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**The Zimmermann Telegram:  
Diplomacy, Intelligence and the American Entry  
into World War I**

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THE TEMPTATION



*The Dallas Morning News, 2 March 1917.*

If the success or failure of wartime diplomacy can be measured by the number of countries joining one's own or the hostile alliance, Arthur Zimmermann should not be remembered as a competent foreign secretary.<sup>1</sup> During his short term of office (25 November 1916 to 5 August 1917) he failed to secure a single ally for Germany, while roughly twenty powers on three continents joined the *entente*. During Zimmermann's tenure, the "Great European War" became a world war, much to Germany's disadvantage.

Zimmermann's name is closely associated with his frustrated effort to form a German-Mexican alliance against the United States in January 1917. The notorious "Zimmermann telegram" offered German support to Mexico "to reconquer the lost territory in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona," in an effort to tie up American forces on the U.S. southern border. However, British naval intelligence intercepted the telegram and turned it over to the U.S. embassy in London, and the text of the note was published by the American press on 1 March 1917. From the American perspective, Zimmermann's proposal appeared to be a direct German threat to the United States.

Literature on the Zimmermann telegram has long been an American preserve and is linked closely to the debate on the justification of America's participation in the Great War. For President Woodrow Wilson and his supporters, the aim of going to war in 1917 was "to make the world safe for democracy."<sup>2</sup> Later, however, the president's failures at the Paris peace conference in 1919 and the totalitarian backlash of the 1920s and 1930s led many Americans to question the wisdom of going to war. During the interwar period, revisionist historians like Walter Millis, Horace Peterson and Charles Transill strongly condemned Wilson's decision to join the Allies because, according to them, no vital U.S. interests had been at stake and many American lives were sacrificed without achieving tangible results. The revisionists perceived the Zimmermann telegram primarily as one of many British propaganda coups, skillfully employed to drag the United States into the war for the sake of securing questionable Allied war aims.

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<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank the Fritz Thyssen Foundation for funding this project with a generous one-year scholarship, and Roger Chickering of the BMW Center for German and European Studies, Georgetown University, for his exceptional support.

<sup>2</sup> In the presidential war message to Congress on 2 April 1917.

While American participation in World War I generated much controversy during the interwar period, after World War II criticism of President Wilson subsided. On the other hand, historians began to view Imperial Germany's diplomacy more critically. Zimmermann, who headed the Foreign Office when the United States entered the war, received particular attention by American authors. In 1953, Samuel Spencer published the first monograph on the Zimmermann telegram, which amounted to a frontal assault on the revisionists. Spencer concluded that "he [the Kaiser] would have attempted the same type of politico-military penetration which Hitler later effected."<sup>3</sup> Hence, according to Spencer, Wilson's decision for war was fully justified.

Five years later, in 1958, Barbara Tuchman published what became the most influential book on the Zimmermann telegram to date. Tuchman concludes that Germany pursued an aggressive, long-term policy of bogging down the United States in Mexico, and that the telegram, demonstrating this policy, was the primary and justifiable reason for President Woodrow Wilson's decision to enter the war.<sup>4</sup> Tuchman's argument later found strong support from Friedrich Katz, who maintains in various works that Germany had pursued imperialistic objectives in Mexico since the turn of the century and, from August 1914, "vigorously sought to provoke a Mexican-American war" to divert American attention from Europe.<sup>5</sup> While some authors argue that Tuchman exaggerates the importance of the Zimmermann telegram,<sup>6</sup> her and Katz' findings have strongly influenced historians.<sup>7</sup>

Tuchman and Katz examined Germany's alliance proposal to Mexico primarily as an element of diplomatic relations between Germany, Mexico and the United States. However, since Tuchman and Katz, scholars have argued that the telegram must be

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<sup>3</sup> Samuel R. Spencer, Jr., *Decision for War, 1917: The Laconia Sinking and the Zimmermann Telegram* (Ridge, N.H.: R.R. Smith, 1953), p. 108.

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Tuchman, *The Zimmermann Telegram*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985), pp. viii, 88-106, 199.

<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Katz, *The Secret War in Mexico: Europe, the United States and the Mexican Revolution* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981), p. 50. See also idem, *The Life and Times of Pancho Villa* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 664.

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Ross Gregory, *The Origins of American Intervention in the First World War* (New York: Norton, 1971), p. 156.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Reinhard Doerries, *Imperial Challenge: Ambassador Count Bernstorff and German-American Relations, 1908-1917* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), pp. 225 and 361, n.b. 161; David M. Esposito, *The Legacy of Woodrow Wilson: American War Aims in World War I* (London, Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996), p. 135.

considered in a broader political context in order to grasp fully its historical significance. As historian Martin Nassua suggests, the Zimmermann telegram cannot be understood on an interstate level alone. According to Nassua, it was as much a result of an internal power struggle between Germany's civilian and military leaders over the conduct of war, as it was an attempt to extend German influence to the Western hemisphere.<sup>8</sup>

Two other elements of the Zimmermann telegram merit attention. One is its public perception in the United States. While historians have written extensively on President Wilson's reaction to the telegram,<sup>9</sup> much less attention has been directed to the American domestic context in which the telegram was perceived. It is traditionally assumed that the publication of the Zimmermann telegram had a strong impact on American public opinion in that it conditioned the country for war, but there still exists no scientific study to corroborate or refute this assumption.<sup>10</sup> Secondly, the British angle has not received the attention it deserves. British naval intelligence, the agency which intercepted the telegram, was long viewed as a mere executive branch of the British government, with no agenda of its own. Yet, historians have demonstrated that the British secret services in the early twentieth century were highly politicized, very independent, and often pursued their own political goals.<sup>11</sup> These findings beg the question whether the role of British naval intelligence extended beyond merely intercepting the telegram.

To date, historians have relied chiefly on the records of the U.S. State Department and the German Foreign Office for research on the Zimmermann telegram, but recently a significant amount of new primary sources on the subject has become accessible. Among these are the papers of Hans Arthur von Kemnitz, the German Foreign Office staff member who invented the Mexican alliance scheme;<sup>12</sup> British naval intelligence records

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<sup>8</sup> Martin Nassua, in his published master thesis, "*Gemeinsame Kriegführung. Gemeinsamer Friedensschluß.*" *Das Zimmermann-Telegramm vom 13. Januar 1917 und der Eintritt der USA in den 1. Weltkrieg* (Frankfurt/M.: Peter Lang, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> One of the best studies remains Arthur Link, *Wilson: Campaigns for Progressivism and Peace, 1916-1917* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965).

<sup>10</sup> Friedhelm Koopmann, *Diplomatie und Reichsinteresse: das Geheimdienstkalkül in der deutschen Amerikapolitik 1914-1917* (Frankfurt/M.: Peter Lang, 1990), p. 410, n.b. 428: "Eine zuverlässige wirkungsgeschichtliche Untersuchung der Zimmermann-Depesche... steht noch aus."

<sup>11</sup> See the seminal study of Christopher Andrew, *Her Majesty's Secret Service: the Making of the British Intelligence Community* (New York: Viking, 1985).

<sup>12</sup> The papers of Hans Arthur von Kemnitz, Hoover Institute, Stanford University, California.

dealing with the interception and handling of the message;<sup>13</sup> and hitherto classified U.S. documents which shed more light on the activities of the American embassy in London regarding the Zimmermann telegram.<sup>14</sup>

The broadening of the research focus over the past years, plus the availability of new primary sources, warrant a fresh look at the subject that must go beyond an analysis of diplomatic relations in the World War I era. The historical importance of the Zimmermann telegram can only be assessed by exploring simultaneously its German origins, the objectives of British intelligence and its impact on the United States. This paper seeks to integrate these three aspects. The first part examines the rise of Arthur Zimmermann as secretary of the Foreign Office, and the German domestic forces behind the Mexican alliance scheme; the second part explores the role of British naval intelligence as the agency responsible for intercepting and handling the telegram; and the third part determines to what extent its publication in the United States convinced Americans of the necessity of going to war against Germany.

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As a commoner Arthur Zimmermann was an unlikely candidate for the post of state secretary in one of Germany's aristocratic strongholds, the Imperial Foreign Office. Even getting into the diplomatic service was not easy. One of the few avenues open to a non-aristocrat was the dull consular service which Zimmermann joined in the mid-1890s. His first and only official posting abroad brought him to China, considered a political backwater at the time, where he served as vice-consul and consul in Shanghai, Canton and Tientsin from 1898 until 1901.<sup>15</sup> On his way back to Germany, he crossed the United States from San Francisco to New York, this being his only sojourn in the Western hemisphere.<sup>16</sup> Back in Berlin, Zimmermann rapidly scaled the hierarchy in spite of his modest background: in 1905, he was appointed counselor in the important political

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<sup>13</sup> Public Record Office [henceforth PRO], London, HW 3 and HW 8 series, "Government Code and Cypher School."

<sup>14</sup> National Archives and Records Administration [henceforth NARA], Washington, D.C., State Department, Office of the Counselor. Four important documents are reproduced by David Kahn, "Edward Bell and his Zimmermann Telegram Memoranda," *Intelligence and National Security*, vol. 14, no. 3 (autumn 1999), pp. 143-159.

<sup>15</sup> For Zimmermann's career in the Foreign Office see Reichsamt des Innern (ed.), *Handbuch für das Deutsche Reich* (Berlin: Reichsdruckerei, 1871-1936).

<sup>16</sup> James Gerard, *My Four Years in Germany* (New York: George H. Doran Co., 1917), p. 423.

division, and in 1911 he became under-secretary of state. However, there were clear limits to the ambitions of a non-aristocrat in the Imperial Foreign Office. When the post of state secretary became vacant in 1912, Zimmermann decided not to apply for the job on account of his weakness in foreign languages and his inability, as a commoner, to hold his own in Berlin society.<sup>17</sup>

The secret of Zimmermann's success was hard work and unquestioned loyalty to his superiors. Due to his background, he could afford an independence of mind to a lesser extent than his aristocratic peers, and having held only a few insignificant posts in China, Zimmermann tended to see international relations in a simplistic and unimaginative way.<sup>18</sup> Although occasionally assertive and determined, his main concern was to execute wishes from above and avoid isolation from colleagues and superiors. As his predecessor at the helm of the Foreign Office, Gottlieb von Jagow, remarked: "...he always swam with the stream and with those who shouted loudest."<sup>19</sup> These traits were clearly a disadvantage when Zimmermann was called upon to make an independent decision.

