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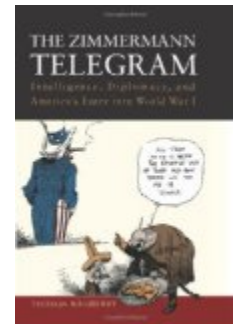
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Thomas Boghardt. *The Zimmermann Telegram: Intelligence, Diplomacy, and America's Entry into World War I*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press. 320 pp. \$36.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-61251-148-1.

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Historian Michael J. Hogan, in 2000, characterized the historiography of pre-WWI American foreign relations as “something of a ‘wasteland.’” He added that, “to the extent that diplomatic history itself has spawned fresh ideas and ways of thinking, it has done so largely in work that deals with the twentieth century and especially the Cold War.” He voiced the hope “that diplomatic historians will refocus their energies on other topics and earlier periods.”[1] The events of 2001 ensured that Cold War themes were replaced by other topics, in particular the global war on terrorism and similar subjects. As for “fresh” new work on earlier periods, Thomas Boghardt’s *The Zimmermann Telegram: Intelligence, Diplomacy, and America’s Entry into World War I*, provides an excellent example in that category.

Boghardt, a senior historian at the U.S. Army Center of Military History, received his PhD in modern European history from the University of Oxford. His other publications include *Spies of the Kaiser: German Intelligence Operations in Great Britain during the First World War Era* (2005). In 2009, he received the CIA’s Studies in Intelligence Award for his work on Soviet and East German intelligence operations during the Cold War. *The Zimmermann Telegram* will enhance his reputation even more, particularly at a time when considerable heated public discussion revolves around acceptable forms of intelligence collection and the legitimate uses to which such information might be put.

In his tightly focused account of the events surrounding the Zimmermann telegram, Boghardt provides new insight into the thoughts and actions of the key policymakers at the heart of the Zimmermann episode by

adding for the first time an informed discussion of intelligence and cryptology as integral components of the formulation and execution of high-level government policymaking. Citizens of the modern world are used to being told they live in an information age, but it can sometimes be difficult for the uninitiated to appreciate the ways in which something as amorphous as “information” can shape real-world events. Boghardt’s exploration of the actions taken by the British spy chief, Admiral Sir William Reginald Hall, provides a case study of how this can be done in practice.

The Zimmermann Telegram is divided into seventeen topical chapters that follow a logical chronology. Each is well written and thoroughly documented in notes and bibliography. A meticulous index makes it easy for the reader to find passages of interest. The introduction opens with a brief outline of events in early 1917 and the affair’s subsequent treatment in historiographical literature. The telegram’s apparent influence made it the focus of many subsequent historians and writers who examined one aspect of the episode or another, but the popular standard account for decades has been Barbara Tuchman’s *The Zimmermann Telegram* (1958).

“Until recently,” as Boghardt notes, “only one book, *The Zimmermann Telegram* by Barbara Tuchman, has sought to examine this subject by addressing developments in Germany, Britain, and the United States roughly in equal parts.” However, he questions many of her conclusions, pointing out that “The primary flaw in Tuchman’s work lies in the author’s limited access to and use of government records. First published in 1958, her account draws on a number of U.S. State Department files,

but she did not have access to U.S. and British intelligence records” (pp. 2-3).

Declassification of relevant First World War records has provided Boghardt the opportunity to tell the full story of the telegram. He approaches the subject along three thematic paths. As Tuchman had done previously, he pursues geographical balance, tracing the story through the workings of the German, British, and American political and intelligence arenas. Next, Boghardt explores the intelligence aspects of the episode, treating “intelligence as a key element of the entire story, not only in terms of interception and decryption.” In a sentence that echoes recent concerns, he adds, “The emergence of powerful intelligence organizations and techniques in Germany, Britain, and the United States created a new factor in governmental decision making and directly affected responses to the telegram.” Finally, Boghardt follows the telegram’s historical effect and long-term consequences, tracing “the ripples of the telegram through the twentieth century and beyond in Germany, Britain, and the United States” (pp. 6-7).

