

## Censoring International Mail in WWII by David Gray

Britain systematically censored international mail, including mail to and from the United States, throughout World War II. This effort was part of a broader "Imperial Censorship" operation designed to prevent intelligence from reaching the enemy, monitor civilian morale, and enforce economic blockades. Britain established an extensive censorship network to monitor all forms of communication—including letters, packages, and telegrams—to prevent sensitive military information from reaching enemy eyes and to identify Axis spies.

### Key Operations and Locations



The primary hub for processing American mail was the Littlewoods Pools building in Liverpool. At its peak, this facility alone employed approximately 1,500 people to handle the massive volume of transatlantic correspondence. To manage the sheer volume, Britain expanded operations to territories that served as transit points for air and sea routes. The Princess Hotel in Bermuda became a major censorship station because most planes traveling between the British Isles and the U.S. landed there. Additional censorship centres were established in Trinidad, Gambia, and Quebec to intercept mail on southern and northern Atlantic routes.

### The Censorship Process

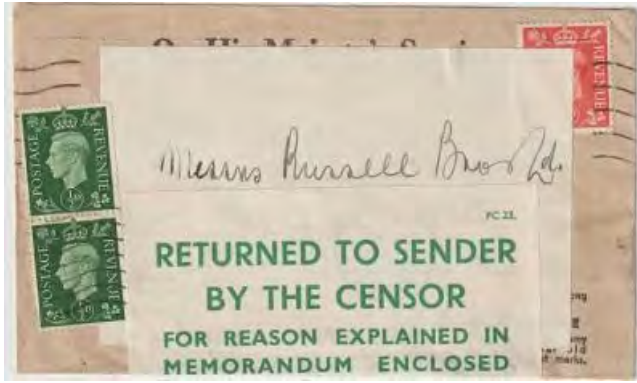
More than 10,000 postal "Examiners" were employed across the UK to read through mountains of mail. Letters that were opened and inspected typically had "Examiner" stickers (or resealing labels) affixed to the envelope, often marked with the specific examiner's number (e.g., "Examiner 6883"). Censors looked for information on troop movements, shipping, production of armaments, or weather reports. They also used blacklists and whitelists to flag suspicious senders or exempt trusted correspondence. While official U.S. policy toward British censorship evolved during the war, the relationship was defined by a massive gap between public neutrality and secret high-level cooperation.

### The Official Public Stance (Pre-1941)

Publicly, the U.S. government maintained its neutral status and did not officially endorse British interference with American mail. Historically, the U.S. had strongly objected to British postal censorship during WWI, viewing it as a "lawless" violation of neutral rights and individual privacy. Because it would have been politically damaging for the American public to know their mail was being read by a foreign power while the U.S. was still neutral, both governments kept the coordination strictly confidential.

### Secret Government Cooperation

Behind the scenes, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration was not just aware of the censorship—they actively facilitated it. J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI entered a secret verbal agreement with the British Security Coordination (BSC). The U.S. allowed Britain to perform the actual censorship,



and in exchange, Britain provided the FBI with intelligence and helped identify Axis spies operating on American soil. High-level U.S. officials even pressured American aircraft to land in Bermuda specifically so the British could intercept and censor the mail they were carrying. In early 1941, a British expert even taught FBI technicians advanced techniques for opening and resealing correspondence without leaving a trace.

### Post-Pearl Harbour Integration

Once the U.S. formally entered the war in December 1941, the relationship became an open partnership.

- **The Office of Censorship:** President Roosevelt established the Office of Censorship just days after the attack on Pearl Harbor.
- **Joint Operations:** The U.S. military had already been studying British methods to prepare their own censorship plans. The two nations eventually harmonized their practices, sharing "blacklists" of suspicious individuals and ensuring their respective systems worked in tandem.
- **Division of Labor:** To avoid duplication, the allies eventually divided global censorship duties; the U.S. took primary responsibility for mail in the Pacific and Latin America, while Britain continued to lead in the Atlantic and European sectors.

British censors during WWII used a sophisticated "arms race" approach to detect hidden messages, moving beyond simple physical inspection to advanced chemical and optical testing.

### Invisible Ink Detection

Censors employed a tiered screening process for suspicious mail to uncover "sympathetic" (invisible) inks:

- **Optical & Physical Screening:**
  - **Glancing Light:** Envelopes were examined at an angle to look for "disturbed" paper fibres or a slight sheen/dullness left by dried ink.
  - **Ultraviolet (UV) Light:** Many organic substances (like lemon juice or bodily fluids) fluoresce under UV lamps.
- **Chemical Development:**
  - **"Striping":** Censors used a tool with multiple brushes, each dipped in a different chemical reagent, and swept it across the page. If a stripe changed color, it indicated which specific ink was used.