It was a political crisis that propelled Zimmermann to the top of the Foreign Office. In late 1916, the German leadership was deeply divided over the question of the conduct of war. A growing number of officials advocated the declaration of unrestricted submarine war in which German submarines would sink any merchant vessel headed for or coming from British, French and Italian seaports, in an attempt to hurt Allied trade. The measure would be primarily directed at Great Britain which the German leadership considered the most critical country in the enemy alliance. One of the main perils of unrestricted submarine warfare would be that it did not distinguish between neutral and enemy vessels and was thus bound to provoke protests from neutral countries, especially from the United States which engaged in considerable trade with Britain.<sup>20</sup>

The German chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, and his foreign secretary, Gottlieb von Jagow, were acutely aware that unrestricted submarine warfare

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<sup>17</sup> Lamar Cecil, *The German Diplomatic Service, 1871-1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 317.

<sup>18</sup> Bernhard von Bülow, *Denkwürdigkeiten*, (4 vols., Berlin: Ullstein, 1930-31), iii, p. 159.

<sup>19</sup> Von Jagow to Bernstorff, 2 September 1919, as quoted in Johann v. Bernstorff, *Memoirs of Count Bernstorff* (New York: Random House, 1936), p. 165.

<sup>20</sup> For the debate over unrestricted submarine warfare within the German leadership see Karl E. Birnbaum, *Peace Moves and U-Boat Warfare: A Study of Imperial Germany's Policy towards the United States April 18, 1916 - January 9, 1917* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1958).

might provoke an American declaration of war and advised caution. But for the military, unable to break the trench war deadlock on the western front, the prospect of striking directly at Great Britain was tempting. The chief advocates of unrestricted submarine warfare included the navy and the Supreme Army Command - or third OHL - under Field Marshall Paul von Hindenburg and his quarter-master general, General Erich Ludendorff. Hindenburg and Ludendorff were quite aware that the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare would probably mean war with the United States, but this made little difference as, in their eyes, the Allied war effort already hinged largely on American exports. They also believed the United States would be unable to intervene militarily before Germany could knock out France and Britain, and that the submarines would prevent any American troops from crossing the Atlantic.

The Supreme Army Command tried to coax the political leadership into accepting unrestricted submarine warfare. Ludendorff interfered repeatedly in the political decision-making process in this regard. As a result of the military's continuous meddling in civilian affairs, Foreign Secretary von Jagow exasperatedly resigned his post on 22 November 1916. Ludendorff now pushed for Zimmermann, who was considered more pliable than Jagow, as a replacement.<sup>21</sup> Plainly, Zimmermann's natural inclination to obey orders made him an ideal candidate in the eyes of the military. Upon Ludendorff's recommendation, Zimmermann assumed the post of state secretary for foreign affairs on 25 November 1916.

Yet, Ludendorff's assumption that Zimmermann would follow him blindly, proved misplaced. Constitutionally, Zimmermann's immediate superior was the chancellor, not the third OHL. When Ludendorff tried to replace Bethmann Hollweg to clear the way for unrestricted submarine warfare, Zimmermann backed the chancellor and tried to restrain the general. Faced with such unexpected civilian opposition, Ludendorff declared in December 1916 that he and Field-Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, the nominal head of the third OHL, would resign unless they had their way. A crown

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<sup>21</sup> Lerchenfeld to Hertling, 24 November 1916, in Ernst Deuerlein (ed.), *Briefwechsel Hertling-Lerchenfeld 1912-1917: Dienstliche Privatkorrespondenz zwischen dem bayerischen Ministerpräsidenten Georg Graf von Hertling und dem bayerischen Gesandten in Berlin Hugo Graf von und zu Lerchenfeld* (2 vols., Boppard a. Rhein: Harald Boldt, 1973), ii, p. 772.



council - a meeting of the country's top leadership - was scheduled to deliberate the matter.<sup>22</sup>

During the following days, Ludendorff skillfully outmanoeuvred the civilians by taking advantage of the fact that Germany's civilian government and military headquarters were at this time geographically separated. While the chancellor, the ministries and the parliament remained in Berlin, the military leadership had transferred to the imperial residence of castle Pless in the Prussian province of Silesia, a multiple-hour train ride away from the German capital. In late December 1916, Ludendorff asked Zimmermann to come and see him at Pless to discuss "important questions of our times."<sup>23</sup> Zimmermann complied and met with Ludendorff for a few days in early January 1917.<sup>24</sup> No records exist of the ensuing discussions, but in all likelihood Ludendorff gave Zimmermann a thorough dressing down regarding his failure to support unrestricted submarine warfare. On 6 January the foreign secretary returned to Berlin; he would not attend the crown council in Pless. Consequently, when Bethmann Hollweg traveled to Pless three days later to discuss unrestricted submarine warfare, he had to face the military without the presence and support of the head of the Foreign Office.

On 9 January the crown council convened. Bethmann Hollweg was completely isolated and offered only half-hearted resistance to the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare. The council scheduled unrestricted submarine warfare to begin on 1 February. The crown council was a major success for the Supreme Army Command but Ludendorff still felt betrayed by Zimmermann's "disloyalty." On 11 January the general let it be known that he regarded the foreign secretary as dishonest, that it was impossible to work with him, and that it would not be long before he "demanded his head."<sup>25</sup>

Zimmermann now found himself in an extremely unpleasant situation. While the chancellor's star was visibly waning, the foreign secretary had incurred the wrath of powerful third OHL. Obviously, he had backed the wrong horse. The psychological

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<sup>22</sup> Martin Kitchen, *The Silent Dictatorship: The Politics of the German High Command under Hindenburg and Ludendorff, 1916-1918* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1976), p. 117

<sup>23</sup> Telegram by Lersner, Pless, to Zimmermann, Berlin, 27 December 1916, NARA, microcopy T 137, roll 88, German Foreign Ministry Archives 1867-1920 [henceforth GFM], Deutschland 122 Nr. 2m, AS 4780. How far power had already gravitated towards the military, is demonstrated by the fact that Zimmermann was to visit Ludendorff rather than vice versa.

<sup>24</sup> *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 7 January 1917, second morning edition.

<sup>25</sup> Kitchen, *Silent Dictatorship*, p. 122.

implications for someone like Zimmermann, who felt most comfortable when in complete accord with his superiors, must not be underestimated. To prevent his ousting and to detach his own fate from the chancellor's, Zimmermann quickly had to find a way to prove his loyalty to the military and to demonstrate his support for unrestricted submarine warfare, preferably before its resumption on 1 February. It is in this particular environment of distrust, intrigue and tilt towards military rule in Germany that the fateful "Zimmermann telegram" was concocted.

After his meeting with Ludendorff at Pless, Zimmermann likely had few illusions as to who was now in charge in Germany. Determined to realign himself with the military leadership, the state secretary convened a meeting with his advisers immediately after learning the outcome of the crown council on 9 January.<sup>26</sup> Zimmermann's closest advisers at the Foreign Office at the time were Hans Arthur von Kemnitz, counselor (*Referent*) on Latin American and East Asian affairs, and Count Adolph von Montgelas, counselor on Mexican and North American affairs. Generally speaking, Kemnitz was a conservative Prussian whose views conformed closely to those of the military, while Montgelas was a Bavarian of French descent with a liberal outlook.<sup>27</sup>

There are many indications that it was Kemnitz who invented the Mexican alliance scheme. Shortly after the publication of the Zimmermann telegram, Bethmann Hollweg's secretary recorded in his diary: "*Das hat Kemnitz gemacht, dieser phantastische Idiot...*"<sup>28</sup> Zimmermann himself later stated that the telegram had originated "in the brain of some minor official of the German Foreign Office,"<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> There is no reason to doubt Zimmermann's later statement to the effect that the telegram was conceived and drafted immediately after 9 January, and in anticipation of America's joining the war. See Arthur Zimmermann, "Fürst Bülow's Kritik am Auswärtigen Amt," in Friedrich Thimme (ed.), *Front wider Bülow: Staatsmänner, Diplomaten und Forscher zu seinen Denkwürdigkeiten* (Munich: F. Bruckmann, 1931), p. 234.

<sup>27</sup> See Kemnitz' thoughts on the role of the army in German society: Hans Arthur von Kemnitz, "Are we liberated?" May 1945, the papers of Hans Arthur von Kemnitz, Hoover Institute, Stanford University. Regarding Montgelas, U.S. Ambassador Gerard wrote shortly after his return to Washington in 1917: "Montgelas was an extremely agreeable man and I think at all times had correctly predicted the attitude of America and had been against acts of frightfulness, such as the torpedoing of the Lusitania and the resumption of ruthless submarine war. I am sure that a gentleman like Montgelas undertook with great reluctance to carry out his orders..." Gerard, *My four Years*, p. 379. Montgelas also had an American wife.

<sup>28</sup> Karl Erdmann (ed.), *Kurt Riezler: Tagebücher, Aufsätze, Dokumente* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Rupprecht, 1972), entry for 4 March 1917.

<sup>29</sup> George Sylvester Viereck, *Spreading Germs of Hate, With A Foreword by Colonel Edward M. House* (New York: Horace Liveright, 1930), pp. 112-114.

apparently a reference to his former counselor on Latin American and East Asian affairs. Kemnitz himself admitted his authorship of the Zimmermann telegram in the press after the war.<sup>30</sup> Montgelas went along with the plan despite strong reservations.<sup>31</sup>

Kemnitz composed the text of the alliance proposal in record time. On 11 January he submitted the initial draft to Montgelas who signed it the following day. Zimmermann approved the final version on 13 January.<sup>32</sup> The Foreign Office planned to send the document to Mexico by long-range submarine, but this proved impractical because of the time lag. Hence, on 16 January the text was cabled to Count Johann von Bernstorff, Germany's ambassador to Washington, with instructions to relay it to Heinrich von Eckardt, the German minister to Mexico. A translation of the original version reads:

“We intend to begin unrestricted submarine warfare on the first of February. We shall endeavor in spite of this to keep the United States 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 a consent on our part for Mexico to reconquer the lost territory in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona. The settlement in detail is left to you.

