the repeal of the Licensing Act in 1695), or in the United Provinces in particular, where a fairly broad freedom of expression was dominant. English copyrights and the Dutch privileges purchased by publishers were enough to meet commercial demand.

The second type of censorship was exercised after publication. Any work, whether authorized or not, could be the subject of post-publication censorship if held to be criminal. This took aim at infractions of publishing privileges, as well as remarks that were scandalous toward the government, those in power, the Church, or morals. Courts could order the cancellation of the privilege to publish, legal proceedings against the author, printer-booksellers, and peddlers, along with the removal and even destruction of copies. The book police was given the task of seizing stocks of forbidden works, monitoring book shipments in border towns and ports, and preventing the import of unauthorized texts, etc. The penalties were severe, ranging from being banned from the trade to death and excommunication. However, the harshness of these penalties often limited their application. While such post-publication censorship existed throughout Europe, two extreme situations stand out. In the United Provinces, where the dynamism of the book industry and freedom of expression attracted dissenting print, censorship was most often exerted following complaints from foreign powers, and its effects were greatly attenuated by the decentralized structure of the state. On the contrary, in Spain the Inquisition was the most effective and formidable institution of censorship in Europe. This central administration, placed under the direct authority of the crown, was used by the monarchy as a weapon to fight against deviant beliefs and behavior. It drafted the list of forbidden works (*Index*), controlled the entry of foreign books, visited printing workshops and libraries, and imposed the maintenance of inventory lists on booksellers, which had to be submitted annually to “inspectors” from 1614 onward.

Throughout Europe, practices of indirect censorship existed alongside this institutional activity. Self-censorship was widespread, and was dictated by conformism and fear of repression. Sponsorship, patronage, and later the increase of academies in the 1660s made it possible to supervise production by developing norms, having a good command of knowledge, and even delegating supervision to authors. Finally, European governments controlled the apparatus of production by limiting the number of authorized printers. For example, in the Southern Netherlands, one had to demonstrate good morals and orthodox religious practices in order to join the trade. Through the granting of privileges, the French monarchy favored the largest companies, which were more inclined to respect regulations that were to their advantage, thereby aligning the economic interests of the most important booksellers with the political interests of governments.

Difficulty Implementing Control

The exercise of censorship nevertheless proved complex due to institutional and legislative sedimentation. For instance in France, civil control of writings fell under the king's council, the chancellery, the Lieutenant of the Police, and *Parlements*. This was joined by ecclesiastical censorship, which involved the faculty of theology, the assembly of clergy and, on a local level, bishops. It took until 1723 for a *Code de la Librairie* [Code of censorship] to bring uniformity to practices in the Paris region, and until 1744 for the entire kingdom. The multiplicity of institutions grew constant rivalries. Religious authorities always jealously ensured that *Parlements* did not decide on theological questions. While each institution sought to gain a monopoly over control, their objectives were sometimes so different that their sentences could contradict one another. Genuine conflicts broke out, in which censorship served as a medium for a dispute over jurisdiction or for an offensive by one institution against another. In these cases, each party published and circulated texts, with acts of condemnation becoming more important than their subjects. Censorship, which was partially based on a culture of secrecy, transformed into an act of publicity, sometimes taking on a sensationalist aspect in trials that fascinated the public, notably in England.

The functioning of the book trade also complicated the exercise of censorship by creating possibilities for circumvention. An author who did not have permission could thus employ the services of foreign printers, and then secretly bring his works into the country using the large networks for selling and peddling on both the national and European scale. For that matter, the diffusion of print did not exclude the circulation of manuscript works; on the contrary, manuscript works enjoyed a highly positive preconception on the part of readers, who saw them as precious because of their rarity, unusual because of their unpublished status, and potentially critical or scandalous because they were unauthorized. Paradoxically, censorship could produce the opposite of its intended effect, especially when banning a book, thereby making it more attractive and involuntarily giving it promotion.

With the increasing quantity of titles and print runs, it also became difficult to monitor all of production and seize every copy of forbidden books. Technical progress promoted secrecy by enabling the creation of more discreet presses and smaller editions. The policy of limiting privileges to a small number of printers prompted their competitors to counterfeit authorized works, or to simply do without permission. Finally, by censoring their own printers, states promoted the rise of more liberal foreign booksellers, particularly those in Swiss cantons or in the United Provinces. Under these conditions, censorship was also, in spite of itself, a structural element in the geography of European production. In all countries in which strict censorship prevailed, its leaders were forced to reconcile often contradictory economic and political interests.

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