

# How did Publishers Respond to the Restrictions Placed on Them by the Outbreak of World War Two?

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## Abstract

The events of World War II (1939–1945) are well known throughout the world. Unsurprisingly, given the severity of the conflict, a number of restrictions were placed upon commerce and industry. These restrictions, or limitations, took many different forms. For the publishing industry the main restrictions enforced were physical restrictions, including paper shortages and the conscription of workers, and controls on the content of publications due to the censorship of the information which was released to the public. Despite the limitations enforced by the demands of warfare, the publishing industry displayed remarkable fortitude to survive the period intact. This article takes the restrictions placed on publishers by paper shortages and censorship as a starting point to determine how publishers responded to the hardships felt by the industry during World War II, and how successful it was in navigating these limitations and ensuring its survival.

## Key Words

World War II, Restrictions, Censorship, Paper rationing, Morale

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## Introduction

'Books were among the most conspicuous victims of this vicious warfare' (Hench, 2010, p. 19). The horrors of the Second World War are well known, its impact upon the publishing industry is perhaps not. Publishers were subject to a number of restrictions following the outbreak of war in 1939, including the physical restrictions of paper rationing and decreased workforces, as well as censorship restrictions which limited the information that could be released and the type of book which could be published. Yet the publishing industry, in McAleer's (1992) words, displayed 'remarkable resilience' (p. 60) to survive a period of supreme instability, enduring two world wars and economic depression during the first half of the 20th century. Books played a great role in the entertainment, education and upkeep of the morale of the masses during wartime, both at home and on the front line. What restrictions did publishers face following the outbreak of World War II and how did they respond to the subsequent hardships? This article will investigate the restrictions placed upon publishers by the demands of war and then analyse the success of their responses to such restrictions.

## Supply and Demand

As in World War I, the nature of warfare meant that the rationing of many resources was enforced. Of most immediate concern to the publishing industry was the rationing of paper from 1940 until 1949. As early as December 1939 the designated Paper Controller had warned of the likelihood of paper rationing (Holman, 2008, p. 14) and indeed, the February 1940 Paper Order restricted publishers to just 60 percent of their 1939 supply (McAleer, 1992, p. 60), an allocation that decreased throughout the war. For many, the base year of 1938–39 which was used to determine the 1940 allocation was considered unfair (Hench, 2010, p. 24) because it constituted an irregular year upon which to base calculations as the threat of warfare decreased consumption. In 1939 the book industry consumed on average 63,000 tons of paper per year, by 1943 levels had dropped as low as 6.5 percent of this figure (McAleer, 1992, pp. 60–61). Predictably, all new books during the war were subject to

economy regulations to allow rations to stretch as far as possible; small margins and typeface, and poor paper quality were some of the key features (Norrie, 1982, p. 88).

Paper rationing was not the only cause for concern in terms of resources. Publishing did not constitute one of the occupations exempt from national service and compulsory service was introduced in June 1939 restricting the workforce (Holman, 2008, p. 36), books went out of print and could not be put into reprint programmes until after the war, and air raids destroyed premises and stock (Norrie, 1982, p. 85). The destruction of Paternoster Row from 29–30 December 1940 devastated Longman's available titles from a total of 5000–6000 the previous day to just 12 the following Monday (1982, p. 87). Even Penguin, which had proved so important for the paperback during the 1930s, did not escape unscathed – although Allen Lane was exempted from national service, Richard and John Lane joined the Navy, with John never to return again (1982, p. 90), and only 9 percent of the population were reading Penguins at this time (McAleer, 1992, p. 59).

Simultaneously, the restrictions enforced on other potential leisure activities led to an increased demand for reading materials which far outweighed the available supply of books (McAleer, 1992, p. 60). Since World War I, a trend towards lower-priced fiction had been steadily increasing (1992, p. 51). This was likely compounded by the paper shortage discussed above which limited the types of book released during this period, meaning the supply of 'light' novels and magazines increased (1992, p. 63). Moreover, there had been a noticeable growth in the number of patrons using lending libraries which continued to increase during the Second World War due to the shortage of books, an unwillingness to spend, and an increased interest in current affairs (1992, pp. 48–50). British military personnel were also reading more on the front line. Consequently, British publishers found that they could sell virtually any title, yet lacked the required output to meet demand both at home and abroad (Hench, 2010, p. 25). While output did increase to meet demand despite the paper shortages, it still remained far too low to fulfil orders.

