The Interception of the Zimmermann Telegram

Secret Communications Between Germany and Mexico Prompt America to Declare War
By the winter of 1916 to 1917, World War I had reached a deadlock. While the Allies commanded greater resources and fielded more soldiers than the Central Powers, German armies had penetrated deep into Russia and France, and tenaciously held on to their conquered empire. Hoping to break the stalemate on the western front, the exhausted Allies sought to bring the neutral United States into the conflict.

A golden opportunity to force American intervention seemed at hand when British naval intelligence intercepted a secret telegram detailing a German alliance offer to Mexico. In it, Berlin’s foreign secretary, Arthur Zimmermann, offered his country’s support to Mexico for reconquering “the lost territory in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona” in exchange for a Mexican attack on the United States, should the latter enter the war on the side of the Allies. The British handed a copy of the Telegram to the American government, which in turn leaked it to the press. On March 1, 1917, the Telegram made headline news across the United States, and five weeks later, America entered World War I.
The Zimmermann Telegram
The National Cryptologic Museum Examines the Intercepted Message
Run Time: 1 Minute
Video
The Message that Changed History

Encoded Interceptions Turn the Tide of War

♦ In 1917 President Wilson had just won re-election under the campaign slogan “He Kept Us Out of War.”

♦ Until this point the United States had been able to maintain neutrality and stay out of WWI after the Germans issued the Sussex Pledge, apologized for the sinking of the Lusitania and pulled back on unprovoked attacks on passenger vessels.

♦ In January 1917 the British blockade was having debilitating effects on the Germans and the Central Powers were becoming desperate. They knew that if they resumed unrestricted submarine warfare that the United States would likely enter the war on the side of the Allies.

♦ To slow the United States down, Germany sought to distract America by enlisting the help of Mexico. Tensions between America and Mexico at the time were heightened due to the Spanish-American War and Mexican Revolution from 1910 to 1916.

♦ On January 16, 1917, German Foreign Secretary Arthur Zimmermann sent an encoded telegram to the German Minister to Mexico, Heinrich von Eckhardt through the German Ambassador in Washington, D.C., Count Johann von Bernstorff. The message was to be delivered to the President of Mexico Venustiano Carranza, proposing an alliance to halt or undermine America’s entrance into WWI.

♦ The telegraph was intercepted on January 17, 1917, and decoded by British intelligence who shared its contents with the American government.

♦ In response to the breaking of the Sussex Pledge and rising anti-German public sentiment, the United States severed diplomatic relations with Germany, released the contents of the telegram to the press and plunged into WWI.
The Zimmermann Telegram

Germany’s Secret Message to Mexico

“We intended to begin on the first of February unrestricted submarine warfare. We shall endeavor in spite of this to keep the United States of America neutral. In the event of this not succeeding, we make Mexico a proposal alliance on the following basis: make war together, make peace together, generous financial support and an understanding on our part that Mexico is to reconquer the lost territory in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona. The settlement in detail is left to you. You will inform the President (of Mexico) of the above most secretly as soon as the outbreak of war with the United States of America is certain and add the suggestion that he should, on his own initiative, invite Japan to immediate adherence and at the same time mediate between Japan and ourselves. Please call the President’s attention to the fact that the ruthless employment of our submarines now offers the prospect of compelling England in a few months to make peace.”

—Arthur Zimmermann, German Foreign Secretary
The Zimmermann Telegram

Decoding the Words, Understanding the Message

**Telegram Received.**

FROM 2nd from London # 5747.

"We intend to begin on the first of February unrestricted submarine warfare. We shall endeavor in spite of this to keep the United States of America neutral. In the event of this not succeeding, we make Mexico a proposal of alliance on the following basis: make war together, make peace together, generous financial support and an understanding on our part that Mexico is to reconquer the lost territory in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona. The settlement in detail is left to you. You will inform the President of the above most secret, as soon as the outbreak of war with the United States of America is certain and add the suggestion that he should, on his own initiative, Japan to immediate adherence and at the same time mediate between Japan and ourselves. Please call the President's attention to the fact that the ruthless employment of our submarines now offers the prospect of compelling England in a few months to make peace." Signed, ZIMMERMANN.
A Plot for Collusion

Germany’s Secret Proposal to Mexico Discovered by British Intelligence

Run Time: 1 Minute

Video
The Zimmermann Telegram ignited public fear of what would happen if Americans did not unite behind the war effort in Europe.
Instigating International Tension

How a Decrypted German Telegram Pushed the United States into WWI and Prompted a Wave of Hostility on the U.S.-Mexico Border

Run Time: 4 Minutes  Video®
The Germans were often forced to use telephone cables belonging to neutral countries after their own Atlantic cables had been cut earlier in the war.