Your Excellency will inform the president [of Mexico] of the above most secretly as soon as the outbreak of war with the United States 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 unrestricted employment of our submarines now offers the prospect of compelling England to make peace within a few months.

signed Zimmermann.”<sup>33</sup>

Historians traditionally explain the Zimmermann telegram as the culmination of a long-term German policy to challenge the United States in the Western hemisphere by pitting Mexico, and possibly Japan, against Washington. In view of Mexican military weakness vis-à-vis the United States, and the existing Japanese alliance with the *entente*

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<sup>30</sup> *The New York Times*, 15 May 1920. In all likelihood, the idea of approaching Japan also originated with Kemnitz, the “expert” on East Asian affairs.

<sup>31</sup> The Austrian ambassador reported strong reservations to the plan from Foreign Office department chiefs, Katz, *Secret War*, p. 353.

<sup>32</sup> See signatures and dates in the margins of the original draft: Zimmermann to Eckardt, Mexico City, via Bernstorff, Washington, D.C., 13 January 1917, NARA, microcopy T 149, roll 378, GFM, Mexico 16 secr., A.S. 162I.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* For the German text see appendix. This translation is based on Tuchman, *The Zimmermann Telegram*, p. 146, and Koopmann, *Diplomatie*, p. 292. See also Koopmann's criticism of Tuchman's translation as slightly misleading (“großzügige angelsächsische Übersetzungspraxis”), *ibid.*

powers, Zimmermann's alliance proposal was regarded alternatively as an expression of hubris or incompetence.<sup>34</sup> But against the backdrop of German domestic politics, the telegram appears less absurd.<sup>35</sup> Ludendorff had criticised Zimmermann's reluctance to endorse unrestricted submarine warfare. With the telegram, the foreign secretary proved not only his unequivocal support for and faith in this measure, he also demonstrated to the military that he was planning ahead for the eventuality of an American entry into the war. Zimmermann thought in domestic, not in international categories. He wanted to repair his damaged relationship with Ludendorff; whether a German alliance with Mexico was realistic, was of secondary importance to the foreign secretary.

There is no reason to doubt the conclusion drawn by several historians that Zimmermann did not inform Bethmann Hollweg of the telegram.<sup>36</sup> The clearest evidence of this comes from the chancellor's secretary. On 4 March 1917 the latter wrote in his diary: "What rubbish concerning Mexico... and the chancellor has approved the issue only orally." However, shortly afterwards he crossed out the second part of the paragraph, likely after learning that the chancellor had not been informed at all.<sup>37</sup> Initially, the third OHL was not notified of the matter either. For one, Hindenburg and Ludendorff were not in Berlin, and Zimmermann did not see them until his return to Pless on 25 January.<sup>38</sup> From the foreign secretary's perspective, it also made sense to wait until he had something to show for before meeting with the choleric Ludendorff. But it would have been Zimmermann's constitutional duty to consult his direct superior, Bethmann Hollweg. While Zimmermann could expect retroactive consent from the third OHL, his bypassing of the chancellor was a clear legal and confidential breach, demonstrating his determination to realign himself with the military. In this endeavour he proved successful.

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<sup>34</sup> See Tuchmann, *The Zimmermann Telegram*, passim. In the same vein, see Katz, *Secret War*, pp. 350-378; Esposito, *Legacy of Woodrow Wilson*, p. 135.

<sup>35</sup> See also Nassua, *Gemeinsame Kriegführung*, p. 145.

<sup>36</sup> Katz, *Secret War*, p. 352; Nassua, *Gemeinsame Kriegführung*, p. 33.

<sup>37</sup> Erdmann, *Riezler: Tagebücher*, entry for 4 March 1917. Apparently, historians have hitherto overlooked this reference to the chancellor's oral approval, and its subsequent cancellation, at the bottom of the page.

<sup>38</sup> Rudolf Valentini, *Kaiser und Kabinettschef. Nach eigenen Aufzeichnungen und dem Briefwechsel des wirklichen Geheimen Rats Rudolf von Valentini dargestellt von Bernhard Schwertfeger* (Oldenbourg: G. Stalling, 1931), p. 149.

In late January, the civilian and military elites of Imperial Germany and its allies gathered at Pless to celebrate Emperor Wilhelm II's birthday (27 January). Both Zimmermann and Ludendorff attended, this being their first personal meeting after the dispatch of the Mexican alliance proposal on 16 January. Apparently, Zimmermann seized this occasion to inform Ludendorff of the telegram, and the general encouraged the foreign secretary to proceed with the project; on 5 February the Foreign Office followed up the original telegram of 16 January with another, instructing Minister Eckardt to enter immediately into alliance negotiations with Mexican President Venustiano Carranza, rather than wait for an American declaration of war. The Mexican leader was also to be encouraged to approach the Japanese with a view to include them into the alliance.<sup>39</sup> Zimmermann's instructions of 5 February can be seen as a direct response to Ludendorff's embracing of the Mexican alliance scheme. Buoyed and emboldened by the general's approval, the foreign secretary was now only too eager to work towards his new master's wishes.<sup>40</sup>

Zimmermann was primarily motivated by a desire to mend relations with the Supreme Army Command. But what role Mexico, and the Mexican alliance proposal, played in the political calculations of the Foreign Office, also warrants brief discussion.

The most relevant political event in Mexican history during the early twentieth century was the revolution which began in 1910/11 with the deposition and exile of President Porfirio Díaz who had ruled the country with an iron fist since 1876. During World War I, Venustiano Carranza emerged as Mexico's "First Chief," but throughout his tenure he had to deal with armed opposition from Francisco "Pancho" Villa in the north and Emilio Zapata in the south, as well as military intervention by the United States in 1916/17.

The revolution involved significant bloodshed and internal insecurity, and given the presence of a sizeable German colony in the country, German policy-makers could

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<sup>39</sup> State Secretary [Zimmermann], Berlin, to Eckardt, Mexico City, via embassy Stockholm, 5 February 1917, NARA, microcopy T 149, roll 378, GFM, Mexico 16 secr., attachment to A.S. 162 III. Kemnitz drafted the telegram on 4 February, while Montgelas and Zimmermanns signed it one day later.

<sup>40</sup> On 3 February the United States had broken off diplomatic relations with Berlin in response to the German declaration of unrestricted submarine war. This step took Zimmermann by surprise and removed any constraints on German foreign policy towards the United States. See Doerries, *Imperial Challenge*, p. 227.

not remain indifferent to Mexican domestic affairs. One action Berlin took was the dispatch of German warships to Mexican waters to calm and protect German citizens. This and other measures normally originated with the then-German minister in Mexico City, Admiral Paul von Hintze, who witnessed the atrocities of the revolution first hand.<sup>41</sup> In his capacity as under-secretary of state for foreign affairs, Zimmermann had communicated Hintze's requests to the Admiralty Staff.<sup>42</sup> During this period a number of German officials supported the idea of U.S. intervention in Mexico, but they were not motivated by a desire to drain American resources there. Much rather, they hoped that U.S. troops would stabilize the country and protect Germany's citizens and material interests in Mexico.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, Hintze warned strongly against political involvement with any of the warring factions as this might seriously endanger the property and lives of German residents in Mexico.<sup>44</sup>

Following the outbreak of war in Europe, the German warships off the Mexican coast were withdrawn and Berlin's interest and leverage in Mexico declined. Carranza, on the other hand, became attracted to Germany as a counterweight to growing U.S. influence. In 1916, several semi-official Mexican emissaries appeared in Europe, proposing closer German-Mexican ties, including requests for German financial aid, arms and a defensive alliance after the end of the European war.<sup>45</sup> However, prior to 1917 Berlin rejected all overtures in this regard. In September 1916, the Foreign Office informed the German minister in Switzerland to discontinue negotiations with one of Carranza's emissaries for the following reason: "Due to political considerations we have to avoid everything that could be construed in the United States as direct or indirect support by the Imperial Government for Mexico's anti-American tendencies."<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Hintze, Mexico City, to Foreign Office, Berlin, 10 February 1913, Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv [henceforth BA-MA], RM 5/5823, p. 26.

<sup>42</sup> Zimmermann to chief of Admiralty Staff, 20 January 1914, *ibid.*, p. 374.

<sup>43</sup> Report by commander of *SMS Nürnberg*, *Fregattenkapitän* v. Schönberg, Mazatlan, to His Majesty the Emperor, 21 February 1914, BA-MA, RM 5/5824, pp. 217ff.

<sup>44</sup> Top secret, Hintze, Mexico City, to Foreign Office, 20 October 1912, BA-MA, RM 5/5807, pp. 10f.

<sup>45</sup> See, for instance, treaty proposal of Col. Gonzalo Enrile, Berlin, no date [March or April 1916], NARA, microcopy T 141, roll 20, GFM, Mexico 1, A 11153. Enrile's proposal envisages Mexican support for separatist movements in California, Arizona, Texas and New Mexico, and possibly served as blueprint for Kemnitz' draft of the Mexican alliance scheme.

<sup>46</sup> State Secretary [von Jagow], Berlin, to Minister Einsiedel, Berne, 9 September 1916, NARA, microcopy T 141, roll 20, GFM, Mexico No. 1, A 25216.

