

The Literature of the Zimmermann Telegram

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Abstract

The Zimmerman Telegram was handed to the United States government on 25 February 1917. It is a widely known aspect of the Great War also known as World War 1 as it is the United States entry into the war. The Zimmerman Telegram deals with unrestricted submarine warfare and German secret alliance proposal to Mexico against the United States. This essay is an assessment of the compiled works regarding the Zimmerman Telegram. It argues that the narrative of the Zimmerman Telegram changes from beginning works to recent works due to time gaps and new discoveries and questions becoming prevalent. Each individual work brings a new narrative with it but also plays off the previous. In this essay it analyses the different questions each work proposes and how/if the question is answered. This event that took place over a hundred years ago still has unanswered questions and unknown origins.

It was a restless Sunday night at the White House when a Telegram was rushed through the doors. February 25, 1917, was the date the Telegram was delivered to President Woodrow Wilson. World War I, or the Great War, had begun three years prior in 1914 with three to four countries on each side of the Allied and Central Powers, none of which were the United States. Wilson, who ran the slogan “He kept us Out of War”, apprehensively read the Telegram from German ambassador Arthur Zimmermann to the German Minister in Mexico Heinrich von Eckhardt. Obviously, the note was not meant for the eyes of the United States, but British cryptographers thought otherwise. The Telegram read that night is one of the most influential reasoning for the United entered the Great War. A war that Wilson tried so hard to stay out of. Much like President Wilson, Germany wanted to keep the United States neutral during the war, but due to their plans to continue unrestricted submarine warfare, indicated in the Telegram, that would be awfully difficult. In the event, however, that Germany does not succeed in keeping the United States neutral then they would like to form an alliance with Mexico to keep the United States occupied in the American front. In return for Mexico helping them, Germany would give Mexico the land it lost to the United States from the Mexican-American War when Germany wins the Great War. The very next morning Wilson told Congress to begin preparing for war. Two months succeeding what is now known as the Zimmerman Telegram, on April 6, 1917, the United States of America declared war upon Germany leading to their entry in one of the biggest wars of the twentieth century. The Zimmermann Telegram is known in this narrative by most Americans, but what if this was all a lie? The literature on the Zimmermann Telegram begins with the narrative of the British being the cryptic heroes of the War, but is drastically changed when John Cornelius’ 1999 article “The Zimmerman Telegram: Palestine, the Balfour

Declaration and Why America entered the Great War” suggested that Zimmerman Telegram was a ploy by British Intelligence to gain the United States entry into the Great War.

From the Great War sprang works on why the United States ultimately decided to enter the war. Through these works, the Zimmerman Telegram was shaped into view. Was it actually influential to United States entry into the Great War? Military historians argue that after events such as the Zimmerman Telegram, the United States entering the Great War was inevitable. The literature on the Zimmermann Telegram ranges from the 1950s to the 2000s. There are barely any works in-between those two periods. Due to the extensive gap in time, only fifty years, the Zimmermann telegram is viewed differently by World and Military historians from each period. The literature from the 1953 and 1958 works of Samuel R. Spencer and Barbara Tuchman address the topic in a similar way in that they give an explanation of the Zimmermann Telegram and its contribution to the United States entry into the war. Other works on the Zimmermann Telegram from 2006 to 2013 share similar aspects as the 1950's writings, but they consider a different narrative of the Zimmerman Telegram such as Britain's role in decoding and delivery of the Telegram to the United States.

Decisions for War, 1917: The Laconia Sinking and the Zimmermann Telegram as Key Factors in the Public Reaction against Germany written by Samuel R. Spencer and published in 1953, argues that the Zimmerman telegram was influential to the war in its own right but also in a pairing with the *Laconia* sinking.¹ Spencer, an American politician and World War II veteran, argued that with the scare of the luxury liner *Laconia* sinking due to unrestricted submarine warfare from the Germans and it is just a few hours earlier than the Zimmerman Telegram

¹ Samuel R. Spencer Jr., *Decisions for War, 1917: The Laconia Sinking and the Zimmermann Telegram as Key Factors in the Public Reaction against Germany* (Rindge, NH: Richard R. Smith Publisher, 1953).

caused a bigger uproar in the American presses. Since the *Lusitania* had been sunk in the same fashion and the Telegram, of which was originally sent January 15th, 1917, the American people were in a panic.² With the Telegram having the decision on which it declared that Germany would continue unrestricted submarine warfare a month prior to the *Laconia* was infuriating.

In a different perspective, *The Zimmermann Telegram* by Barbara W. Tuchman, published in 1958, essentially argues in a similar tone.³ Tuchman, an American and World historian, believed that instead of being a pair of events that pulled the United States into the Great War, it was just the powerful work of the Zimmermann Telegram. She writes “In itself the Zimmermann telegram was only a pebble on the long road of history. But a pebble can kill a Goliath, and this one killed the American illusion that we could go about our business happily separate from other nations.”⁴ Exaggerating the amount of influence the Zimmerman Telegram had on the United States decision to enter the Great War.

