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When Intelligence Made a Difference

— WORLD WAR II – COLD WAR —

Ultra Diplomacy and the Origin of the Five Eyes Alliance

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At the beginning of World War II, Winston Churchill quickly learned that successfully decrypting German messages, including those to and from Adolf Hitler, would be instrumental in defeating the Third Reich. Churchill also understood the diplomatic value of such decryption. Churchill's decision to share the Ultra technology with the US subsequently blossomed into the Five Eyes intelligence alliance that exists today.

A Short History of Ultra

Churchill's understanding of the importance of intelligence was unique among world leaders at the time because of the government roles he had prior to moving into 10 Downing Street. He was, for instance, the Royal Navy's First Lord of the Admiralty from 1911-1915, a period that overlapped with the outbreak of World War I. Then, from 1919-1921, he headed the UK's War Office as the Secretary of State for War while simultaneously serving as the inaugural Secretary of State for Air. During this period, Churchill helped to create, then later redesign, the UK's intelligence program.[1]

Under Churchill, as prime minister, in May 1940 the UK's Government Code and Cypher School (GCCS) at Bletchley Park first successfully decrypted Enigma-enciphered messages, which were used as a major source of intelligence throughout World War II. While Alan Turing is the most widely recognized GCCS figure, hundreds of men and women at Bletchley Park – including mathematicians, linguists, and even chess champions – collectively made significant, though secret, contributions to the war effort.[2]

By the end of 1941, the UK had decrypted many codes used by the German air, sea, and land services.[3] Reflecting its perceived importance, the UK adopted the 'Ultra' designation for the signals intelligence obtained by GCCS's program to decrypt enemy communications.[4] The decrypted messages gave Churchill and rest of the UK government much needed information about German troop numbers, military maneuvers, casualties suffered, and technological developments. The benefits of this intelligence have been well publicized since Ultra was declassified in the 1970's.[5] One such example occurred during the Battle of Britain in 1940 when GCCS learned that the Luftwaffe had begun utilizing a radio beam system (Knickenbein) to precisely guide bombers to their intended targets.[6] In response, the Royal Air Force (RAF) developed a unit (No. 80 Wing) to jam the radio beams, which resulted in the Luftwaffe dropping bombs much more errantly, thereby missing critical targets.[7]

Three telegrams to military leaders illustrate that Churchill felt confident in the intelligence provided by Ultra. In a 3 July 1942 message, Churchill asked General Sir Claude Auchinleck, then Commander-in-Chief of UK forces in the Middle East, about the ongoing battle in Egypt. Specifically, Churchill asked whether Auchinleck was getting "these priceless [decrypted] messages (which have never erred) in good time?"[8] Auchinleck, however, was a tepid decisionmaker. His inactions in the fight against Field Marshal Erwin Rommel (the "Desert Fox") – even with the upper hand

1. F. H. Hinsley, "Churchill and the Use of Special Intelligence," in Robert Blake and Wm. Roger Louis (eds.) *Churchill: A Major New Assessment of His Life in Peace and War.* New York: W.W. Norton, 1993, p 407.

2. Andrew Hodges, *Alan Turing: The Enigma* (London: Vintage, 1992); Christopher Grey, *Decoding Organization: Bletchley Park, Codebreaking and Organization Studies*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. It is worth noting that the UK intelligence community received much needed assistance from the considerable efforts of the Polish intelligence services. For more information, see: Władysław Kozaczuk, *Enigma: How the German Machine Cipher Was Broken, and How It Was Read by the Allies in World War Two*, Frederick: University Publications of America, 1984.

3. Enigma had many variations used by different elements of the German military, police, and other government organizations. GCCS also broke the Fish radio-telephone system linking the German high command with subordinate armies and army groups. (F. H. Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, abridged edition, London: HMSO, 1993, pp. 14, 116-7, 439).

4. Ronald Lewin, *Ultra Goes to War: The Secret Story*, London: Penguin Group, 2001, pp. 63-4.

5. The first book published on Ultra was by F. W. Winterbotham, *The Ultra Secret*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974.

6. F. H. Hinsley, E. E. Thomas, C. F. G. Ransom, and R. C. Knight, *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, Volume 1 London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1979, p. 324.