### **Light Fiction and Libraries**

Hench (2010) points to the destructive effects of war on the book industry as producing a 'great hunger for books and much pent up demand' (p. 19) which required peace for its eventual fulfilment. Nonetheless, despite these hindrances, the publishing industry remained remarkably stable during this time, indeed the number of publishing houses rose steadily throughout the war from 320 in 1939 to 412 in 1945, and as high as 572 in 1950 (McAleer, 1992, p. 47). Increased demand ensured an increase in titles despite paper shortages. It must therefore be asked how the publishing industry responded to the restrictions enforced upon it by the outbreak of World War II and what it was about these responses that allowed the industry to survive as successfully as it did.

Regarding the paper shortages and physical restrictions, it is easily concluded that measures were taken to stretch the paper allowance as far as possible. The economy restrictions mentioned earlier (reduced paper quality, standardised format and smaller typeface) were essential in this regard. However, the resulting products were, to use Hench's (2010) term, 'unattractive' (p. 25) and impeded export sales long after the close of the war. Imports became much more important in an effort to fulfil the great demand for reading material. The presence of American books within the market was noted as early as 1942 (2010, p. 27) and concerns were felt for the future of Britain's foreign trade market. Nevertheless, this format was more than adequate for the proliferation of 'light' fiction flooding the market at that time in response to the success of the 'tuppenny library' (McAleer, 1992, p. 58) and publishers were quick to capitalise upon this. As expected, the perils of war increased the desire for escapist fiction and the lack of alternative leisure activities increased the demand for reading materials, particularly among the working classes who were experiencing more leisure time than normal. Similarly, the demand for reading material from the front line consisted of calls for fiction of a lighter kind, including detective fiction and romance, which were eagerly passed around the forces (1992, pp. 76–77). In response to these demands, publishers promoted escapist fiction as far as possible.

Despite the appearance of American books within the market, British-made books were still reaching consumers, largely through the public libraries previously mentioned. The number

of public libraries had been increasing since World War I, when the abolition of the penny rate in England and Wales and benefactions from the Carnegie and J. Passmore Edwards' foundations had increased patron numbers, and cheap 'pay-as-you-go', 'no deposit' and 'tuppenny' libraries during the 1930s ensured access to literature for all. The use of libraries was further increased during the Second World War itself as shortages of supply and lack of funds to spend buying new books encouraged visits to the library for suitable reading material (McAleer, 1992, pp. 48–50). Consequently, several publishing houses became what McAleer (1992) referred to as 'library houses' (p. 58), tailoring their lists to the demands of the commercial library market.

This increased library usage also increased support for the publishers as much more was known about what, where and why the British were reading (Holman, 2008, p. 47). For instance, the March 1940 Mass-Observation *Report on Book Reading in War Time* noted that the most noticeable sales increase was in popular reprints of the classics, as evidenced by figures from libraries, book clubs, publishers and booksellers (cited in Holman, 2008, p. 49). This enabled publishers to target their market accordingly, and indeed while children's desire for new reading material prompted new books, for adults the reprint and editions market was a big seller, as restrictive financial conditions encouraged the publication of cheaper editions of books with proven sales records (McAleer, 1992, p. 46).

### **Censorship**

Given the sensitive nature of wartime information and the potential dangers of releasing such information, it is unsurprising that all combatants had some form of censorship in place restricting the information that was released. The severity of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour on 7 December 1941, for instance, was withheld from the American media to prevent the Japanese from knowing the devastation caused to the American Navy. It was one year before news of the damage to ships was released in order to allow time for the reparation and relaunch of some vessels and two years before photographs and newsreels of the deaths were seen (Paxton, 2008, p. 30).

O'Higgins (1972) referred to a 'curious coyness' (p. 11) on the part of the British regarding censorship and pointed to a lack of any concrete definition of the term. Despite this apparent uncertainty, he was confident of its use during wartime, pointing to the statement in the Central Office of Information's *Human Rights in the United Kingdom*, which clearly highlights the lack of government censorship, 'except in wartime on security grounds' (cited in O'Higgins, 1972, p. 11) as evidence of government restrictions on the release of information during conflict. O'Higgins' definition of censorship as 'the process whereby restrictions are imposed on the collection, dissemination and exchange of information, opinions and ideas' (1972, p. 11) neatly sums up the type of censorship enforced in the Pearl Harbour example above. Whilst subject to these same restrictions, publishers were also subject to a form of censorship perhaps less evident.

