

The Zimmermann Telegram: Intelligence, Diplomacy, and America's Entry into World War I

Thomas Boghardt (Naval Institute Press, 2012), 319 pp., illustrations, bibliography, index.

Reviewed by John Ehrman

Since 1 March 1917, the day its decrypted text was published in US newspapers, the Zimmermann telegram has been a subject of popular fascination. The reason the story is so captivating is not hard to understand: it is a morality play, a story of deception, code-breaking, and high diplomacy. Not surprisingly, though, these elements also have obscured the truth about the telegram, whether because historians have had a difficult time sorting the facts or because of deliberate distortion and mythmaking. In his new history, *The Zimmermann Telegram*, military and intelligence historian Thomas Boghardt presents a meticulously researched and well-written account that clarifies the story of the telegram and likely will be the standard for many years to come.

The basic story is well known. As Germany prepared in January 1917 to begin unrestricted submarine warfare—a move likely to bring the United States into World War I—Berlin's foreign minister, Arthur Zimmermann, approved a proposal to the Mexican government that offered it the opportunity to recover territories lost to the United States if it joined the war on Berlin's side. British intelligence, however, intercepted and decrypted the cable and then gave the text to Walter Hines Page, the US ambassador in London. Page forwarded the text to the State Department, and it was shown to President Wilson and Secretary of State Lansing. Lansing, in turn, gave the text to an Associated Press correspondent. The uproar that followed publication, generations of schoolchildren have been taught, helped propel the United States into the war.

The strength of *The Zimmermann Telegram* is the multiple perspectives that Boghardt uses to tell the story. For general readers, there is plenty of fun. Fascinating, even eccentric characters populate the tale. Foremost among these is the chief of the British navy's codebreaking branch, Captain William Reginald

“Blinker” Hall. Hall, in Boghardt's description, was a charismatic man and brilliant intelligence operator and politician. He earned his nickname because “when excited...his piercing eyes took to frequent blinking.” Hall also had false teeth that clicked as he spoke, and he used these tics to overcome opponents in Whitehall debates: “When making a point, he clicked his false teeth horridly, and his icy stare and wiggling eyebrows were said to work wonders in negotiations.” (83)

Hall is the key player in the book. Boghardt gives a good account of how he established his operation, known as Room 40, and then expanded it into the best intercept and codebreaking operation in the world. It is a glimpse, too, of the birth of an intelligence service and how—under Hall's firm hand—it operated with virtually no supervision from above, something that would be almost inconceivable today, when intelligence services are bureaucratized and seek to integrate their operations. Ironically, though, Hall's success contributed to the creation of the modern intelligence bureaucracy. After the war, the British realized how valuable Room 40 had been and took steps to place it on a firm institutional footing, creating what is now GCHQ, the Government Communications Headquarters, which—along with NSA—is one of the world's leading SIGINT agencies.

On the German side, too, the characters tend to be interesting, although not because of their abilities. Zimmermann himself was a hardworking plodder who “did not respond well to stress” and who had a poor understanding of European politics—hardly the qualities one would look for in a foreign minister. (24) As for Hans Arthur von Kemnitz, who suggested the proposal to Mexico and drafted the telegram, Boghardt simply notes that his “performance as a diplomat was subpar” even before he came up with his scheme. (53)

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After the war, Kemnitz was unable to find employment as a diplomat, but after 1933 suddenly discovered that he long had been a loyal Nazi and tried to find a job in the new regime's foreign affairs apparatus. Even the Nazis did not want him, however, and he died in well-deserved obscurity.

The story of how Room 40 intercepted the telegram also is fascinating. The British had cut the German undersea cables at the start of the war, leading Berlin to send diplomatic traffic to North America by handing encrypted messages to the US embassy for transmission to Washington on US cables. The cables passed through London, and Hall intercepted and decrypted the State Department's messages; thus he found and decrypted the Zimmermann telegram, which was embedded within the US traffic. To cap this achievement, Hall staged an elaborate deception so he could pass the telegram to Page without revealing that he was reading US cables. Indeed, it would not be until the 1930s that the United States realized that the British had been reading its traffic (and not until World War II that the UK stopped the practice altogether).

Another of Boghardt's accomplishments is to set all of this in a broader context. As interesting and important as the intelligence aspect of the story is, he carefully details the diplomatic background in which the events took place. Here, the British come off quite well, as Boghardt walks through their years of efforts

to cultivate strong relations with sympathetic US officials. When the telegram was decrypted and handed over, London was able to exploit these relationships quickly and effectively to build support for US entry into the war. The Germans, in contrast, were woefully inept in their diplomacy. The telegram was but one example of Kemnitz's unrealistic schemes for drawing Mexico or other Latin American states into the war on Germany's side; Kemnitz somehow convinced himself that such marginal players could tip the scales in Berlin's favor.

For American readers, the book addresses another important question: how much did the telegram really matter in the decision to go to war? Not much, according to Boghardt. The telegram certainly created an uproar in the US press, but, as Boghardt carefully documents, the furor did not last long and changed few minds on the question of whether or not to intervene. Indeed, he notes, the overwhelming issue in March 1917 was how to respond to the German declaration of unrestricted submarine warfare, and this was the reason Wilson asked for the declaration of war.

In sum, *The Zimmermann Telegram* is a fine example of how various historical disciplines—intelligence, diplomatic, and political—can be combined to tell a compelling story. It should be on the reading list of anyone interested in how intelligence shapes our world.