7. David A. T. Stafford, *Churchill and Secret Service*, New York: The Overlook Press, 1999, pp. 193-4.

8. Churchill Archive, Reference CHAR 20/77/53, available at: *https://www.churchillarchive.com*.

in intelligence that Ultra provided – proved to be too hard to ignore, and in the end convinced Churchill to relieve Auchinleck of his command.[9] Later that year, General Harold Alexander, Auchinleck's replacement, received a telegram from Churchill commenting that Ultra decryptions showed "the enemy [was] in great anxiety and disarray at Buerat," (Libya) and that he was "hoping that Alexander will be able to bring forward his strike."[10] Ultimately, Alexander was able to defeat Rommel and deliver Churchill the "lynch pin…of [his] war strategy."[11] In a later telegram to then-Lieutenant General Dwight Eisenhower, Churchill expressed satisfaction with "the toll [Ultra] had take[n] on enemy supplies."[12]

Ultra and Diplomacy

While the military consequences of Ultra have been widely acknowledged, the diplomatic impact was very important but examined much less.[13] Churchill made use of decrypted messages for diplomacy as much as he utilized the information for the battlefield thanks to GCCS's "comprehensive coverage of diplomatic material."[14] As Edinburgh University historian David Stafford notes, "Ultra was a source of undreamed-of power; knowledge to use against the unsuspecting enemy, but also a trump card in [Churchill's] negotiations on strategy with his Chiefs of Staff *and allies*."[15]

The first successful UK decoding of German communication occurred in early 1940.[16] Early on, the decryptions were few enough that Churchill received daily updates, literally brought to him in a locked box for which only he had the key. The box was sent by Secret Intelligence Service head Colonel Stewart Menzies (code-named "C"). Soon, however, upwards of 3,000 messages were decrypted every day. Though Churchill remained a central consumer, he could no longer dedicate himself to reading every decrypted message.[17] He was, however, quick to recognize Ultra's diplomatic value, as the UK's "scientific and cryptanalytical secrets…could be traded for American know-how."[18]

In November 1940, Churchill ordered the scaling back of all intelligence shared with the US, in a reflection of his "desire not to give away secrets without exacting a price."[19] Much of the war until that point had been UK and Commonwealth forces facing down the fascist powers nearly alone, as Norway, the Benelux countries, and France, had all fallen before the German Blitzkrieg. The US was still attempting to stay out of the war and had offered little beyond aging ships.[20]

Unsurprisingly, as the Axis countries in Europe and Asia led a reluctant world to war, US cryptanalysts broke Japan's diplomatic codes, which were code-named "PURPLE" by American cryptographers. In a speech given at Westminster College in 2016, former National Security Agency (NSA) Deputy Director Richard "Rick" Ledgett detailed the importance of a February 1941 visit to London by a US military delegation. Ledgett explained that:

> [i]n approving the visit, Churchill had prohibited any British mention of their success against Enigma. This decision reflected his recognition of the value of the Enigma solution and concern over keeping the British success a secret from the Germans. The Americans, two Army and two Navy officers, brought a copy of the device that they developed to decrypt the PURPLE messages. They gave the PURPLE device to the British and explained how to break the

9. Allen Packwood, *How Churchill Waged War: The Most Challenging Decisions of the Second World War*, Philadelphia: Frontline Books, 2018, pp. 131-156. It should be noted that Rommel was a user of German communications intelligence and used it effectively exploiting poor British and American communications security. (Wil Deac. "Intercepted Communications for Field Marshall Erwin Rommel," originally published in *World War II Magazine*, at http:// *www.historynet.com /intercepted-communications-for-field-marshal-er-* win-rommel.htm/1; also, Hinsley, *British Intelligence*, abridged edition, p. 198.

10. Churchill Archive, Reference CHAR 20/85/70.

11. Packwood, p. 156.

12. Churchill Archive, Reference CHAR 20/85/16-17.

13. This oversight may be because, despite Churchill's best efforts to utilize Ultra decryptions to assist the Russians, Stalin often ignored the messages Churchill sent. Using decoded messages, Churchill twice tried to warn Stalin about the impending 1941 Nazi invasion, only to have Stalin dismiss the intelligence as "mere 'English Provocation.'" See Andrew Roberts, *Churchill: Walking with Destiny*, New York: Viking, 2018, p. 645.

14. Robin Denniston, *Churchill's Secret War: Diplomatic Decrypts, The Foreign Office and Turkey 1942-1944* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), p. 56.

