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## The Zimmerman Telegram

Alexander Patterson

alexander.patterson404@topper.wku.edu

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Patterson: The Zimmerman Telegram

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The Zimmermann Telegram:  
The Spark of War or Something Else?

Alexander Patterson

On April 2, 1917 newly, re-elected President Woodrow Wilson presented his address to Congress asking for declaration of war against Germany and on April 6, 1917 the United States launched into the first “Great War.”<sup>1</sup> Historians have argued the question of cause in regard to the United States entry into the war since their declaration in 1917. All historical implications point to the Zimmermann Telegram as the spark that started the engine of war. The telegram was intended to barter for a conflict between Mexico and the United States to keep the United States occupied while Germany completed their campaign in Europe. The Zimmermann Telegram is historically seen as the entire reason the United States entered World War I in support of the allies, but the purpose of this paper is to explore Germany’s declarations of unrestricted submarine warfare on neutral countries and the failing German-American diplomatic relations that followed as an alternative rationale for United States’ entry into the war

The Zimmermann Telegram, or Zimmermann Note, was a telegraph in January of 1917 by German Foreign Minister, Arthur Zimmermann. The original telegram was sent in secret to the German foreign minister for Mexico, Henrich von Eckhardt. Eckhardt was Resident Minister for Germany, serving as a diplomat in Mexico. He received the telegraph from the German ambassador to the United States, Johann Heinrich von Bernstorff. According to the telegram he was to begin negotiations with Mexico and encourage them to enact war with the United States. However, the original message was intercepted by British intelligence when being transmitted between Bernstorff and Eckhardt. The message was promptly decoded by the British secretive “Room 40.” This message, while not initially given to the United States by the British, still marked a transition in which Germany chose to take a more direct approach in conflict with the

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<sup>1</sup> Woodrow Wilson, "Presidential Proclamation 1364 of April 6, 1917, by President Woodrow Wilson declaring war against Germany," *National Archives Catalog*, April 6, 1917, Series: Presidential Proclamations, 1791 – 1991, Record Group 11: General Records of the United States Government, 1778 – 1992, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/299966> (Accessed November 9, 2017)

United States. The United States government was told about this telegram on February 24, 1917 and its content quickly published in various American media.<sup>2</sup> The *Bemidji Daily Pioneer* published this heading “Conspiracy against United States has failed; Germany’s plot fully known,” on March 1, 1917. This article both posted the text of the Telegram and provided commentary on its contents. Thus, knowledge and the American outrage that followed were a guaranteed concept. Political leaders could not allow this insult to pass unresponsive and it forced action.<sup>3</sup>

The Zimmermann Telegram, despite the proposed ramification it brought, promised the return of territory to Mexico. The ideas presented by the telegram detailed Germany’s exact plan with Mexico by their wording, “we make Mexico a proposal or alliance on the following basis: make war together, make peace together, generous financial support and an understanding on our part that Mexico is to reconquer the lost territory in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona,” which meant economic support from Germany and the reconquest of lands lost in the nineteenth century should they agree. The short telegram posed a threat to the United States with Mexico on one side and the risk of German naval invasion on another. The United States declared war with Germany on April 6, 1917 launching them into an intercontinental conflict; however, the discovery of this correspondence was not the only reason that led the United States to enter The Great War.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> “The Zimmermann Telegram,” *National Archives: Educator Resources*, <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/Zimmermann#documents> (Accessed November 8, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Minn Bemidji, “Conspiracy against United States has failed; Germany’s plot fully known,” *The Bemidji daily pioneer*, March 1, 1917, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn86063381/1917-03-01/ed-1/seq-2/> (Accessed November 7, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> *Zimmermann Telegram, 1917*, Decimal File, 1910-1929, 862.20212/82A (1910-1929), and *Decoded Zimmermann Telegram, 1917*, Decimal File, 1910-1929, 862.20212/69, General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59, National Archives.