On the face of it, then, Zimmermann's alliance proposal of January 1917 marked a complete reversal of German policy towards Mexico. However, after the publication of the telegram in the American press, Zimmermann and Kemnitz were eager to stress that they never contemplated obliging Germany to Mexico by a formal treaty. In fact, the wording "a consent on our part for Mexico to reconquer" New Mexico, Arizona and Texas did not imply a legally binding commitment, and was hence very different from Germany's explicit support for Austrian, Bulgarian or Ottoman war aims. In Mexico's case, the Foreign Office committed itself merely to "generous financial support," in itself a rather vague promise. A few days after the telegram had been published, Zimmermann emphasized before the parliamentary budget committee that he never believed the Mexicans were really capable of conquering U.S. territory. The proposal for taking Texas, New Mexico and Arizona was regarded simply as bait with the ultimate goal of binding American troops on the Mexican border.<sup>47</sup> After the war, Kemnitz explained in the same vein:

"I foresaw two possibilities [...] firstly, that Mexico would decline because she was afraid of the United States, which would nevertheless have strengthened the Germanophile sentiment in Mexico, or, secondly, that Mexico would accept, in which case considerable American forces would have been tied up on the Mexican border *and Germany would not have incurred any special obligations.*"<sup>48</sup>

These comments demonstrate that the Foreign Office never contemplated a serious German commitment to Mexico. On the international level, Zimmermann's telegram was a spontaneous and rather unsophisticated attempt to exploit American-Mexican tensions on the cheap, and not the product of long-harboured German designs to gain a foothold on the southern border of the United States. To Berlin, Mexico was never remotely as important as, say, the Balkans or Italy before it entered the war on the Allied side. Even after the American declaration of war in April 1917, German efforts to prop up Mexico financially and militarily as a potential ally were rather modest.<sup>49</sup> In August 1918, the Foreign Office concluded that an armed conflict between Mexico and the

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<sup>47</sup> Reinhard Schiffers and Manfred Koch (eds.), *Der Hauptausschuss des Deutschen Reichstages 1915-1918* (4 vols., Düsseldorf: Droste, 1981), iii, 123<sup>rd</sup> session, 5 March 1917, p. 1152.

<sup>48</sup> *The New York Times*, 15 May 1920. My italics.

<sup>49</sup> Nassua, *Gemeinsame Kriegführung*, pp. 40f.

United States was not even in Germany's interest, and that all efforts in this regard should be abandoned.<sup>50</sup>

For the Allies, the year 1916 had been disappointing.<sup>51</sup> The Italian army had proved a liability rather than an asset, Romania had been overrun by the Central Powers within weeks after joining the *entente*, defeatism in Russia was spreading fast, and France was exhausted from the terrible bloodletting at Verdun. Hence, Great Britain emerged as the backbone of the *entente* powers, and London took steps to intensify the British war effort. Compulsory military service was introduced, and the new British coalition government under Prime Minister David Lloyd George categorically ruled out the idea of a compromise peace and promised to wage war with renewed vigour.

An important element in the Allied war economies was access to U.S. markets. By September 1916, Britain was purchasing American goods at a rate of over \$210 million per month,<sup>52</sup> and France at \$38 million per month.<sup>53</sup> However, in August 1916 the French Treasury declared it was unable to continue payments, and the burden of financing the Allied orders in the United States fell entirely on London.<sup>54</sup> With expenditure spinning out of control, by early 1917 the British Treasury was racing towards bankruptcy.<sup>55</sup> The British War Cabinet concluded that the only way to avoid financial collapse was to obtain massive U.S. loans or, even better, America's formal entry into the war.<sup>56</sup>

Zimmermann's alliance proposal thus fell into British hands at a crucial moment. The German Foreign Office had decided to wire the text through several channels to its

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<sup>50</sup> Memorandum by Foreign Office, Berlin, 6 August 1918, NARA, microcopy T 149, roll 378, GFM, Mexico 16, attachment to A.S. 3543, 3544, 3545.

<sup>51</sup> See Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), pp. 248-317, for an original account of how the Allies squandered their advantages, in terms of manpower and economic capabilities, over the Central Powers.

<sup>52</sup> Kathleen Burk, *Britain, America and the Sinews of War, 1914-1918* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1985), p. 81.

<sup>53</sup> Martin Horn, *Britain, France, and the Financing of the First World War* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2002), p. 131.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>55</sup> Burk, *Sinews of War*, p. 95.

<sup>56</sup> Minutes of 54<sup>th</sup> meeting of War Cabinet, 5 February 1917, Library of Congress, Cabinet Minutes and Memoranda, 1916-1939, reel 5, CAB 23/1, pp. 181ff.



embassy in Washington.<sup>57</sup> Since the British were in possession of the relevant German code, the telegram was intercepted on the same day it was dispatched, 16 January.<sup>58</sup>

The British department in charge of intercepting and deciphering German wireless messages was the intelligence service of the Admiralty, at times referred to as “Room 40,” after its location in the Old Building of the Admiralty. From 1913 until 1919, Captain Reginald Hall headed this department as Director of the Intelligence Division (D.I.D., and later as Director of Naval Intelligence, D.N.I.).

Nigel de Grey, the cryptographer in charge of deciphering the coded text of Zimmermann’s message, soon had a general idea of its content and informed Hall on the same day. The latter immediately grasped the significance and ought to have passed the message on to the British Foreign Office. But Hall decided otherwise. On the one hand, he was concerned that by passing his intelligence on, its contents might become publicly known which would cause the Germans to change their codes, thus depriving Room 40 of an important source of information. On the other hand, Hall had decided that he, and not the prime minister, would be best suited to use the intelligence for British purposes. As he informed de Grey and a fellow cryptographer: “You boys think you do a very difficult job, but don’t forget *I have to make use of the intelligence you give me* and that’s more difficult.”<sup>59</sup> According to one of Hall’s biographers, the captain added: “This is a case where standing orders must be suspended... For the present not a soul outside this room is to be told anything at all.”<sup>60</sup> Given that Zimmermann’s telegram not only contained the Mexican alliance proposal but also conclusive evidence and the precise date as to the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare, Hall’s decision to keep his knowledge to himself was a remarkable act of insubordination.

Although the German submarines ultimately failed to suspend British trade by sinking merchant vessels in the Atlantic, this outcome was by no means clear in

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<sup>57</sup> Memorandum by Rh. to under secretary of state, 29 November 1918, NARA, microcopy T 149, roll 378, GFM, Mexico 16, attachment to A.S. 6464, sub-heading no. I.4.

<sup>58</sup> For cryptographic details see William F. Friedman and Charles J. Mendelsohn, *The Zimmermann Telegram of January 16, 1917 and its Cryptographic Background* (1938; Laguna Hills, Calif.: Aegean Park Press, 1976), and David Kahn, *The Codebreakers: The Story of Secret Writing* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1967), pp. 266-297.

<sup>59</sup> Memorandum by Nigel de Grey, 31 October 1945, PRO, HW 3/177. My italics.

<sup>60</sup> Patrick Beesly, *Room 40: British Naval Intelligence 1914-18* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), p. 205. Beesly gives no reference as to Hall’s statement.

February. The German Admiralty Staff had calculated that at least 600,000 tons of merchant shipping had to be destroyed monthly in order to make the submarine strategy work, and at first the U-boats actually exceeded this goal, with a peak of 860,000 tons sunk in April.<sup>61</sup> On 9 February, 1917 *The New York Times* worried, “Germany’s ruthless submarine warfare, continued with the success of the last three days, would destroy, within a short time a great part of the world’s merchant tonnage.”<sup>62</sup> The British War Cabinet considered the situation “serious” and feared it might culminate “in something approaching a blockade.”<sup>63</sup>

Hall had hoped unrestricted submarine warfare would provoke an immediate American declaration of war. Only when this failed to materialize, did he decide to use the intercepted Zimmermann telegram to bring the United States into the conflict on the Allied side. The ensuing Anglo-American negotiations as to how to put the telegram to best use are remarkable in that top policy-makers on both sides of the Atlantic were virtually excluded from them.

On 5 February, Hall approached the permanent under-secretary of state for foreign affairs, Lord Charles Hardinge, and told him of the telegram,<sup>64</sup> presumably without mentioning that he, Hall, had been in possession of it for almost three weeks. He pressed the British Foreign Office to use the telegram as leverage to bring the United States into the war, but both Hardinge and his private secretary, Ronald Hugh Campbell, had misgivings. They were afraid of creating the impression of a *cabinet noir* operating within the Foreign Office, and anxious to avoid anything that could be construed as a British attempt to influence the policy of a neutral power.<sup>65</sup> After two weeks of procrastination, Hall decided to force the issue by revealing his information to the American embassy in London. On 19 February, he met with Edward Bell,<sup>66</sup> second secretary of the embassy, and informed him orally of the content of the Zimmermann telegram. Like most of the staff of the American embassy in London, Bell advocated the

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<sup>61</sup> Jürgen Mirow, *Der Seekrieg 1914-1918 in Umrissen* (Göttingen: Musterschmidt, 1976), p. 141.

<sup>62</sup> *The New York Times*, 9 February 1917, “See U-Boats Attaining Goal of Destruction.”

<sup>63</sup> Minutes of 57<sup>th</sup> War Cabinet meeting, 8 February 1917, Library of Congress, Cabinet Minutes and Memoranda, 1916-1939, reel 5, CAB 23/1, p. 193.

<sup>64</sup> William M. James, *The Eyes of the Navy: A Biographical Study of Admiral Sir Reginald Hall* (London: Methuen, 1956). p. 140.

<sup>65</sup> Beesly, *Room 40*, p. 217.