The most influential of the two is The Zimmermann Telegram, although it was published after Decisions for War. This is in part because Tuchman focuses mainly on the Zimmerman Telegram. She traces the Telegram from the minute it arrived in the hands of the British to when it was in the pages in the American newspapers. Her monograph is used by the works in 2006, 2007, and 2013 as the foundation or background for their arguments, while Tuchman herself uses Spencer’s work as a foundation.

The monographs in 1953 and 1958 both speak on the telegram as if it was some kind of murder mystery. How did the British intercept the message and decode it so well and so fast? In

² The *Lusitania* was a Cunard ocean liner sunk by German submarines in unrestricted warfare on 15 May 1915. The liner sunk within twenty minutes and killed 1,198 passengers including 128 Americans.

³ Barbara Tuchman, *The Zimmermann Telegram* (New York: Viking Press, 1958).

⁴ Tuchman, *The Zimmermann Telegram*, 200.

Decisions for War, Spencer writes that the Englishmen obtained two German code books that allowed them to decipher the coded Zimmerman Telegram with ease.⁵ Tuchman plays on the deciphering by giving a more detailed account of the event saying that the British intelligence deciphered the code a little less easily, but still with haste. Her monograph also refers to how the British Intelligence were not sure how to send the note to the United States without it seeming suspicious because the United States did not know that the British were intercepting mail. Spencer also comments on Britain's reluctance, asking why such a delay but ultimately refers to them as clever for the timing of the telegram being "indeed perfect, but only on accident."⁶ The British in Spencer's eyes were strategic, but was it on purpose? Others still wonder why the British took so long to turn over the telegram?

A journalist by the name of John Cornelius wrote a short article, "The Zimmermann Telegram: Palestine, the Balfour Declaration and Why America Entered the Great War" (1999) theorizing that the Zimmerman telegram was not written by Zimmerman himself, but perhaps British Intelligence or at least was planted into the mind of Arthur Zimmerman.⁷ Cornelius states that Zionism in Britain caused the British to make a telegram that would get the United States into the War. In 1903 Britain gained six Zionist members to its parliament, some of which were still in power during the Great War. With the thought of Zionism, Britain believed that the United States entry would be their ticket to an alliance with Palestine.⁸ The information given has not been stated before by any world historian, it is hard to believe. Cornelius displays his

⁵ Spencer, *Decisions for War*, 57.

⁶ Spencer, *Decisions for War*, 69.

⁷ John Cornelius, "The Zimmermann Telegram: Palestine, the Balfour Declaration and Why America Entered the Great War," *The Washington Report on Middle Affairs*, Vol. 18, Iss. 7 (November 1999). 2

⁸ Cornelius, "The Zimmermann Telegram," 3

own disbelief toward the end of his article stating, “It has certainly caused me to sharply reconsider historical views I have held since childhood,”⁹

Peter Freeman wrote similarly in his article “The Zimmermann Telegram Revisited: A Reconciliation of the Primary Sources” in 2006. Freeman looks into each of the primary sources; such as journals from the men decoding the Telegram and documents from ambassadors and analyzes in comparison to other writings such as Tuchman’s work. He argues that the Zimmerman telegram happened completely different compared to what Tuchman and Spencer had initially said. Initially he is just describing each of the codes the Germans were using during the war and how Britain could have possibly obtained one of the code books. Freeman then moves on to describes the possible events in “Room 40 O.B.” Room 40 O.B. stands for the 40th room in a building in British Intelligence referred to as the “Old Building.” It was there that British Intelligence obtained and deciphered the Zimmermann Telegram. The way people think of this major push to the Great War has changed. Freeman goes on to discuss the different copies of the Zimmerman Telegram in “Room 40.” He comes to the conclusion while assessing each and every one of the different copies that the one sent to the United States is not the original and is also incomplete in de-coding. Freeman’s argument furthers the shift in narrative of the Zimmerman Telegram.

In another article written in 2007, “Zimmermann Telegram: The Original Draft” by Joachim von zur Gathen, a German Mathematician and Cryptographer, argued that the Zimmermann Telegram had to be from Germany since it was coded with “0075 or 13040” and the Germans only had four ways to send it out due to British military cutting their direct line.¹⁰

⁹ Cornelius, “The Zimmermann Telegram,” 4

¹⁰ Joachim von zur Gathen, “Zimmerman Telegram: The Original Draft,” *Cryptologia* 31, no.2 (January 2007) 12.

He also agrees that Britain had every intention on sending the Telegram to the United States and that it changed the United States view of the German people. Gathen focuses on the coding and the delivery of the telegram. Both Cornelius and Gathen bring about a change in the focus of this event of it being about Britain being the heroes or strategic allies to Britain being a manipulator to the war.