As this paper seeks to argue, earlier events and tensions before this telegram would have eventually led the United States to war, primarily the constant annoyance Germany's submarine warfare was causing on American economic interests. The telegram details how Germany returned to unrestricted submarine warfare in February, and they endeavored to keep United States neutral, but also seek to negotiate a war between Mexico and the United States. However, Zimmermann seems to understand the United States would enter the war with their announcement, but Germany simply wanted to eliminate United States as an arms dealer in the War. However, based on the wording, "In the event of this not succeeding, we make Mexico a proposal...make war together," it can be argued that the telegram was a direct instigation of war towards the United States.<sup>5</sup>

The role the Zimmermann Telegram played in United States intervention in World War I is undoubtedly a factor. For a century, however, historians have debated the central role the telegram played. This telegram was originally a coded and secret message detailing possible plans that could be taken with Mexico to keep the attention of the United States occupied. It was not designed to be seen by prying eyes, particularly the United States. The guarantees of the telegram are nothing more than plans that Germany was enacting. The telegram was a list of diplomatic suggestions for German ambassadors to enact in relations to the United States and Mexico. Without the decoding of this message the United States would have never been aware of its existence. However, historians like Thomas Boghardt have argued this telegraph merely sped United States' entry into World War I by a few weeks at most.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Zimmermann Telegram, 1917*, National Archive.

<sup>6</sup> *Zimmermann Telegram, 1917*, National Archive; Thomas Boghardt, *The Zimmermann Telegram*. (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2012). 293.

Despite British intelligence deciphering the code of the Zimmermann Telegram, its authenticity was questioned by American Leaders. Secretary of State Robert Lansing in his words about the war stated, “The President said that he had been wondering how Bernstorff got the message from Berlin and that the closing of secret lines of communication with his government made him a little uncertain as to its authenticity.” The President knew the implications of this note should it be true and Lansing records the doubt the President most likely felt.<sup>7</sup> In 1966, Barbara Tuchman wrote a long piece discussing this very same topic which gives more insight into the initial idea that this document was a fabrication. Tuchman details how the presidential cabinet had a very large problem with proving this document’s authenticity. Mexico and Japan denied the document and even Zimmermann challenged its authenticity when questioned.<sup>8</sup> However, on March 3, 1917 Zimmermann regrettably announced to German news the telegram’s authenticity and Lansing stated “the charge of falsification collapsed.” With this news the United States was pushed to finally make a public decision on the continued nature of its neutrality.<sup>9</sup>

Tuchman argues that the Zimmermann Telegram was the “kick that did it” causing intensive hostility toward Germany. While providing examples of how the telegram came to creation, her argument fails to consider the influence submarine warfare had on American interests prior to the telegram.<sup>10</sup> The telegram, as Thomas Boghardt argued in his book, “accelerated United States intervention, though perhaps only by a few weeks.”<sup>11</sup> Despite the argument presented in both books United States intervention was not an if, but rather a when.

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Lansing, *War Memoirs of Robert Lansing*. (New York: Indianapolis, Indiana University, 1935), 227.

<sup>8</sup> Barbara W. Tuchman, “The Telegram in Washington,” *The Zimmermann Telegram*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985), 182-183.

<sup>9</sup> Lansing, *War Memoirs*, pp. 232.

<sup>10</sup> Tuchman, *Zimmermann Telegram*, 199.

<sup>11</sup> Boghardt, *Zimmermann Telegram*. 292-293.

The Telegram certainly played a role in propagating a response, however, the overwhelming reason was German use of the submarine on United States' shipping. Another argument could question what the ramifications would have been had the United States entry been delayed by a few months or few weeks, however, what is known is the impact it did have on history.

By entering the war the United States ended its long proclaimed neutrality. With the onset of the War in 1914, United States leaders faced a decision, to partake in the war or avoid it? Understanding America neutrality is key to explaining the reason they entered the war at all. Woodrow Wilson gave a statement declaring Neutrality in 1914 detailing how the United States would "speak in the true spirit of neutrality, which is the spirit of impartiality and fairness and friendliness to all concerned." Wilson in his address expressed a desire for unity among the different ethnic groups within the country, noting the division there was between them no doubt escalated by aspects of the war.<sup>12</sup> He no doubt understood the possible divisions that pro and antiwar sentiments create during escalating wartimes

The spirit of European isolationism practiced and altered by the United States' self-proclaimed neutrality wasn't a rejection of the world to live as hermits, refusing to communicate and trade, but rather, as defined by Richard Owens, "applies to any country or issue outside the defined area of vital United States overseas interests."<sup>13</sup> However, the idea of continued neutrality was causing economic havoc and may have been a growing opinion leading to increased support for a war effort.<sup>14</sup> Ships such as the *City of Memphis* and *Illinois* were loaded

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<sup>12</sup>Wilson, Woodrow. "Message on Neutrality," August 19, 1914, *The American Presidency Project*, Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/message-neutrality> (Accessed November 8, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> Richard Owens, *The Neutrality Imperative* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2009), 4.

