Introduction to
Inside Room 40: The Codebreakers of World War I
by Paul Gannon

On 17 January 1917, Nigel de Grey, a young naval intelligence officer, hurried to the office of his wartime superior, Captain William Hall, Director of Naval Intelligence. Once inside, de Grey impatiently spluttered out his question. 'Do you want to bring America into the war, sir?'

The short, dapper captain, known to his subordinates and colleagues as 'Blinker' Hall because of his rapidly blinking eyes, was immediately alert. 'Yes, why?' he exclaimed.

De Grey brandished a piece of paper, exclaiming 'I've got a telegram here that will bring them in if you give it to them'.

The war was at a critical stage. A dreadful, bloody stalemate on land and sea was consuming lives at an awful rate. The military offered no obvious way of breaking the deadlock. America's entry to the war, however, could sway the balance and bring the dreadful slaughter to an end. But neither America's government nor its people wanted to join the Europeans' imperial war. If de Grey was not exaggerating the import of his intelligence, then whatever it was he had discovered could be decisive in determining the outcome of the war.

De Grey was one of the handful of people who worked in Room 40 of the Admiralty in central London. Their task was to break German naval and diplomatic codes. This particular telegram had been sent from Berlin, via Washington, to the German representative in Mexico. De Grey, and a colleague Dilly Knox, had managed to make out only some passages of the message. But what they had revealed was enough to send de Grey dashing off to Hall's office. In the telegram the German Foreign Secretary, Arthur Zimmermann, proposed that Germany and Mexico join forces in waging war – 'conduct war jointly; make peace jointly' – against the United States. When the telegram's contents were fully decoded and revealed to the American public, America was propelled into joining the war, ensuring Germany's defeat.

This intercepted message is Room 40's most renowned achievement. Yet, the 'Zimmermann Telegram' was just one of many tens of thousands of wireless and telegraph cable messages systematically intercepted throughout the war and decoded by the Room 40, and also by its little known War Office equivalent, MI1(b). While the existence of these codebreaking activities was kept quiet during the war, various

details were exposed soon after the fighting had ended. But it was only in the early 1980s, that a semi-official account of Room 40 was written by Patrick Beesly (a naval intelligence officer at Bletchley Park, the Second World War equivalent of Room 40). Beesly had access to at least some of the Room 40 archives and his book became the standard work on the subject. In the quarter of a century since then, little new material has been published on Room 40. But many previously secret documents have been opened at the National Archives in Kew, West London, including several on the Zimmermann telegram and on the secretive MI1(b). As the centenary of the outbreak of the cataclysmic Great War approaches, it is time to review the story of Room 40, to see what the archives can tell us now.

History, it is frequently asserted, is written by the victors. And this case certainly seems to fit that aphorism. Assuming that we do not dwell too long on what might actually be meant by 'victory', Britain was clearly among the states that determined the shape of the peace settlement imposed at Versailles. British codebreakers in the First World War peeped into the secret military, naval and diplomatic messages of Germany and its allies, and also into the diplomatic messages of neutrals, including the USA, Spain, the Netherlands, Greece and Switzerland. British codebreaking was part of the overall effort that achieved victory. And, by bringing America into the war, codebreaking was critical in determining who would be the winners and the losers. So the codebreaking story would seem at first glance to be a classic case of history written by the victors through the documents that they have selected to leave us in the archives. But it is not such a simple matter.

This book tells the story of the First World War and the story of Room 40 and of MI1(b) partly through these German intercepts. In that sense it is history intercepted, decoded and translated by the victorious side – but as written by the vanquished. The intercepts allow us to hear the voice of German military and naval commanders and officers (seldom, though, of the lower ranks), and also of diplomats, politicians and spies. There are orders couched in military jargon, often about apparent trivia such as switching on harbour lights, but also informing us of debates between diplomats, civil servants and politicians about strategy. Combined, the intercepts reveal how the German military and government understood and tried to organise the war they were fighting. The geographical spread and range of topics covered in those messages is astounding. They reveal how Room 40 and MI1(b) gave British military and government leaders an extraordinary oversight of their enemies' activities on every continent and on every ocean of the land war, the sea

and air war, the espionage and sabotage war, and the propaganda and diplomatic war. The First World War was truly global, with fighting in many regions, not just the Western Front and the North Sea. Other nations had large-scale codebreaking operations, but what distinguished the British effort was its systematic nature. With Room 40 and MI1(b) we see the origins of the shadowy bodies that have industrialised codebreaking.

Yet this is also a story about people. The cast of characters that peopled Room 40, and its military equivalent, is as replete with brilliant academics and potty eccentrics as the more renowned codebreakers of Bletchley Park in the Second World War. A few accounts from the individuals, who toiled night and day between 1914 and 1918, have survived and allow us to get a feel for what it would have been like inside Room 40 or MI1(b) and to glimpse behind the mask of command and the veil of secrecy.

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