15. Stafford, p. 189 (our emphasis).

16. The exact date of when GCCS broke the Enigma codes is recorded differently by different sources. Andrew Roberts (p. 538) in *Churchill: Walking with Destiny*, says "…22 May 1940—the Allied cryptographers at Bletchley Park broke the Luftwaffe code for the Enigma cipher machine." However, the World War II database says "British cryptologists at the Government Code and Cypher School, Bletchley Park deciphered the German Enigma code with help of Polish experts" (*https:// ww2db.com/battle_spec.php?battle_id=92*) and confirm the May 22 date for the Luftwaffe code.
Bletchley Park (*https://bletchleypark.org.uk/news/podcast-103-enigma -unlocked*) says that in January, 1940 "international efforts … led to the unlocking of [Enigma's] secrets."

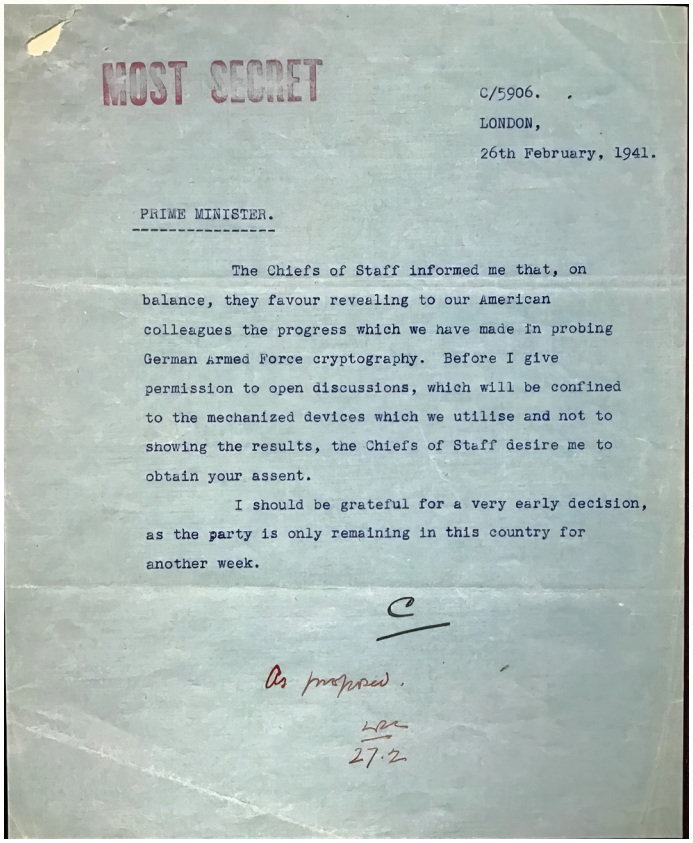
17. Hinsley, Vol. I, p. 422.

18. Stafford, p. 199.

19. Ibid, p. 201.

20. In September 1940 the US transferred 50 overage destroyers to the Royal Navy in exchange for base rights in Newfoundland, Bermuda, Antigua, Bahamas, British Guiana, Jamaica, Sant Lucia, and Trinidad. (*https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Destroyers-for-bases_deal#References*.)

> Japanese codes. This caused the British to re-examine the initial decision not to share the success against Enigma...[21]



MOST SECRET

C/5906.
LONDON,
26th February, 1941.

PRIME MINISTER.

The Chiefs of Staff informed me that, on balance, they favour revealing to our American colleagues the progress which we have made in probing German Armed Force cryptography. Before I give permission to open discussions, which will be confined to the mechanized devices which we utilise and not to showing the results, the Chiefs of Staff desire me to obtain your assent.

I should be grateful for a very early decision, as the party is only remaining in this country for another week.

C

As proposed.

27.2

During Ledgett's visit to Westminster College, he presented a joint NSA-GCHQ[22] gift to America's National Churchill Museum, which details how on 26 February, "C" (i.e. Menzies) requested permission to reveal "the progress which we have made in probing German Armed Force cryptography," which was approved "[a]s proposed" the following day in a handwritten note by "WSC" (i.e. Churchill).[23] This decision to share the Enigma decryption process, after initially (and strategically) closely guarding the technology was a watershed moment for diplomatic relations between the countries.