<sup>14</sup> Eugene Klapp, "What Neutrals Could Do," *The New York Times*, May 30, 1915, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=940DE6D81338E633A25753C3A9639C946496D6CF&legacy=true>. (Accessed October 9, 2017)

with cargo to be traded in the United States but were sunk by the German Navy in March 1917. According to Lansing “These attacks required the government to review the new situation thus presented and to decide whether or not the time had arrived to abandon armed neutrality.” Many of the pro-war sentiments prior to United States entry originated on the east coast with states and commerce being unaffected towards the Pacific. The interests associated with east coast states were the ones most affected by the War after all. Early discussion of vengeance rose as a direct result of German submarine actions.<sup>15</sup> The constant irritation and interaction on American naval interests prior to United States entry by German submarines played the key factor in the eventual declaration.

U-Boat warfare during the Great War was without argument a major tool used by various navies, but German use of this vessel was a source of great strife for the United States. Germany issued a decree on February 4, 1915 declaring:

“All the waters surrounding Great Britain and Ireland, including the whole of the English Channel are hereby declared to be a war zone. From February 19 onwards every enemy merchant vessel found within this war zone will be destroyed without its being always possible to avoid danger to the crews and passengers. Neutral ships will also be exposed to danger in the war zone, and in view of the misuse of neutral flags ordered on January 31 by the British Government, and owing to unforeseen incidents to which naval warfare is liable, it is impossible to avoid attacks being made on neutral ships in mistake for those of the enemy.”<sup>16</sup>

The U-Boats were initially designed to target military targets, later after unrestricted warfare was adopted the Germans attempted to warn civilians of sailing in dangerous waters

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<sup>15</sup> Lansing, *War Memoirs*, 233, 232.

<sup>16</sup> Winston Churchill, *The World Crisis, 1911-1918* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2005), 418.

therefore preventing unwanted causalities. It was shortly after publishing this decree that the passenger ship *Lusitania* was sunk on May 7, 1915 by a German torpedo killing 1,198 people of which 128 were Americans. Although its cargo was arguably stocked with military supplies which resulted in the rapid sinking of the vessel and violated terms of ‘neutrality,’ by late 1917 this event was heard as a battle cry, “Remember the *Lusitania*,” by Americans into the war and thus showing the wound the event left on American psyche. Thus, the *Lusitania* became a reason some Americans justified intervention into World War I.<sup>17</sup>

It was by the sinking of the *Lusitania* and the public outcry it caused that the United States was forced to express their anger towards Germany. A news article from that same month details how Germans regretted the loss of civilian life, but in the article it quotes words from a German newspaper *The Berliner Tageblatt*, “Every warship, as needs scarcely be said, may expect to be torpedoed without previous warning...Therefore, the *Lusitania*, too...must have been prepared for an attack.” The news article gives insight into the growing hatred America was developing for Germany and continued neutrality or impartiality in the war. The news article also detailed how this attack could have been prevented had the correct measures been taken to secure safe passage and the article did not desire war.<sup>18</sup> A few months after this event in August, 1915 the *SS Arabic* was sunk by a German torpedo that killed a few Americans and the talks of war were discussed in Washington as a result.<sup>19</sup> The argument in Washington was a “protest made to the German Government against the use as commerce-destroyers” and in May of 1916 a formal complaint was

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<sup>17</sup> Diana Preston, *Lusitania: An Epic Tragedy* (Bloomsbury: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2002), 5.

<sup>18</sup> Wilson Blames, “German Comment on the *Lusitania*; Loss of life is regretted, but the Action of the Submarine is Extolled,” *The New York Times*, May 31, 1915, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=9C05E0D81338E633A25752C3A9639C946496D6CF&legacy=true> (Accessed November 9, 2017).