Unknown to the Germans, British cryptographers had intercepted the telegram as it briefly passed over British territory and were decoding it at their cryptanalytic center, known as Room 40 using captured German codebooks found in combat and through military intelligence.

When the British saw the decoded text with the announcement of resumed unrestricted submarine warfare, a proposed alliance with Mexico and Japan and the promise of restored territories from the American Southwest, they realized that they held a cryptanalytic “trump card” that virtually guaranteed America’s entry into WWI on the side of the Allies.

Before the British could capitalize on the telegram they had to protect their own intelligence gathering sources and capabilities while convincing U.S. officials of the message’s authenticity.
President Wilson made the decision to release the note to the press on February 28, 2017 in an attempt to convince U.S. lawmakers to pass legislation protecting American lives at sea.

The March 1st, 1917 publication of the Zimmermann Telegram outraged the American public by exposing Germany’s attempt to reignite boundary disputes and ultimately incite a war between Mexico and America.

As a result the U.S. Congress formally declared war on Germany and its allies on April 6, 1917.
The Impact of Codebreaking

The Zimmermann telegram helped draw the United States into the war and profoundly changed the course of history.

The telegram and ensuing cryptanalysis had enormous consequences, making an unprecedented impact on American opinion.

Never before had so much turned upon the solution of a secret message.
American Military Forces

*The Impact of the Industrial Revolution on Modern Warfare During WWI*

- During a period of world industrialization, the war brought technical advances such as the machine gun and airplane that forever changed both the strategy and tactics of combat.

- Similarly, the radio, which was still in its infancy, completely revolutionized military communications.

- The intelligence organizations of belligerent forces in Europe were aware of the information to be gained by “listening in” on enemy communications.

- With borrowed French radio equipment, the U.S. Army Radio Intelligence Section soon became an active and vital part of the American intelligence effort. Along with the machine gunner and the pilot, the radio intercept operator took his place in the new American Army born in the trenches of the “war to end all wars.”
An analysis of the Zimmermann Telegram, based on a conversation with David Kahn, author of The Codebreakers; research by Barbara W. Tuchman, author of The Zimmermann Telegram; and information provided by the National Cryptologic Museum in Fort Meade, Maryland.
Prior to the interception of the Zimmermann Telegram the American public had supported humanitarian aid efforts across Europe.

American citizens mobilized to send a constant stream of food, clothing, and assistance to countries suffering occupation such as Belgium, which was a neutral country invaded in August 1914 by the German Army.

The plight of Belgium attracted worldwide sympathy. Successful businessman and future U.S. President Herbert Hoover undertook leadership of the Commission for Relief in Belgium, which sought to feed and clothe Belgians and avert starvation.

In an expression of gratitude for U.S. humanitarian aid, thousands of Belgian schoolchildren and many of their teachers wrote letters of thanks to President Wilson and the American people expressing appreciation for their generosity.
Humanitarian Aid

A Shifting of American Sentiments and Efforts

- German immigrants demonstrated allegiance to their homeland by orchestrating charity events to benefit the widows and orphans of the Central Powers.

- As the war escalated, domestic tensions rose between German nationals and native-born American citizens.

- Ethnically German charity organizers argued, “There is no one in this country who can accuse us of disloyalty if we feel sympathy first for the country of our birth, so long as the United States is not directly involved.”
International Relief Efforts

As long as the United States remained out of the war, humanitarian assistance offered an alternative response to the international crisis.

Neutral Belgium, which was invaded and occupied by Germany, and other war-ravaged countries faced food shortages and the threat of starvation.

At the urging of the U.S. embassy in London, Herbert Hoover—then a forty-year-old mining engineer and wealthy business leader—organized the Commission for Relief (CRB) in Belgium, which was designed to feed all of Belgium as the largest humanitarian relief operation to date.