<sup>66</sup> For a short biographical summary of Bell, see Kahn, “Edward Bell.”

immediate entry of America into the war. He and Hall made four crucial decisions: first, the telegram must be made known in the United States; second, Hall would have to submit the full text, and reveal the method by which the telegram had been intercepted and deciphered to make it credible in the eyes of the U.S. administration in Washington; third, the role of the British would be concealed from the public to avoid the impression that Britain was trying to influence American public opinion and to keep the Germans from learning that their codes were compromised (the official version was to be that the Zimmermann telegram had been obtained on American territory); fourth, the best way to achieve maximum attention in Washington was for British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour to present it officially to U.S. Ambassador Walter Page.<sup>67</sup>

Hall and Bell informed their superiors - Balfour and Page respectively - of their decisions shortly afterwards. Both the British foreign secretary and the United States ambassador were strong advocates of American participation in the war and approved of the plan. On 23 February Balfour visited the American embassy in London, and officially handed a transcript of the intercepted Zimmermann telegram to Page. The British foreign secretary later described this “as dramatic a moment as I remember in all my life.”<sup>68</sup>

Simultaneously, Balfour endeavoured to ensure that Zimmermann’s alliance proposal would not be dismissed in America as purely theoretical. In order to magnify the German threat to the United States, and to maximize the impact of the telegram’s publication in the American press, Balfour asked the British chargé d’affaires in Mexico, Edward Thurston, to verify “strong rumours here of German activity in Mexico” and to “enquire of all consuls if they have information of such intrigues or of any suspicious concentration of Germans, and keep me fully informed.”<sup>69</sup> On the same day, Thurston replied that he felt “no doubt as to German movement,” but that he needed more time to contact the British consuls across the country before he was in a position to verify these

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<sup>67</sup> Private and most secret, Edward Bell, Tokyo, to W.L. Hurley, Washington, D.C., 13 July 1921, NARA, Office of the Counselor, Leland Harrison’s General Correspondence, 1915-1918, box 7; memorandum by Nigel de Grey, 31 October 1945, PRO, HW 3/177.

<sup>68</sup> Jason Tomes, *Balfour and Foreign Policy: The International Thought of a Conservative Statesman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 187.

<sup>69</sup> Balfour, London, to Thurstan, Mexico City, 27 February 1917, PRO, FO 115/226, p. 253.

rumours.<sup>70</sup> However, without waiting for any further reports from Mexico, Balfour informed Page on 1 March somewhat incorrectly:

“the British Chargé d’Affaires in Mexico has telegraphed that Germans in large numbers are arriving there daily from the United States and that he has good reason to fear impending German activities in that country. Thurston further states that he is keeping close watch and will report again shortly to this government. At present suspicions comprise not only the West coast but the Government wireless apparatus and the oil fields.”<sup>71</sup>

Hall claimed sole responsibility for intercepting and handling the Zimmermann telegram, and he boasted to Guy Gaunt, the British naval attaché in New York: “Alone I did it.”<sup>72</sup> To be sure, Hall determined to a large extent if and when the telegram reached the Americans, and after the war he received much praise for his actions. What has been entirely overlooked is that Hall was, after all, a rather minor figure within the British governmental machinery, and that he had assumed the role of decision-maker that ultimately belonged to the prime minister. As far as can be gleaned from the records, Lloyd George was informed neither of the telegram’s existence nor of the ongoing negotiations between Hall, Balfour, Bell and Page. The Zimmermann telegram was never discussed by the War Cabinet, and as late as 7 February the prime minister told his secretary that he would be “lucky” if the United States entered the war, indicating that he considered his own leverage over Washington as minimal.<sup>73</sup> Balfour may have informed Lloyd George orally shortly before or after handing the telegram to Page, but overall the prime minister was excluded from the decision-making process.

It is worthwhile to point out that Lloyd George’s position did not differ significantly from Bethmann Hollweg’s in this respect. At the time, Hall’s decision to hand over the telegram to the Americans was less problematic than Zimmermann’s bypassing of the chancellor, for Hall’s and Lloyd George’s goals - American entry into the war - coincided, whereas Zimmermann’s and Bethmann Hollweg’s did not. But Hall’s decision to sideline the prime minister had the potential to create a major political disaster. Unlike Lloyd George, Hall had no idea about the critical state of Britain’s

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<sup>70</sup> Thurstan, Mexico City, to Balfour, London, 27 February 1917 [received 28 February], *ibid.*, p. 254.

<sup>71</sup> Page, London, to secretary of state, Washington, D.C., 1 March 1917, NARA, State Department, Internal Affairs of Germany 1910-1929, decimal file 862.20212/75, microcopy M 336, roll 55.

<sup>72</sup> Telegram by Hall, London, to Naval Attaché Gaunt, New York, 27 January 1917, PRO, HW 3/178.

<sup>73</sup> A.J.P. Taylor (ed.), *Lloyd George: A Diary by Frances Stevenson* (London: Hutchinson, 1971), p. 147.

finances. Had Germany's submarine campaign failed sooner than it did, Hall may well have decided not to release the Zimmermann telegram at all to protect British knowledge of the German codes. This probably would have delayed U.S. entry into the war. But even a minor postponement of America's commitment to the Allies would have forced the British government to reveal the true extent of its financial despair to Washington,<sup>74</sup> which would have greatly increased Wilson's leverage over the Allies. In these circumstances, the American president may have been much more successful in realizing his grand vision of a negotiated "peace without victors," while the British government would have found it extremely difficult to attain its ambitious war aims.

Hall hoped that releasing the telegram would trigger an immediate U.S. declaration of war. On 1 March, the day the Zimmermann telegram was published, he wired the British naval attaché in New York secret instructions for the eventuality of an American entry into the war.<sup>75</sup> But the failure of the United States to join the Allies immediately left British policy-makers somewhat perplexed, and as late as 1 April - one day before President Wilson's war address to Congress - Lloyd George still wondered when America would enter the war.<sup>76</sup>

To understand how the Zimmermann telegram was perceived in the United States in the spring of 1917, it is necessary to examine briefly how events of the previous three years had shaped American perceptions of Germany. Since August 1914, American manufacturers had supplied the Allies with large quantities of goods, including arms and explosives. The Central Powers were virtually excluded from this trade due to the British naval blockade, which caused considerable resentment in Germany and among German-Americans in the United States. In flagrant violation of American neutrality, some pro-German elements endeavoured to sabotage the constant flow of ammunitions and goods on American soil. The extent of these operations and the degree to which they were linked to German officials in the United States are still debated but the German military

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<sup>74</sup> Burk, *Sinews of War*, p. 95.

<sup>75</sup> Telegram, secret, by Hall, London, to consul general, New York, for Gaunt, 1 March 1917, PRO, HW 3/178.

<sup>76</sup> John Grigg, *Lloyd George: War Leader, 1916-1918* (London: Allen Lane, 2002), p. 72.

attaché in Washington, D.C., Captain Franz von Papen, was definitely involved.<sup>77</sup> In December 1915, the U.S. administration declared von Papen *persona non grata* on account of his involvement in illegal activities, and he returned to Germany. Although the American authorities arrested very few genuine German saboteurs - and only a somewhat larger number of German agents otherwise involved in illegal operations (e.g. passport forgeries, funding of strikes in the armaments industry) - the activities of German secret agents in the United States became a frequent topic in the American press. Hence, early in the war the Germans acquired a reputation as “plotters” and “dynamiters.” As a result, unverifiable accusations left disturbing questions about German intentions and actions on American soil. In the summer of 1916, for instance, Egon von Blankenfeld, a suspected German secret agent, reported that German military attaché von Papen had wished to hire him in order to bomb the White House or possibly the Capitol. According to Blankenfeld,

“von Papen is alleged to have remarked with a laugh: ‘We want to hurry Wilson heavenward, and if possible some of his Senators with him, in order that war may be prevented. If war with America should come, then we would be finished, for our ships and our entire capital here would be gone. Wilson must be gathered to his fathers. You need not be uneasy, my dear Blankenfeld; we have worked everything out and provided the explosives, so that everything will go all right. You only have to oversee the men and give them courage, so that they will not fail us at the last moment.’”<sup>78</sup>

With Papen now in Europe, it was virtually impossible for the investigators to determine to what extent Blankenfeld’s assertion was based on fact, but given the ex-military attaché’s past illegal activities in America, such allegations, as unlikely as they were, could not be dismissed out of hand.

The debate over direct German threats to U.S. security gained new momentum in early 1916. On 9 March, 500 Mexican troops under Pancho Villa raided the town of Columbus, New Mexico, crying “Viva Villa” and “Viva México.” After a six-hour battle, the invaders were driven back into Mexico by units of the 13<sup>th</sup> U.S. Cavalry, garrisoned

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<sup>77</sup> For a summary, see Reinhard R. Doerries, “Die Tätigkeit deutscher Agenten in den USA während des Ersten Weltkrieges und ihr Einfluss auf die diplomatischen Beziehungen zwischen Washington und Berlin”, in idem (ed.), *Diplomaten und Agenten. Nachrichtendienste in der Geschichte der deutsch-amerikanischen Beziehungen* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 2001), pp. 11-52.

<sup>78</sup> Memorandum from Office of the Counselor to Frank Polk, Department of State, 19 July 1916, NARA, Office of the Counselor, Classified Case Files of Edward Bell, 1917-19, box 2, file 73a.

in Columbus. Over one hundred Mexicans and seventeen Americans died in the fighting.<sup>79</sup>

This direct, if minor, attack on U.S. territory shocked the American public and eventually led to an expedition into Mexico under Army General John Pershing who tried in vain to capture Villa. It was and remains difficult to determine Villa's motives for the raid. The most likely explanation is that he hoped to provoke U.S. retaliation to destabilize the regime of his rival, Carranza. However, in March 1916 many Americans found it difficult to believe that a minor Mexican bandit like Villa could be so bold as to have planned this raid by himself. It seemed more plausible to suspect a foreign power with sinister intentions behind this provocation. As early as 12 March, rumours circulated in New York City "that Villa and his raiders had received ammunition and other supplies through purchases made with German funds."<sup>80</sup> The Bureau of Investigation - the precursor of the FBI - and the State Department investigated the Columbus raid on both sides of the border, and in late March the State Department received a report "that there are THREE GERMAN OFFICERS with Villa in Chihuahua [,] one of them named COLONEL GHEMELN... all these officers appear well supplied with money and appear to dictate to Villa..."<sup>81</sup> During the following months, the Bureau of Investigation, the State Department and numerous newspapers narrowed their focus on possible links between Villa and other Mexican troublemakers on the one hand, and German intelligence on the other. This link was never established. In fact, clear evidence that Berlin did not have a hand in the Columbus raid comes from the files of the Imperial Foreign Office; when Germany's ambassador to the United States, Johann von Bernstorff, reported American suspicions of Germany having backed the attack, adding that these rumours were, of course, baseless, an anonymous official cynically scribbled in

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<sup>79</sup> For details see Friedrich Katz, "Pancho Villa and the Attack on Columbus, New Mexico," *The American Historical Review*, 83, 1, supplement (1978), pp. 101-130.