<sup>19</sup> Lansing, *War Memoirs*, 43-46.

sent to Ambassador Gerard in Berlin to voice to the German government.<sup>20</sup> Lansing's quote regards German U-Boat activity as an affront to economic activity, thus livelihood and profits. Hurting economy and profits hurts the American capitalism system and therefore American herself in Lansing's eyes.

The sinking of the *Lusitania* and *SS Arabic* and expressed anger by the United States forced Germany to react, else risk war from another opponent. German ideology for unrestricted submarine warfare was one that arose from knowledge of their naval superiority and they used it to slowly starve Britain. Germany in an effort to cause fear and prevent neutral ships from bringing supplies, munitions, and food to allied forces they began preying on cargo ships as well as passenger ships. Their design was to cause havoc on mainland Britain and was partly successful, but the miscalculation of Germany was the possibility that the United States might rise to join the war on the side of the alliance.<sup>21</sup> After the sinking of the *Lusitania* it marked a period of hesitation by German submarines, but with the sinking of the *Sussex* in February 1916 it would have led to war had Germany not surrendered in their acts of submarine warfare altogether. America was insisting that Germany abandon a policy jeopardizing American lives and interests.<sup>22</sup>

President Wilson had every intention of keeping the United States out of war, but prepared for its eventuality. Wilson would argue "peace without victory," having countries involved in 'The Great War' to state their intentions. Wilson hoped that by countries outright stating their hostility it would curb violent behavior and allow diplomatic discussion. It was Germany's declaration of continued all-out naval warfare that would force a diplomatic severing between Germany and America. Also the continued strikes on American boats allied and owned, accordingly turned even

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<sup>20</sup> Lansing, *War Memoirs*, 28.

<sup>21</sup> Frank H. Simonds, *History of the World War. Vol. 2* (New York: Doubleday Page & Co. 1918), 80-81.

<sup>22</sup> Frank H. Simonds, *History of the World War. Vol. 4* (New York: Doubleday Page & Co. 1919), 36; Simonds, *History of the World War. Vol. 2*, 87.

the greatest opposition to the war path.<sup>23</sup> Within the German government, General Erich von Falkenhayn and others had come to believe that war could not be won on land. Unfortunately Germans were to make two errors causing United States entry, the first being the irritation of the America people's economic interests, and the second the announcement of return of unrestricted submarine warfare.<sup>24</sup>

While the number of people inclined to the idea of War was slowly increasing as it progressed, primarily from those on the East Coast and people involved with commerce, the Zimmermann Telegram did accomplish the action of unifying most of country for United States entry in 1917. People viewed the actions stated in the telegram as "sinister" and "cold-blooded." Lansing argues "the Zimmermann Telegram resulted in unifying public sentiment...putting the people solidly behind the government in making war inevitable."<sup>25</sup> The fact that this telegram was originally encoded, despite being sent on United States channels, must not be forgotten. Had it not been intercepted by the British, the United States may have never known of its existence. The telegram's existence and the use of United States diplomatic cables to send it removed any doubts Wilson had towards going to war.<sup>26</sup> However, Wilson would have urged the United States to enter the war regardless of the telegram because of the constant abuse by German submarines on United States economy. With the anger caused over the *Lusitania*, it would have simply taken another similar highly publicized event to drive the United States to war. The telegram and its revelation merely accelerated our involvement.

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<sup>23</sup>David Stevenson, "Diplomats," in *Cambridge History of the First World War, Vol 2*, ed. Jay Winter (Yale University, Connecticut: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 77-78.

<sup>24</sup>C. Hartley Grattan, *Why We Fought*, Ed. Keith L. Nelson (The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1969). Library of Congress, 375, 377.

<sup>25</sup> Lansing, *War Memoirs*, 232.

<sup>26</sup> Boghardt, *Zimmermann Telegram*. pp. 292-293.

