Censorship reaches deeply into the psyche. Back in the
nineteenth century, Russian frontier guards ferociously
blotted out references in imported literature that might
stir anger about the legitimacy, stability, or longevity of
the Tsars. Without unwanted prompts, the populace
might forget about the paternity of Catherine's children,
or that assassins had been bringing down Russian rulers
for centuries. Memory, even fictional memory (or so the
fear went), might provoke revolution. With glue, paper,
and liberal amounts of black ink (known, because of its
color and form, as “caviar”) the border guards annihi-
lated offending sentences—targeting with special vigor
German-language texts. To Freud, writing in Vienna,
the Russian censor with his black ink and papier mâché
stick-ons was, from early on, a more-than-metaphor for
our unconscious rubbing out of disturbing memories,
dreams, and thoughts.

Censorship drew closer. During World War I, it
descended on Vienna itself, like a great smothering blan-
ket. Newspapers, especially on the socialist left, felt the
brunt of the censors’ wrath on a daily basis. Editors and
writers would finish their composition of the day’s news,
and then, too late for re-writing, the censor would slash
bits—sometimes a sentence, sometimes a paragraph,
sometimes an entire article. Viennese police censors,
some three thousand of them, also monitored corre-
spondence—and not just to the front.

It was in such a climate that the international
socialist militant Friedrich Adler agitated against the
war, polemicizing in his monthly Der Kampf—until it
was censored and shut down by the authorities. Adler,
for years the secretary general of the Austrian Socialist
Party, was the son of Victor Adler, who, in addition to
being the head of the Austrian socialist movement, was
a psychiatrist who knew Freud. (Freud actually recorded
a dream he had about Adler senior in his Interpretation
of Dreams.) Young Adler (“Fritz”) had begun his career
as a physicist—and was one of Albert Einstein’s closest
friends from their university days in Zurich, where they
had shared classes and even been housemates during
some of Einstein’s crucial scientific years.

For Fritz Adler, censorship was one of the worst
infringements on Austria’s halting struggle toward
democracy, along with impediments to free assembly
and to the convocation of parliament. Censorship was
an obstacle to the political passage, so Adler believed,
out of Austria’s autocratic, imperial past. On 20 October
1916, the Arbeiter-Zeitung, the Socialist Party newspaper
founded and edited by Victor Adler, laid out a screed
against deleting news on its front page. In bold black
print, the headline read: “Censorship.” But the article
itself was censored. Between censorship and autocratic
interference with deliberation more generally, Fritz Adler
had had enough. He believed that the prime minister of
Austria, Count Karl Stürghk, was behind the constant
interference with democratic action. And in the case of
this article we actually can know what was behind the
curtain, so to speak. The blocked bit (as I know from an
unmolested version of that day’s paper that survives in
the Socialist Party’s archives) began: “No one has been
successful in moving Count Stürghk—he who is indeed
the originator of the whole system designed to abolish
press freedom—to actually speak.” A few hours later,
on 21 October, Adler took his Browning pistol, faced
the prime minister at the Meissl and Schadn Hotel,
and killed him. Einstein leapt to his friend’s defense—it
became one of the Austria’s most sensational trials.

In the midst of that bloody conflagration, Freud
returned to The Interpretation of Dreams (first pub-
lished back in 1900), precisely to alter his treatment
of censorship, and inserted a dream account, drawn
in good measure from his wartime Lecture IX (“The
Censorship of Dreams”) given in December 1915.
Freud’s insertion: “Frau Dr. H. von Hug-Hellmuth
(1915) has recorded a dream which is perhaps better
fitted than any to justify my choice of nomenclature
[for censorship]. In this example the dream-distortion
adopted the same methods as the postal censorship
for expunging passages which were objectionable to
it. The postal censorship makes such passages unread-
able by blacking them out; the dream censorship
replaced them by an incomprehensible mumble.”

Freud thought through the two systems (news-
paper/postal censorship and psychic censorship) in
He observed the pre-(self-)censorship that the newspapers imposed on themselves and felt the weight of this self-limitation in his correspondence acutely, commenting to his friends and acquaintances how oppressive he found the necessity of sending unsealed letters (prominently labeled "offen") so that the censors would not tear them up in their effort to surveil contents. Freud could see that his correspondence was being twice inspected—the stamps were there for all the world to see: "inspected in Vienna" and then "inspected in Königsberg," for example. In this period, Freud began commenting on the double "frontier" censorship of material as it passed from the unconscious to the pre-conscious or from the pre-conscious to the conscious. Topographies of the war zone, topographies of the psychic zones. He began, too, to write about the pre-censorship that we impose on dreams, for example, knowing that our inner censors would otherwise go to work on it. Back and forth Freud went between the two kinds of distortion and deletion, interior and exterior, all amplified in the anxiety of war.

Since ancient times, "memory theater" has been a commonplace technique for remembering, as we place ideas or themes in the rooms of an expansive house. But perhaps we ought also to attend to the theater of forgetting, forged not only deep inside the self, but always also under pressure of the wars that now seem permanent. Perhaps you pause, and consider a circumlocation, as you wonder who might read that email?