Conveniently, the first chapter provides an excellent bibliographic essay that reviews the literature on the telegram from World War I into the twenty-first century. Various early interpretations disagreed whether the telegram was a sinister German plot or evidence of British meddling, and events in the middle of and later in the century also produced differing interpretations. On the other hand, some aspects of the telegram history have varied little, including the notion that its disclosure fanned the public’s desire for war. But as Boghardt notes, “even interpretations that have held remarkably steady over time can easily crumble or may require significant readjustment when checked on the basis of new evidence and a careful re-examination of available sources” (pp. 21-22).

Boghardt lays the groundwork for the story of the telegram by devoting biographical chapters to each of the two central participants, Arthur Zimmermann and Sir William Reginald Hall. Boghardt judges Zimmermann “as an efficient facilitator domestically and goodwill ambassador vis-à-vis Washington in foreign affairs” as long as things went well. If they did not, “the Wilhelmstrasse would need a resolute and principled leader to steer the nation with a steady hand through the crisis. Unfortunately for Germany, Zimmermann was neither” (p. 32). Hall’s brief biography, on the other hand, portrays a determined, aggressive, and capable man. His appointment as director at Intelligence Division and his assumption of

control of Room 40, the Royal Navy’s cryptanalytic unit, put the independent-minded Hall in a position to use the confidential information that flowed through his command to ensure that Britain’s best interests, as he judged them, were served. Boghardt’s summary assessment is that “Hall’s information monopoly gave him a degree of leverage over British foreign policy that far exceeded the authority formally vested in him as DID” (p. 89).

As relations between Germany and the United States grew strained, Germany naturally sought ways to reduce the danger of an American intervention. Boghardt shows that both German and American diplomats came to an early appreciation of the consequences of an extensive American involvement in Mexico. In the end, it was not German initiative, but Pancho Villa’s raid into New Mexico in March 1916 that took the United States into Mexico, ultimately with fewer consequences than Germany desired and America feared. Though Mexico features prominently in the telegram, more important from Germany’s standpoint, was reaching an arrangement with Japan. There, Germany had a two-fold desire: to keep Japan from offering more assistance to the Entente, and, if possible, to cultivate Japanese and American antagonisms that had arisen from earlier immigration disputes.

The drafting of the Zimmermann telegram took place against the background of a naval war that by the end of 1916 seemed to German military leaders to have become an indispensable complement to their land campaign on the western front. But, as Boghardt points out, the telegram was the result of the confused strategic policymaking process that existed by the end of 1916. At that time, neither the Kaiser nor Chancellor Bethmann were willing to stand up to Field Marshall Paul von Hindenberg and General Erich Ludendorff, who dismissed concerns that the employment of the submarine weapon was certain to provoke the United States. “The Zimmermann telegram was conceived amid this frantic scramble of German diplomats to prepare for the official announcement of unrestricted submarine warfare, set to begin on February 1” (p. 65).

Interception of the telegram originated in the circumstances of German transatlantic communications. Dependent on cables controlled by British, the Germans were unable to overcome the technological problems associated with long-distance radio telegraphy or the problems associated with reliable routine physical delivery of messages to distant posts. Efforts to elude British listeners by using Sweden’s cables did not prevent the British from accessing the traffic, nor did it prevent interception

when Germany used the offices of the U.S. State Department, which had been offered to facilitate peace work. Decryption of the telegram by Room 40's practiced analysts quickly gave Hall the contents. Thereafter, Hall simply awaited the proper moment, while protecting his sources and methods, to do the most damage to Germany with the information.

Hall's determination to bring the United States into the Entente camp required the aid of an influential group of well-connected pro-interventionist Americans, in particular individuals like Secretary of State Robert Lansing and the U.S. ambassador in London, Walter Hines Page. Boghardt shows how these well-disposed individuals and others made Hall's job easier by serving as willing conduits and supporters of his information. As Boghardt notes, "When it became obvious that the United States would not enter the war in response to Germany's declaration of unrestricted submarine warfare in February 1917, Hall activated his connections with pro-Allied American officials to place an explosive piece of information in the American press. This time Hall decided to inform the U.S. government of Zimmermann's Mexican-Japanese alliance scheme, with a view to 'rouse the whole of the United States and ... force the President to declare war'" (p. 115).