<sup>80</sup> *The New York Times*, 12 March 1916. According to the *Times*, Maurice Leon, a New York-based adviser to the Allies on legal and financial affairs, first suggested an official investigation into these rumours.

<sup>81</sup> Memorandum by J.K. Huddle, Department of State, Consular Bureau, 28 March 1916, NARA, Office of the Counselor, Classified Case Files 1915-26, Human Espionage Activities, German Activities, box 11. Underlining and capitalization as in original. This piece information was supplied by a certain H. M. Bowen, formerly an electrical engineer in Mexico.

the margin: “unfortunately.”<sup>82</sup> The German leadership was not unhappy to see Washington distracted in Mexico. After all, the United States was an important arms supplier for the Allies and a potential opponent of the Central Powers. But Berlin’s policy at the time was a far cry from masterminding anti-American conspiracies in Mexico. Still, the various investigations into possible German-Mexican links and the recurrent press reports on German plots in Mexico and elsewhere provided enough “evidence” of Berlin’s hostile intentions to the growing number of those who wanted to believe in them.

On 1 February Bernstorff informed Secretary of State Robert Lansing of Germany’s resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare in the eastern Atlantic. The new policy was that the U-boats would sink on sight and without warning any surface vessel they encountered, Allied and neutral, commercial and naval. As a result, the majority of Wilson’s cabinet now advocated a declaration of war on Germany, as unrestricted submarine warfare would gravely interfere with U.S. rights and commerce, and a German victory in Europe would be contrary to American interests. Lansing was a particularly outspoken champion of war and had argued since 1915 that the United States should become more supportive of the Allies.

However, for the time being Wilson decided to limit his reaction to breaking diplomatic relations with Germany, and he recalled U.S. ambassador Gerard from Berlin. Contemporaries widely interpreted this move as the first step towards war, but much to the chagrin of his cabinet, Wilson intended Gerard’s recall only as a warning to Germany not to follow words into action, and abstain from sinking American ships. At a cabinet meeting on 2 February, Wilson said that “he didn’t wish either side to win - for both had been equally indifferent to the rights of neutrals - though Germany had been brutal in taking life, and England only in taking property.” The president opined that Berlin’s unrestricted submarine warfare announcement alone was not sufficient for going to war, and that Germany had to commit an “overt act,” i.e. attack an American vessel, before he could take any further steps.<sup>83</sup> As most of Wilson’s secretaries favoured an immediate

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<sup>82</sup> Report by Bernstorff, Washington, D.C., to Bethmann Hollweg, Berlin, 29 March 1916, NARA, microcopy T 141, roll 20, GFM, Mexico 1, A 9861. It is tempting to ascribe this comment to Kemnitz.

<sup>83</sup> Anne W. Lane and Louise W. Wall (eds.), *The Letters of Franklin K. Lane* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1922), p. 234. Franklin Lane was Wilson’s secretary of interior.



declaration of war on Germany, there was now an opinion gap between the president and the majority of his cabinet.

Wilson's decision to wait for an "overt act" initially worked to Germany's advantage. The submarines had, of course, no orders to spare American ships but most American shipping companies were reluctant to send their vessels into the war zone. Insurance for Europe-bound ships skyrocketed and transatlantic commerce was reduced to a trickle, with cargoes and vessels clogging America's Atlantic seaports. Germany's blockade seemed to work even without sinking U.S. ships, as the pro-Allied East Coast press reported angrily. An editorial in *The Washington Post* observed grudgingly:

"The merchant marine of the United States has been terrorized and driven from the seas. To all intents and purposes Germany has put into effect an embargo on American exports and passenger traffic with England and France. So long as our shipping is suspended the submarine campaign is as successful as if American vessels had been torpedoed."<sup>84</sup>

In February 1917 an observer could easily conclude that Germany might succeed in strangling Britain without provoking the American president by an "overt act." This was a particularly worrisome prospect for the hawks in Wilson's administration. Matters came to a head at a cabinet meeting on 23 February. In an obvious attempt to vilify Germany, Secretary of the Interior Franklin Lane posed a rhetorical question about whether it was true that the wives of American consuls upon leaving Germany had been stripped naked, given an acid bath to detect writing on their flesh, and subjected to other indignities. Lansing replied in the affirmative. Lane then suggested that, if Americans knew of this, they would favour intervention. Wilson, alerted, asked if Lane suggested "to work up a propaganda of hatred" against Germany. Lane denied this, but maintained that in a democracy the people were entitled to know the facts. Other cabinet members supported this argument. At this point, Wilson ended the discussion by categorically ruling out such a campaign. Furthermore, he insisted that the country was not willing to risk war. After the meeting several cabinet members considered resigning.<sup>85</sup> Thus the atmosphere in Washington in late February was tense, with Wilson and his cabinet at

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<sup>84</sup> *The Washington Post*, 14 February 1917, "Convoys for Shipping."

<sup>85</sup> Lane and Wall, *Letters of Franklin K. Lane*, p. 240.

loggerheads over the issue of going to war. This deadlock was broken with Ambassador Page's news of the Zimmermann telegram on 24 February.

Page hoped that his message would precipitate America's entry into the war. In his communication about Zimmermann's alliance proposal, the ambassador added somewhat dramatically and not altogether truthfully:

“The receipt of this information has so greatly exercised the British Government that they have lost no time in communicating it to me to transmit to you, in order that our Government may be able without delay to make such disposition as may be necessary in view of the threatened invasion of our territory.”<sup>86</sup>

It is noteworthy that Page inverted cause and consequence by using the term “the threatened invasion of our territory.” The Zimmermann telegram itself envisaged a German-Mexican alliance only as a response to an American declaration of war, whereas Page implied that a German-Mexican attack was imminent.

When the message arrived at the State Department, Lansing was away on a brief vacation, and his deputy Frank L. Polk duly showed it to the president on 25 February. The Zimmermann telegram implied that Mexico and Japan might be interested in an alliance with Germany, and Polk immediately took steps to establish whether either country could be expected to respond positively to Zimmermann's proposals. On 26 February, Carranza's foreign secretary, Aguilar Cándido, denied knowing of the note.<sup>87</sup> Two days later, the Japanese ambassador “expressed great amusement and said it was too absurd to take seriously.”<sup>88</sup>

Nonetheless, Wilson changed his policy towards Germany perceptibly after having read the Zimmermann telegram. While at the cabinet meeting on 23 February the president had rebuffed those who advocated stronger measures to counter unrestricted submarine warfare, Wilson adopted a different posture at the next meeting on 26 February. After reviewing the situation, he remarked unabashedly on the administration's dilemma: “the tying up of our ships was complete so far as we were concerned and was

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<sup>86</sup> Page, London, to Secretary of State, 24 February 1917, Foreign Relations of the United States [henceforth F.R.U.S.], 1917, supplement i, pp. 147f.

<sup>87</sup> U.S. Ambassador Fletcher, Mexico City, to secretary of state, 26 February 1917, F.R.U.S., 1917, supplement i, p. 235.

<sup>88</sup> Memorandum by Frank Polk, 28 February 1917, Yale University Library, Confidential Diary by Frank L. Polk, 1916-1917, vol. ii.

what the Germans desired, but that no overt act had occurred.” The president essentially acknowledged that his policy of waiting for a German “overt act” worked to Berlin’s advantage. Wilson concluded that “necessity for action might come at any moment,” and that “[i]t would be most imprudent to be unprepared.”<sup>89</sup> The president now planned to ask Congress for the right to arm American merchantmen so that they could defend themselves against submarine attacks, a step that was bound to result in a clash in the Atlantic, and hence to war with Germany. On 28 February, Wilson asked Lansing to schedule a meeting with other cabinet members “as to making the text [of the Zimmermann telegram] public and the best way to use it to get the greatest result in influencing legislation regarding the arming of merchant vessels.” Lansing was also directed to show the telegram to Senator Gilbert Hitchcock, a Democrat from Nebraska in charge of the Armed Ships bill.<sup>90</sup> The Zimmermann telegram was given to the *Associated Press* on the evening of 28 February, and published on 1 March, the day Congress debated the bill.

Was the Zimmermann telegram crucial in persuading Wilson to go to war? In the absence of the president’s own testimony, his decision-making process is difficult to trace. According to Lansing, when handed the message by Polk, “[Wilson] had shown much indignation and was disposed to make the text public without delay.”<sup>91</sup> One of Wilson’s biographers concludes that the president must have been deeply shocked that any country could be “so evil and intriguing.”<sup>92</sup> However, it must be recalled that reports on German plots in Mexico had been circulating in Washington for quite some time.<sup>93</sup> Hence, the Zimmermann telegram may have confirmed Wilson’s worst fears, but it is difficult to judge that it came as a shock. Those who knew about the telegram prior to its publication were not so much shocked as delighted about the political possibilities it

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<sup>89</sup> David F. Houston, *Eight Years with Wilson’s Cabinet, 1913 to 1920* (2 vols., Garden City: Doubleday, Page, 1926), i, p. 237. Houston was Wilson’s secretary of agriculture.

<sup>90</sup> “Memorandum on the message of Zimmermann to the German minister to Mexico” by Robert Lansing, 4 March 1917, Arthur Link (ed.), *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson* (69 vols., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966-1994), xxxxi, p. 323.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 322. On Polk’s advice, Wilson then agreed to await Lansing’s return before going public.

<sup>92</sup> Link, *Wilson*, p. 345.