From Two Partners to Five Eyes

During the remainder of World War II, the UK and US worked jointly to enhance their cryptanalysis capabilities, and "[i]n doing so, they learned the value of partnership in this field and forged a trust relationship based on shared values and mutual respect for their technical skills.[24] In 1943, this informal relationship was formalized with the Britain – United States of America (BRUSA) agreement, which served as "the written constitution upon which arose the Anglo-American cryptanalytic partnership that flourished during the final two-and-a-half years of World War II."[25] This budding intelligence alliance was further cemented with what is now known as the United Kingdom – United States of America (UKUSA) agreement.[26]

In one of history's quirks, this new agreement was signed on 5 March 1946, the same day that Churchill – who had left office a year prior – was at Westminster College giving his "Sinews of Peace" speech, which called for the UK and US to work together in confronting the "iron curtain" which had "descended across" Europe.[27] Over the next ten years, the UKUSA agreement was expanded to include Canada (1948), Australia (1956), and New Zealand (1956), and in the years following, this penta-partnership has played a crucial role in maintaining international peace and security.[28]

As noted by Stafford, "[f]ive months before Pearl Harbor the still-neutral US had joined in the building of a transatlantic intelligence alliance, the eventual dimensions of which were to surpass even Churchill's wildest dreams."[29] While German battlefield successes and its post-Pearl Harbor declaration of war certainly played a role in pushing the US and UK closer together, it was Ultra diplomacy that laid the groundwork for the still-enduring Five Eyes alliance.

Recommended Readings

Richard J. Aldrich, "British Intelligence and the Anglo-American 'Special Relationship' during the Cold War," *Review*

21. Richard Ledgett, "Year of Churchill: A Conversation with the National Security Agency (NSA)." This address was given 4 April 2016 at Westminster College and is available at: *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nLlzHSm15tw* (see 11:22-11:58 for the passage above).
22. In 1946 the Government Code and Cypher School (GCCS) was renamed Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ).
23. For more information, see: *The First Americans: The 1941 US Codebreaking Mission to Bletchley Park* (Fort George G. Meade, Center for Cryptologic History), p. 29. Available at: *https://www.nsa.gov/Portals/70/documents/about/cryptologic-heritage/historical-figures-publications/publications/wwii/sherman-the-first-americans.pdf*.
24. Ledgett, 13:01-13:12.
25. Bradley F. Smith, *The Ultra-Magic Deals and the Most Secret Special Relationship, 1940-1946*, Novato: Presidio Press, 1993, p. 153.
26. On 25 June 2010, this agreement was made publicly available for the first time in history. See: *https://www.nsa.gov/Portals/70/documents/news-features/declassified-documents/ukusa/agreement_outline_5mar46.pdf*). Time magazine.
27. A transcript of this speech is available at: *https://www.nationalchurchillmuseum.org/sinews-of-peace-iron-curtain-speech.html*.
28. Anthony R. Wells, *Between Five Eyes: Fifty Years Inside the Intelligence Community*, Oxford, Casemate Publishers, 2020.
29. Stafford, p. 205.

of International Studies, 1998, 24(3): pp. 331-351.

Richard J. Aldrich, *The Hidden Hand: Britain, America, and Cold War Secret Intelligence*, Woodstock, The Overlook Press, 2002.

Jeremy Black, "Churchill as Strategist in World War Two," Churchill Archive. Available at: *https://www.churchillarchive.com/teaching-and-research/in-depth-guides/Black*. (Paywall protected.)

Martin Gilbert, "Churchill and Intelligence – Golden Eggs: The Secret War, 1940-1945," *Part I: Britain and America, Finest Hour* 149 (Winter 2010-2011): p. 20. Available at: *https://winstonchurchill.org/publications/finest-hour/finest-hour-149/churchill-and-intelligence-golden-eggs-the-secret-war-1940-1945-part-i-britain-and-america/*

John Keegan, "Churchill's Strategy," in Robert Blake and Wm. Roger Louis (eds.) *Churchill: A Major New Assessment of His Life in Peace and War*, New York: WW Norton, 1993.

Rick Ledgett, "America's National Security Agency in the context of Churchill's 'Iron Curtain' speech," in Tobias T. Gibson and Kurt W. Jefferson (eds.) *Contextualizing Security: A Reader*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, forthcoming Spring 2022.

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