

## THE THEATER OF FORGETTING

PETER GALISON

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 annihilated 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 blanket. 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 correspondence—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



Letter from Freud to Karl Abraham, 10 August 1916. Freud added the word *offen* (open) to alert the censors to the fact that he had not sealed the envelope.

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 Stürgkh, 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 Stürgkh—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 Schadh 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 published 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 unreadable by blacking them out; the dream censorship replaced them by an incomprehensible mumble."

Freud thought through the two systems (newspaper/postal censorship and psychic censorship) in



parallel. 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 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 circumstance, as you wonder who might read that email?

Further Reading: For more on Friedrich Adler, see Peter Galison, “The Assassin of Relativity,” in Peter Galison, Gerard Holton and Silvan Schweber, eds., *Einstein for the 21st Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 185–204. On Freud and censorship, see Peter Galison, “Blacked-Out Spaces,” forthcoming in the *British Journal in the History of Science*.



Front page of the censored 20 October 1916 issue of *Arbeiter-Zeitung*. Note the empty space in the article titled “Censorship.”