Relief efforts later expanded to occupied northern France, and by 1918 the CRB had delivered three million tons of food, largely averting starvation in the occupied territories.

Americans also undertook much smaller voluntary relief efforts for suffering peoples within the Central Powers’ territories including Germany, Austria, Hungary, Armenia, and Syria.
THE WEEKLY NORTHWESTERN MILLER

April 21, 1918

THE MILLERS' GIFTS IN BELGIUM

CONTRIBUTORS to the Miller Relief Fund of the Women's National American Federation of Labor.Funds for distribution to Belgium have reached the approximate amount of $100,000. The first consignment of flour was dispatched to Belgium on March 15th by the National American Federation of Labor and was received in Belgium on April 5th. The second consignment of flour was dispatched on April 1st by the Women's National American Federation of Labor and was received in Belgium on April 18th.

Without any special qualifications, the women workers of the United States, through their Federation of Labor, are doing their bit to help the people of Belgium. The women workers of the United States are doing their bit to help the people of Belgium.

One of the Distributing Depots in Brussels

Library of Congress
Propaganda and an Intercepted Diplomatic Cable

A Discussion on U.S. Motivation for Involvement in World War I

Run Time: 40 Minutes
Extension Activity: The Military Lens
The Suffrage Movement and America’s Women Soldiers in the Great War and Beyond
The women’s suffrage movement was already firmly part of the nation’s consciousness by 1917 when the U.S. entered WWI.

During the war millions of women contributed to the war effort, not only through volunteer service, but by entering the labor force as nurses, agricultural laborers, telephone operators, and factory workers.
Dreams of Equity
An Overview of the Struggle for Women’s Rights in the Nineteenth Century
Run Time: 27 Minutes
Video🔗
Women in World War I

Women’s Wartime Service Propels the Passage of the 19th Amendment

- Upwards of 25,000 American women between the ages of 21 and 69 served overseas during World War I.

- They began serving in August 1914, at first alone or with a few companions, later with service organizations, and lastly at the request of the U.S. government.

- Although the largest number were nurses, women served in numerous other capacities from administrators and secretaries to telephone operators and architects.

- Many women continued to serve long after Armistice Day, some returning home as late as 1923.

- Their efforts and contributions in the Great War left a lasting legacy that inspired change across the nation. The service of these women helped propel the passage of the 19th Amendment on June 4, 1919, guaranteeing women the right to vote.
Women in the War to End All Wars

Wartime Service Sets Precedent for All Future Conflicts

- The U. S. Army did not sanction the enlistment of women although leaders such as General John Pershing, the U. S. commander-in-chief in France, recognized the valuable service of British and French women and asked the War Department to send over American women with clerical skills.

- The Signal Corps employed some bilingual women telephone operators called “Hello Girls” while other women worked for the Quartermaster Corps as personnel clerks, cooks, and bakers.

- The Medical Department hired women as physical and occupational therapists and dieticians.

- WWI laid the foundation for the later establishment of the Women’s Army Corps which was established shortly after the United States entered World War II. Women stepped up to perform an array of critical army jobs. They worked in hundreds of fields such as military intelligence, cryptography, parachute rigging, maintenance and supply, to name a few. Additionally, more than 60,000 Army nurses served around the world and over 1,000 women flew aircraft for the Women’s Airforce Service Pilots.

- Over 150,000 American women served in the Army during World War II and the Women’s Army Corps proved it was a vital part to winning the war. The selfless sacrifice of those brave women ushered in new economic and social changes that would forever alter the role of women in American society.
Women in American Cryptology

Creating the Legacy

National Security Agency
The Hello Girls
America’s First Women Soldiers
Run Time: 54 Minutes  Video
Women in the United States Army

“The defense of our nation is a shared responsibility. Women have served in the defense of this land for years before our United States was born. They have contributed their talents, skills and courage to this endeavor for more than two centuries with an astounding record of achievement that stretches from Lexington and Concord to the Persian Gulf and beyond.”

Retired General Gordon R. Sullivan
Chief of Staff of the Army, 1991–1995
Tribute to Women in the U.S. Army

The Permanent Presence of Women in the Modern Military

Run Time: 3 Minutes

Video
Text Resources


Image Resources


Image Resources


Audio/Video Resources