- Iodine Fuming: Placing a letter in an iodine vapor cupboard was a non-destructive way to reveal many inks without permanently altering the letter.
- Heat Treatment: Letters were sometimes heated in ovens or with irons to caramelize organic inks like milk or citrus juices, turning them brown.

### Hidden Codes and Steganography

Beyond invisible ink, censors were trained to find messages hidden in plain sight:

- **Microdots:**
  - Spies used specialized cameras to shrink a full page of text to the size of a tiny "full stop" (period), which was then glued over a punctuation mark in an innocent letter.
- **Physical Concealment:**
  - Postcard Splicing: Postcards were split into two thin layers, a message was written inside, and the layers were glued back together.
  - Under Stamp Writing: Messages were frequently written on the back of the postage stamp or inside the envelope flap.
- **Coded Language:**
  - Open Codes: Seemingly normal sentences used pre-arranged meanings (e.g., "The weather is fine" meaning "The convoy has sailed").
  - Pattern Coding: Censors discovered Morse code dots and dashes hidden in the decorative stitching of fashion drawings or even in the spacing of musical notes on sheet music.

### Specific Case: The "Fred Lewis" Letters

In Bermuda, British censors intercepted 13 typed letters sent from New York to neutral European countries. By applying chemical tests, they revealed secret German text written in invisible ink between



the lines of the typed English message. This intelligence was shared with the FBI, leading to the arrest of the spy Ernest Frederick Lehmitz in New York.

The British Security Coordination (BSC) was a massive, secret intelligence organization established in May 1940 by the British Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) in New York City. Its primary mission was to protect British interests in the Western Hemisphere, investigate enemy activities, and—crucially—mobilize pro-British opinion in the Americas.

## **The "Intrepid" Leadership**

The BSC was led by William Stephenson, a Canadian industrialist codenamed "Intrepid". Stephenson was handpicked by Winston Churchill to serve as a direct link between the British Prime Minister and U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt. At its peak, the BSC employed nearly 1,000 members, many working discreetly within major newspapers, radio stations, and polling organizations to influence American sentiment toward entering the war.

## **Key Operations and Impact**

- **Counter-Espionage:** Working closely with the FBI, the BSC helped identify and dismantle Axis spy rings operating in the United States, such as the "Joe K" ring.
- **Secret Censorship:** The BSC managed the censorship hub in Bermuda, where 1,200 examiners intercepted all transatlantic mail, radio, and telegraph traffic.
- **Propaganda & "Dirty Tricks":** The organization engaged in "black propaganda" to smear isolationist groups like America First. They even created high-quality forged documents, such as a fake letter that insulted the Brazilian president, which successfully turned Brazil against the Axis powers.
- **Camp X:** The BSC established a specialized paramilitary training school in Ontario, Canada, known as Camp X, to train covert agents in the methods of "secret warfare".

Established in December 1941 on the shores of Lake Ontario, Camp X (officially Special Training School No. 103) was the first secret spy school in North America. It was a joint venture between the British BSC and Canadian authorities, designed to churn out agents capable of operating behind enemy lines.

## **The "School for Spies" Curriculum**

The training was brutal, condensed, and highly practical. Recruits—including Americans from the newly formed OSS (the predecessor to the CIA)—learned:

- **Silent Killing:** Techniques in close-quarters combat using daggers, garrotes, or bare hands.
- **Sabotage:** How to use plastic explosives to destroy bridges, rail lines, and factories.
- **Subterfuge:** "Lock-picking," safe-cracking, and how to maintain a "cover identity" under interrogation.
- **Communications:** Mastering the "Hydra" high-speed radio transmitter, which allowed Camp X to communicate securely with London and New York.

## **The James Bond Connection**

One of the most famous graduates (or at least a frequent visitor for training) was Ian Fleming, who later wrote the James Bond novels. Many historians believe Fleming based the character of 007 on William Stephenson (the head of BSC) and drew inspiration for Bond's gadgets and ruthless tactics from the curriculum he witnessed at Camp X.

## **Why Canada?**

The location was chosen for three strategic reasons:

1. Safety: It was far from the reach of the Luftwaffe and Axis saboteurs.
2. Proximity: It was close enough to the U.S. border to easily transport American recruits.
3. Geography: The rugged landscape around Whitby, Ontario, mimicked the terrain of occupied Europe, providing a realistic setting for nighttime "parachute" drops and swamp crossings.

## **The Legacy**

By the time it closed in 1944, Camp X had trained over 500 agents. After the war, the buildings were demolished to protect its secrets, and the site is now a peaceful public park called "Intrepid Park," marked by a monument to the men and women who served there.

## **Sources**

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