Another aspect of Cornelius' article is that it brings about an investigation of the code used for the Telegram. Code breaking is a key factor to the Zimmerman Telegram. Without Britain having those code books the telegram code have been sent off to Mexico without anyone knowing. Spencer and Tuchman bathe the British in this holy light. They were the superheroes in a sense. Somewhere in the passing of eighty-two years, Britain was looked at differently. In the passing of seven and eight more years, the British were not looked at as heroes or villains, just the country that got the United States into the war.

Saul Kelly, an International historian, writes in his 2013 article "Room 47: The Persian Prelude to the Zimmermann Telegram" that Britain sent the Telegram only partially un-coded.¹¹ Kelly suggests that the British only had one code book in their possession and that they concocted the way they obtained the other code book. Essentially, with them only sending part of the Telegram deciphered. He also analyzes Freeman and Gathen's work. With Freeman, Kelly agrees with his statement of British sending "misinformation."¹² He also compares of Gathen's code analysis to Freeman's. Kelly acknowledges both as great and essential works but believes there is more to be said. Though he mentions Gathen, Kelly does not go much further into his analysis of the Zimmerman Telegram. Instead he builds off of Freeman's writing in which he

¹¹ Saul Kelly, "Room 47: The Persian Prelude to the Zimmermann Telegram," *Cryptologia* 37, No.1 (January 2013).

¹² Kelly, "Room 47," 1.

focuses on the story of how the British obtained the codebooks and questioning its authenticity by focusing on Persia.¹³ Kelly assess the codes in both Freeman's and Gathen's works then draws in different secondary sources such as Tuchman's monograph and B. J. Hendrick's *The Life and Letters of Walter H. Page* (the London ambassador).

Each work provides its own narrative of the Zimmermann Telegram. Some of the works such as Freeman, Gathen, and Kelly use each other as foundations to their own arguments. Tuchman and Spencer used what they had in the 1950s to evaluate the event that took place thirty years prior. As new developments emerged such as letter and journal entries of the people in "Room 40 O.B." gave more structure and new perspectives to the narrative of the Telegram. Britain went from being the unsuspected hero to possible manipulator. With the enlightenment of these new perspectives (and with 2013 being the most recent ones) more monographs and articles are being spurred into existence. Although these works cover a good deal of information on the Zimmerman Telegram there are still unanswered questions. What were the real passageways of the Telegram? Did Britain really only have one code book? What if it was all fabricated by Britain to gain an ally in the War that was draining the European hemisphere?

¹³ It is not stated in Spencer's *Decision for War* that the codebook was found in Persia. In fact, Spencer gives a very vague description on how both codebooks were found. Freeman and Kelly argue that it was during the Persian Prelude.

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I hereby upon my word of honor have not given nor received unauthorized help on this assignment.

A Telegram Waylaid. The first message of the morning watch plopped out of the pneumatic tube into the wire basket with no more premonitory rattle than usual. The duty officer at British Naval Intelligence twisted open the cartridge and examined the German wireless intercept it contained without noting anything of unusual significance. Hall understood well enough why Zimmermann had sent the telegram. In case America should answer the U-boat threat by declaring war on Germany, he wanted to arrange enough trouble for her to keep her busy on her own side of the Atlantic. The literature about the Zimmermann tele-gram is substantial, but besides Nassua's Master's thesis [37], none of this additional material seems to have been published. Section 3, titled German Options for Encryption and Transmission, presents the various options of the German foreign office for encryption and transmission. Section 4, titled From PleÅ to Washington and Mexico City, discusses some of the background and how the telegram was sent via US diplomatic channels. Figures 1 through 3 show the hand-written final draft of the notorious Zimmermann telegram. It contains an additional message to von Bernstorff explaining the instructions given to von Eckardt. This addition was never sent and is not mentioned in the literature. This article presents the original draft of the Zimmermann telegram from 1917 in facsimile. Its various annotations provide interesting insights, such as the idea to promise California to Japan and instructions concerning transmission and encryption. Further documents clarify how the telegram was sent and put various alternatives suggested in the literature to rest. The political background and fallout in Germany are discussed, as well. The Zimmermann Telegram. Buy Now. Many Germans had strong feelings for their ancestral homeland and were very proud of their German culture and heritage. Copy of Zimmerman Telegram after it had been decoded. (Courtesy of U.S. National Archives) | Source. Telegram From U.S. Ambassador to Great Britain, Walter Page to President Wilson informing the President of the Zimmerman Telegram (Courtesy U.S. National Archives) | Source. Foreign Minister Arthur Zimmerman. German Foreign Minister Arthur Zimmerman (Public Domain photo courtesy of Wikipedia) | Source. British Intelligence Taps the American Embassy's Private Telegraph Line.