Holman (2008) has pointed to the significant growth of readers in 1940, both book buyers and book borrowers, as leading to a policy encouraging reading and states that, 'Official concern with public opinion and the state of national morale embraced a growing interest in reading and in the nature of people's responses not just to literature but also to published information and propaganda' (p. 48). In his study of the censorship and propaganda activities of the Australian government, Hilvert (1984) pointed to the 'special place accorded to publicity and censorship in acquainting, mobilizing and maintaining the morale of the public during major national crises' (p. 1). His comments highlight the dual nature of censorship: the suppression of information with potentially devastating effects should it be leaked, such as weaknesses in defences and planned military strategies, and the preservation of morale both at home and on the front line. For the publishing industry, it was the latter which constituted the much greater role.

### **Boosting Morale**

The National Archive website (n.d.) refers to the Ministry of Information, established on 4 September 1939, as the central office responsible for publicity and propaganda during the war. Its development highlights government policy to raise home morale through the 'control and distribution of news and instruction' (Yass, 1983, p. 1) either by withholding

negative information or releasing information designed to lift spirits. In line with this policy, publishers produced official publications on behalf of the government and capitalised on the war through the publication of manuals to deal with the realities of life during conflict.

Penguin for example released *Keeping Poultry and Rabbits on Scraps* and *Aircraft Recognition* (Ward, 2014, p. 195).

Nonetheless, creating such publications was not the only activity of British publishers. As previously stated, books were passed around both at home and on the front line leading to the proliferation of escapist or 'light' titles from publishers. Given the horrors experienced during the war on a daily basis, publishers had an implied responsibility to maintain the spirits of the reader through their offerings. Accordingly, the role of the publisher adhered much more to Hilvert's (1984) definition of censorship as a means of 'acquainting, mobilizing and maintaining the morale of the public during major national crises' (p. 1) through the choice of titles and topics.

For soldiers on the front line and in Prisoner of War (POW) camps, this took the form of programmes providing soldiers with reading material. Libraries were established in almost all POW camps to serve the 95,000 American and 135,000 British soldiers incarcerated in Germany during the war (Shavit, 1999, p. 113). Various agencies, under the coordination of the International Red Cross Committee, provided books to the inmates of these camps (1999, pp. 114–115). Publishers were generous with the books they donated and discounts for those donated by others (1999, pp. 116–117). American books were chosen by the Council on Books in Wartime, an organisation established by the publishing industry in 1942 'to support the war effort' and certain books were excluded, including those considered offensive to supporters and allies, and those which could harm the war effort (Leary Jr., 1968, pp. 237–238). This was not censorship in the form of painstakingly analysing each line of text to prevent unwanted information being released; rather, it was, as Leary pointed out, censorship in the form of selecting which titles to use, ensuring their acceptability and suitability (1968, p. 237). Similar programmes were followed by Britain: publishers, such as Penguin, supplied books to the services and POWs as in the American initiatives discussed

above (Ward, 2014, p. 195). Comments from those in such situations reveal that the arrival of a book could constitute the most exciting moment of one's entire month and provided a means of escaping their reality (Shavit, 1999, p. 118). Similar schemes served those fighting on the front line. 1941, for example, saw the United States government shipping paperbacks overseas, with 3,000,000 distributed by 1943 (Leary Jr., 1968, p. 237) and one Armed Service Edition paperback was given to all soldiers in the build up to the 1944 D-Day invasion of France (Loos, 2003, pp. 811–812). Tastes evolved and the types of book stored within libraries changed but for those living in POW camps and on the front line, the libraries and books they had access to were essential for the maintenance of morale (Shavit, 1999, p. 125) and the role of publishers in stocking these libraries both personally and through donations made by their consumers back home was invaluable.

## Conclusion

The publishing industry, like so many others, felt the effects of the Second World War. Restrictions on physical resources, such as paper and labourers, decreased the output of publishing companies at the same time as the market demand for books grew. Consequently, more foreign books entered the British book trade and the quality of products decreased in the efforts to meet demands. Equally important for publishers, censorship restrictions and an unofficial policy of boosting morale through reading material affected the types of books published and the market for products: lighter fiction took precedence over more serious literature and the lending market continued to grow at home, whilst publishing programmes and schemes to distribute books were developed for those serving on the front line and incarcerated in POW camps. It is clear that despite the hardships suffered by publishers through the realities of warfare, the industry showed no signs of collapse during the conflict; indeed it remained remarkably strong in the face of adversity. Therefore, whilst it cannot be argued that the publishing industry escaped unscathed, the success of its responses to the restrictions enforced by the outbreak of World War II is proved by its survival and, to an extent, prosperity during the period.



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