In spite of this aid, Hall did not get the immediate result he hoped for: "Yet the strongest response the telegram elicited from Wilson was not heightened presidential concern over a German threat to the Western Hemisphere, but a feeling of personal insult over Germany's nonchalant disregard for his peace efforts and Berlin's chutzpah in using U.S. cables to transmit an anti-American alliance offer" (p. 140). Likewise, the congressional response was mixed. Isolationism was still widespread in spite of the efforts of interventionists. Wilson's request at this time for authorization to arm American merchant ships "became a rallying point for the antiwar movement inside and outside Congress" (p. 147). Several senators with support from both political parties filibustered the armed ships bill, and Wilson was forced to achieve even this protective measure by executive order. Some in Congress speculated presciently that the telegram must be part of a British plot to embroil America in the European war and not solely the result of German action, if German at all.

The opinion of the American public is harder to determine, but Boghardt takes pains to make an analysis of public opinion through an examination of newspaper reporting after the release of the telegram. He reaches

a different conclusion than that claimed by partisans at the time and by later historians. "By early 1917, interventionists on both sides of the Atlantic were claiming that the Zimmermann telegram's disclosure was galvanizing Americans for war. On March 4, Secretary of State Robert Lansing wrote of 'the profound sensation' the telegram had created 'throughout the country.'" Hall also claimed that the publication of the telegram had "created, as we hoped and expected, the most tremendous sensation" (p. 159).

Most later historians agreed with these contemporary voices about the enormity of the telegram's effect on the American public, but Boghardt finds "little evidence to support Lansing's contention about the 'profound sensation' the telegram supposedly provoked. While the American press hotly debated the implications of Zimmermann's scheme, this controversy passed quickly and did not fundamentally alter the stance of any editor of significance vis-à-vis the European war.... The limited impact of the telegram on American public opinion is further evidenced by the fact that by mid-March, coverage of Zimmermann's scheme had virtually disappeared from all American newspapers. When the United States went to war, few if any editors cared to quote the telegram as a justification for intervention. If the U.S. press can be taken as a reflection of public opinion, the telegram's effect on American attitudes vis-à-vis intervention was ephemeral" (p. 164).

Concluding that this was a passing phenomenon, Boghardt points to a month's delay following the telegram's disclosure before the United States joined the Allies as further evidence that Wilson, as he says, "remained a reluctant interventionist" (p. 183). And this highlights the most significant opportunity missed by the Germans. Rather than attempting an alliance with two nations that were unlikely threats to the United States, the Germans ought to have played on Wilson's reluctance to go to war. This had been pointed out to the Berlin government repeatedly, particularly by Germany's ambassador in Washington. The Berlin government ignored the possibility and suffered the consequences.

Boghardt concludes that the telegram highlighted important reasons for Germany's ultimate failure. Insufficient intragovernmental coordination, subordination of diplomacy, and insufficient expertise in non-European affairs were compounded by wishful thinking. "Key military officers and Wilhelmstrasse officials preferred to see events as they deemed fit because it served their personal

or departmental goals.... As a result, Berlin concocted not only the ill-considered Mexican-Japanese alliance proposal, but based many of its policies and strategies during the war on illusions rather than realistic assessments” (p. 248).

“The United States,” he adds, “certainly would have entered World War I regardless of the telegram, but by removing Wilson’s final doubts about the wisdom of joining the Allies, it accelerated U.S. intervention, though perhaps only by a few weeks. A slightly later date of the U.S. declaration of war on Germany would not have affected the conflict’s outcome, but it may well have had

serious implications for London” (p. 251). The telegram episode marks a watershed moment in modern world history, let alone U.S. history. Thomas Boghardt mined an important lode of new material for his history not previously available to historians. In doing so, he has created a notable retelling of this story that should be studied and enjoyed by anyone looking to understand this key moment in modern history.

Note

[1]. Michael J. Hogan, ed., *Paths to Power: The Historiography of American Foreign Relations to 1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 2.

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