<sup>93</sup> Laura Garcés, “The German Challenge to the Monroe Doctrine in Mexico, 1917,” in Hans-Jürgen Schröder (ed.), *Confrontation and Cooperation: Germany and the United States in the Era of World War I 1900-1924* (Oxford, Providence, RI: Berg, 1993), p. 287. See also above.

presented.<sup>94</sup> Obviously, Wilson could not have been pleased to hear that since 16 January the German leadership had been preparing for war with the United States, and he was probably disgusted to find out that the Germans had used the American embassy in Berlin to transmit the message, falsely claiming it contained instructions on peace negotiations. But his reaction to the telegram was not an emotional reflex to the uncovering of a German plot. Neither did he fear an imminent invasion. As Wilson suggested to his cabinet on 26 February, his policy of waiting for an “overt act” had failed, at least if the term “overt act” was taken to mean a submarine attack on American shipping. If, on the other hand, the German alliance proposal to Mexico was defined as an “overt act,” Wilson was now free to adopt stronger measures without backpedaling. Hence, the Zimmermann telegram allowed the president to realign himself with his cabinet without having to retract from his previous statement. It was a logical and predictable step from Wilson’s decision to defend American commerce to the U.S. declaration of war a month later.

If the Zimmermann telegram united administration members in their determination to oppose Germany, for Congress this occurred only to some extent. The telegram’s publication was intended to help carry the Armed Ships bill through both chambers of Congress and, in fact, the House passed the bill on the evening of 1 March by a vote of 403 to 13.<sup>95</sup> However, the Senate proved much less at ease with the bill. During a debate over the authenticity of the telegram, several senators insisted that reports on German plots in Mexico were hardly new. “[T]hey have been going on for weeks, and even for months. But even if they are true, what is the occasion for excitement about it?”<sup>96</sup> asked Senator Miles Poindexter, a Republican from the state of Washington. Senator John Sharp Williams, a Democrat from Mississippi, added in the same vein: “...if we are to have trouble with her [Germany] it will not be because of the

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<sup>94</sup> See, for instance, Charles Seymour (ed.), *The Intimate Papers of Colonel House* (4 vols., Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1926-1928), ii, pp. 451f. Edward M. House, a personal friend of President Wilson, was informed by Polk of the telegram on 26 February and advised its immediate publication.

<sup>95</sup> *The New York Times*, 2 March 1917.

<sup>96</sup> U.S. Congressional Record, *Containing the Proceedings and Debates of the Sixty-Fourth Congress of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1917), Senate, 1 March 1917, p. 4571.

Zimmermann letter.”<sup>97</sup> And Senator William J. Stone, a Democrat from Missouri, asked a delicate question about whether the note was handed to Washington by London in order to influence American policy.<sup>98</sup> The publication of the Zimmermann telegram failed to steer the Armed Ships bill through the Senate. Under the leadership of Robert “Fighting Bob” La Follette, a Republican from Wisconsin and a staunch opponent of Wilson, a dozen senators killed the bill by filibustering until the 64<sup>th</sup> Congress expired on 3 March. In unusually harsh language, Wilson branded La Follette and his fellow filibusterers “a little group of willful men, representing no opinion but their own.”<sup>99</sup>

Although Congress overwhelmingly supported the president’s war message of 2 April, significant opposition existed. Following another La Follette-led filibuster, the Senate passed it by 82 to 6 votes on 5 April, and the House by 373 to 54 votes the following day. In view of the party loyalty of Democrats and the natural inclination of legislatures to support the elected leader in times of national crisis, a block of sixty votes against war in both chambers was significant. The Zimmerman telegram may have persuaded some congressmen to drop their pacifist or isolationist positions, but on the whole it failed to root out all congressional opposition to war.

It is generally argued that the publication of the Zimmermann telegram, and Zimmermann’s admission of his authorship, broke public isolationist and pacifist sentiment, especially in the Midwest and the Old South, as well as German-Americans’ opposition to war.<sup>100</sup> Lansing himself maintained this as early as 4 March 1917.<sup>101</sup> However, the secretary of state had an obvious interest in portraying his Department’s handling of the note as a success. In the absence of opinion polls, newspapers are the accepted source for assessing American public opinion in World War I,<sup>102</sup> and an analysis of press reports in March 1917 suggests that Americans beyond Washington, D.C. were much less perturbed by the Zimmermann telegram than generally assumed.

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 4596.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 4593.

<sup>99</sup> *The New York Times*, 5 March 1917.

<sup>100</sup> See, for instance, Patrick Devlin, *Too Proud to Fight: Woodrow Wilson’s Neutrality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 653.

<sup>101</sup> Memorandum by Lansing, 4 March 1917, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, xxxxi, pp. 326f.

<sup>102</sup> John Crighton, *Missouri and the World War, 1914-1917: A Study in Public Opinion* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1947), p. 5.

Virtually all major U.S. newspapers carried banner-headlines on the Zimmermann telegram on 1 March, and numerous editorials explained it as tantamount to a declaration of war on the United States. What has been overlooked to date is that most papers advocating a tough stand against Berlin in early March, had already done so following Germany's declaration of unrestricted submarine warfare, and in many cases even earlier.<sup>103</sup> Hence, the release of the Zimmermann telegram to the press reinforced anti-German sentiment where it already existed, but it did not sway editorial opinion in any significant way. Likewise, newspapers hitherto defending isolationist or pacifist opinions by and large retained a strong skepticism at participation in the war; for instance, *The San Francisco Chronicle* argued that the Zimmermann note was proof of Germany's desperation and should not be taken seriously,<sup>104</sup> and *The Milwaukee Sentinel* suggested that Zimmermann's move was less monstrous when put into the context of "'la haute politique' of Europe's political system."<sup>105</sup> As late as 26 March, *The Florida Times-Union*, an uncompromising opponent of intervention, shifted the blame for the current crisis in the Atlantic to London:

“...Great Britain has by far the largest navy of any nation, but that navy is not patrolling the Atlantic. The British government is keeping it safe from submarine attacks. If it can induce France to do the fighting on the land and America on the sea it will be in a position to endure the war with tolerable comfort.”<sup>106</sup>

Only a handful of papers, most of them German-American publications, dropped their support for Germany on account of the Zimmermann telegram.<sup>107</sup> George Sylvester Viereck, editor of the pro-German weekly *The Fatherland*, wrote on 1 March: “The letter is unquestionably a brazen forgery planted by the British agents to stampede us into an alliance and to justify violations of the Monroe doctrine by Great Britain.”<sup>108</sup> Having

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<sup>103</sup> Compare editorials of *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The World* of 1 February and 2 March 1917.

<sup>104</sup> *The San Francisco Chronicle*, 2 March 1917, “Working up the War Fever.”

<sup>105</sup> *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, 2 March 1917, “Serious if Authentic.”

<sup>106</sup> *The Florida Times-Union*, 26 March 1917, “Our Place in the War.”

<sup>107</sup> Carl Witke, *The German Language Press in America* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1957), p. 259.

<sup>108</sup> George Sylvester Viereck, New York, to William Randolph Hearst, Palm Beach, Florida, 1 March 1917, U.S. Senate, Subcommittee on Judiciary, *Brewing and Liquor Interests and German and Bolshevik Propaganda. Report and Hearings, 66<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session* (3 vols., Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1919), ii, p. 1611.

pegged his reputation to the claim that the telegram was a forgery, Viereck was personally devastated when Arthur Zimmermann admitted his authorship on 3 March. Consequently, Viereck reversed his position and discontinued editorial support for Germany. Over a decade later, he was still embittered about the incident and claimed that “Zimmermann’s admission ended pro-Germanism in the United States.”<sup>109</sup>

However, Viereck did not represent the majority of German-Americans at the time. The *New Yorker Staats-Zeitung*, with a circulation larger than all other German-American papers combined, had already on 5 February exhorted its readers to be loyal to the American flag, even if this meant fighting Germany.<sup>110</sup> Given that the *Staats-Zeitung* had a much broader readership than *The Fatherland*, it would seem that the majority of German-Americans by 1 March had already made up their minds as to where their loyalty belonged. Viereck was an isolated extremist who came around only when his propaganda activities had totally compromised him.<sup>111</sup>

Reactions of the Hearst press to the publication of the Zimmermann telegram have been similarly misunderstood. Newspaper tycoon William Randolph Hearst is frequently described as a pro-German editor who was caught off-guard by events in early March.<sup>112</sup> Yet, by early 1917 Hearst’s stance vis-à-vis the European conflict is most accurately described as anti-British rather than pro-German, a subtle but important difference.<sup>113</sup> The publication of the Zimmermann telegram caused no editorial turnaround in Hearst’s newspapers. While Hearst privately expressed doubts on the authenticity of the Zimmermann telegram on 2 March, on the same day he published an editorial in all his major newspapers, urging his readers to prepare for war against Germany.<sup>114</sup> This was not a break with past comments as Hearst’s overriding aim on the eve of war was not to keep the United States out of it, but rather to ensure that Washington did not commit itself to traditional Allied war aims such as the destruction of the German navy or the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire.

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<sup>109</sup> George Sylvester Viereck, *The Strangest Friendship in History: Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House* (1932; Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1976), p. 190.

<sup>110</sup> *New Yorker Staats-Zeitung*, 5 February 1917.

<sup>111</sup> For *The Fatherland* see also Doerries, *Imperial Challenge*, p. 52.

<sup>112</sup> Viereck, *Strangest Friendship*, p. 190.

<sup>113</sup> Ian Mugridge, *The View from Xanadu: William Randolph Hearst and United States Foreign Policy* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1995), p. 114.

<sup>114</sup> *New York American*, 2 March 1917.

On the whole, only a stark minority of American newspapers reversed their stance on the war due the publication of Germany's Mexican alliance proposal. It should also be noted that the sensation of the Zimmermann telegram quickly dissipated. Newspapers favouring American engagement in Europe carried headlines about the Zimmermann telegram for merely two or three days, after which this news item gradually disappeared from the first page. After a week it was hardly discussed at all. Newspapers skeptical of American participation in the war removed the discussion of Zimmermann telegram from their pages even more quickly.<sup>115</sup> When Congress deliberated Wilson's war message in early April, the Zimmermann telegram rarely was discussed in editorials or on the front pages. Apparently, the public had grown so used to reports on German plots that just another German conspiracy, even though it bore the signature of the imperial foreign secretary himself, was insufficient to make a lasting impression. The Zimmermann telegram failed to unify public opinion in support of war. American skepticism about intervention in April 1917 was muted by a sense of patriotic duty, but it still existed. As *The Florida Times-Union* concluded on the day the United States declared war:

“The adoption by congress of the resolution declaring that a state of war exists between the United States and Germany closes all discussion. Prior to the passage of the resolution Americans had a right to entertain any opinions on the subject that appealed to them, and to express their opinions... The one object [now] is success and a debating society is not conducive to success.”<sup>116</sup>

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The Zimmermann telegram was primarily the result of a German domestic crisis. As demonstrated in this paper, foreign policy concerns played a subsidiary role when the Foreign Office crafted the Mexican alliance proposal. But through its interception by British naval intelligence, transmission to the American government, and subsequent publication in the American press, the telegram attained a significance which was completely unforeseen by its authors. The American public was less alarmed at the spectre of a German-Mexican alliance than hitherto assumed, but the telegram still accelerated the entry of the United States into World War I.

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<sup>115</sup> See, for instance, *The New York Times* and *The San Francisco Chronicle*, 1-7 March 1917.

<sup>116</sup> *The Florida Times-Union*, 6 April 1917, “The Duty of Americans.”



The Zimmermann telegram affair offers insight into political decision-making processes, civilian-military conflicts and intelligence-state relations at a time when World War I reached a critical stage. In Germany, the spheres of military and civilian power during wartime were not clearly defined which led to a latent rivalry between the Supreme Army Command and the civilian leadership. Military tactics, such as the waging of unrestricted submarine warfare, frequently had a considerable impact on Germany's diplomatic relations with neutral powers, but the third OHL aggressively pushed for the primacy of military over political considerations. By early 1917, politicians and diplomats advocating a cautious policy towards the United States, such as Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg, Ambassador Bernstorff and Counselor Montgelas, had been largely marginalized. In their stead, the inexperienced Zimmermann relied on his pro-military adviser Kemnitz for suggestions that would please the Supreme Army Command. Kemnitz then drafted the Mexican alliance proposal as a means to demonstrate support for the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare. Rather than receiving direct orders from the Supreme Army Command, Zimmermann and Kemnitz worked towards what they believed to be the wishes of the military. This arrangement was convenient for Ludendorff who was averse to the idea of a formal military dictatorship.<sup>117</sup> Yet it allowed him to focus on the pursuit of his military strategies without considering political repercussions. At the end of the war, the fact that he had never formally exercised political power enabled him to escape the responsibility for Germany's defeat, and shift the blame to the civilian government.

Compared to the enormous deficiencies in Imperial Germany's eroding political system, frictions in the British decision-making process appear minor. However, they should not be overlooked. David Lloyd George's coalition government of December 1916 was an uneasy alliance between the Liberal prime minister and a conservative cabinet majority. The British intelligence community, on the other hand, had not been created as a politically neutral tool of the executive, far from it; conservative politicians, military pressure groups and right-wing authors had forced its establishment upon a

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<sup>117</sup> For a discussion of Imperial Germany's regime under the third OHL see Roger Chickering, *Imperial Germany and the Great War, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 72-76.

reluctant Liberal government in the early twentieth century.<sup>118</sup> The well-connected secret service lobby could always rely on the powerful and nationalist yellow press to support their cause, and sympathetic journalists occasionally fabricated evidence of foreign espionage to coax the government into beefing up the country's intelligence apparatus.<sup>119</sup> Against this backdrop, it comes as no surprise that the directors of the various services were usually men with a distinctly conservative, not to say reactionary, frame of mind.<sup>120</sup> Hall was no exception in that he profoundly distrusted the new Liberal prime minister David Lloyd George, and preferred to deal with the conservative Arthur Balfour.

While during the war Lloyd George's and Hall's political goals largely overlapped, in the long run Hall's insubordination reinforced existing tendencies within the British intelligence community to eschew governmental supervision. In the interwar period, the various British secret services were eager to publicize their espionage "scoops" of the Great War to prevent Labour governments from decreasing intelligence-spending or dissolve departments altogether.<sup>121</sup> An efficient means to this end was the release of top secret material, shedding a favourable light on the services, to sympathetic journalists.<sup>122</sup> This was exactly what Hall did. Fed up with all the credit for the telegram's interception going to the Americans, he eagerly supplied the journalist Burton Hendrick with confidential documents to present his own point of view.<sup>123</sup> Hall's indiscretions were as normal in early twentieth century Britain as they were unthinkable in most other Western countries; the U.S. State Department was, in the words of one official, "aghast... at this method of making public information which we have kept secret."<sup>124</sup> But Hall

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<sup>118</sup> Thomas Boghardt, "German Naval Intelligence and British Counter-Espionage, 1901-1918" (Ph.D., Oxford, 2002), pp. 56-83.

<sup>119</sup> See Nicholas Hiley's introduction to William Le Queux, *Spies of the Kaiser: Plotting the Downfall of England* (1909; London: Frank Cass, 1996), p. xvii.

<sup>120</sup> Bernard Porter, *Plots and Paranoia: A History of Political Espionage in Britain, 1790-1988* (London, Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), p. 134. For instance, Basil Thomson, the director of New Scotland Yard's Special Branch during World War I, denounced humanitarians as "sub-human."

<sup>121</sup> Philip Knightley, *The Second Oldest Profession: The Spy as Bureaucrat, Patriot, Fantasist and Whore* (London: Deutsch, 1986), p. 56.

<sup>122</sup> See, for instance, the book of another British journalist, Sidney Theodore Felstead, *German Spies at Bay: Being an Actual Record of the German Espionage in Great Britain during the years 1914-1918, compiled from Official sources* (London: Hutchinson, 1920).

<sup>123</sup> For the results see Burton Hendrick, *The Life and Letters of Walter H. Page* (3 vols., Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Page, 1924-1926), iii, pp. 331-364.

<sup>124</sup> W.L. Hurley, U.S. State Department, to Winslow, London, 29 July 1921, NARA, Office of the Counselor, Leland Harrison's general correspondence, 1915-1918, box 7.

achieved his ultimate goal, i.e. linking his name to the Zimmermann telegram and reinforcing the public image of a professional British intelligence community whose continued existence was justified and desirable.

In the United States, the impact of the Zimmermann telegram diminished as it moved further away from the power center in Washington. The State Department seized upon it as a means to accelerate American entry into the war, and the president used it as the “overt act” which allowed him to take tougher measures against Germany without loss of face. That Wilson was truly shocked by Zimmermann’s alliance proposal is doubtful. But like his advisers, the president anticipated strong congressional and public support for his more bellicose stance as a result of the publication of Zimmermann’s note. Yet, Congress failed to pass the Armed Ships bill in early March, and congressional opposition to the war remained through 6 April. In the end, party loyalties, geographical providence and personal political convictions determined the voting patterns of Members of Congress to a much larger extent than the publication of the Zimmermann telegram.<sup>125</sup> Likewise, the publication of the telegram had only a limited and passing impact on the American public. While making headline news for a few days, Germany’s Mexican alliance proposal disappeared from the columns of most newspapers in less than a week. As compared to the sinking of the *Lusitania* in 1915 or the recurrent stories about German atrocities in Belgium, American newspapers viewed the Zimmermann telegram as a minor, almost comical German misdeed. In fact, Senator La Follette’s contemporaneous filibusters intrigued the public more than Zimmermann’s alliance scheme.<sup>126</sup> The telegram was, of course, grist to the mill of long-time advocates of American belligerency, but it did not cause major changes in public opinion.

Hence, the debate over the justification of American participation in the war was suspended rather than ended in April 1917. Unlike the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, the Zimmermann telegram failed to become the lasting symbol of a just war against an evil and aggressive foreign power. Doubts about the wisdom of American intervention in the Great War receded only after another struggle with Germany appeared

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<sup>125</sup> John Milton Cooper, Jr., *The Vanity of Power: American Isolationism and the First World War, 1914-1917* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1969), ch. 5.

<sup>126</sup> See, for instance, the headlines of *The New York Times* for March 1917.

to vindicate Wilson's decision of April 1917. Following the armistice of November 1918, however, isolationism resurfaced with a vengeance. The results of the Paris peace conference in 1919 fell short of American expectations. Per consequence, Congress refused to ratify the treaty of Versailles, making the United States one of only two countries to conclude a separate peace with Germany.<sup>127</sup>

Key Washington policy-makers regarded the Zimmermann telegram as a "smoking gun," sufficiently menacing to mobilize the people for war and rally them behind the administration. But to many Americans, the German threat proved too remote, and Zimmermann's alliance scheme too absurd to justify fully the sacrifices incurred by participation in a world war.

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<sup>127</sup> The other country was China.

APPENDIX

**German text of Zimmermann's note to Minister Eckardt, Mexico City, via  
Ambassador Bernstorff, Washington, D.C., 13 January 1917<sup>128</sup>**

“Wir beabsichtigen, am 1. Februar uneingeschränkten U Boot Krieg zu beginnen. Es wird versucht werden, Amerika trotzdem neutral zu erhalten.

Für den Fall, daß dies nicht gelingen sollte, schlagen wir Mexico auf folgender Grundlage Bündnis vor: Gemeinsame Kriegführung, gemeinsamer Friedensschluß. Reichliche finanzielle Unterstützung und Einverständnis unsererseits, daß Mexico in Texas, Neu-Mexico, Arizona früher verlorenes Gebiet zurückerobert. Regelung im einzelnen Euer Hochwohlgebohren überlassen.

Euer Hochwohlgeboren wollen Vorstehendes Präsidenten streng geheim eröffnen sobald Kriegsausbruch mit Vereinigten Staaten feststeht und Anregung hinzufügen, Japan von sich aus zu sofortigem Beitritt einzuladen und gleichzeitig zwischen uns und Japan zu vermitteln. Bitte Präsidenten darauf hinzuweisen, daß rücksichtslose Anwendung unserer U Boote jetzt Aussicht bietet, England in wenigen Wochen zum Frieden zu zwingen.

gez. ZIMMERMANN”

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<sup>128</sup> Draft by Zimmermann to von Eckardt, Mexico City, via Bernstorff, Washington, D.C., 13 January 1917, NARA, microcopy T 149, roll 378, GFM, Mexico 16 secr., A.S. 162I.