Between 1916 to about March 1917 Germany declined their U-Boat activity. However, as stated in the Zimmermann Telegram, Germany was to announce a return to unrestricted submarine warfare in February, 1917.<sup>27</sup> Despite the declined activity tactics by German U-Boats sunk many merchant and passenger vessels including the *Laconia* in February 1917, and three other merchant ships would be sunk a week after Wilson gave an executive order arming merchant ships in March 1917.<sup>28</sup> Other ships of United States' interests that were sunk by German submarines included, but not limited to, the *SS Falaba* on March 28, 1915; *Vigilancia* on March 16, 1917, and *City of Memphis* on March 17, 1917. While that list is not every ship, but rather a small number, it gives a scope for the constant impact this war was having.<sup>29</sup> Between 1914 and 1916 Allied and neutral shipping tonnage lost to U-boat activity was about 4 million, but in 1917 alone that number would exceed 6 million.<sup>30</sup> American-German relations were to a tipping point. Those ships were among only a few of 'neutrally' aligned ships that were sunk before United States intervention. Germany again miscalculated as they had in 1916 by giving free rein to their submarine forces and allowed the Zimmermann Telegram to be covertly created and thus not fearing an American response. Germany speculated that within a couple weeks to just a few months British surrender was assured. British funds were beginning to be depleted and only by United States interventions, an unanticipated consequence by the Germans, were they saved.<sup>31</sup>

The declaration made by Germany of unrestricted naval warfare, despite the tactical error in hindsight, was at the heart of the United States entry into 'The Great War.' Woodrow Wilson

<sup>27</sup> Spencer C. Tucker, *The Great War 1914-18* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1998), 133; *Zimmermann Telegram*, 1917, National Archives.

<sup>28</sup> Tucker, *The Great War*, 133-134; "Sink Neutral Ship, Fire on Rescuers," *The New York Times*, May 25, 1915, <https://www.nytimes.com/1915/05/25/archives/sink-neutral-ship-fire-on-rescuers-germans-blow-up-norwegian.html> (Accessed November 7, 2018).

<sup>29</sup> Lansing, *War Memoirs*, 28, 233.

<sup>30</sup> Simonds, *History of the World War*, Vol. 4, 203.

<sup>31</sup> Boghardt, *The Zimmermann Telegram*, 293.

would present an address to Congress on April 2, 1917 requesting an open declaration of war against Germany. At the forefront of his address he presented German submarines as a major problem for the United States:

“On the third of February last I officially laid before you the extraordinary announcement of the Imperial German Government that on and after the first day of February it was its purpose to put aside all restraints of law or of humanity and use its submarines to sink every vessel that sought to approach either the ports of Great Britain and Ireland or the western coasts of Europe or any of the ports controlled by the enemies of Germany within the Mediterranean. That had seemed to be the object of the German submarine warfare earlier in the war, but since April of last year the Imperial Government had somewhat restrained the commanders of its undersea craft in conformity... The new policy has swept every restriction aside. Vessels of every kind, whatever their flag, their character, their cargo, their destination, their errand, have been ruthlessly sent to the bottom”<sup>32</sup>

Wilson appealed to the spirit of War in Congress in this address. He also attempted to appeal to their compassion detailing how “American lives taken” have overwhelmed them and other nations involved. In Wilson’s address there is a sudden shift in attitude towards the war. A man whose 1916 campaign slogan, “He kept us out of war,” assisted him to the presidency in 1917. The continued German abuse on America as an effect of the war can be described as pushing Wilson and America to an opposite attitude on continued neutrality.<sup>33</sup> Wilson had been thinking about war for some time, and his slogan was nothing more than an appeal to the American people.

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<sup>32</sup> “Presidential Proclamation 1364 of April 6, 1917, by President Woodrow Wilson Declaring War Against Germany,” April 6, 1917, National Archives Catalog, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/299966> (Accessed November 7, 2017).

<sup>33</sup> “President Woodrow Wilson declaring war against Germany,” 1917, National Archives Catalog.

Wilson's slogan painted him as a peacemaker and thus gave him additional votes. Wilson was playing the "Big-stick ideology" established by Roosevelt only a few years back. The arguments made by the American government and the people itself were all in response to the intrusion of their naval interests. As direct result of German submarine campaigns, over two million reported metric tonnage would be lost at sea in the year 1916 alone.<sup>34</sup>

The submarines during World War I were a truly fascinating device. Their modernization brought a change to warfare itself. Germany's calculated use of the submarine brought several victories and pressure upon their opponents. German fully exploited their abilities to attack undetected on targets. It was because of the German U-Boat, Britain was being economically starved. German naval authorities knew the power submarines possessed before the war and constructed a number more than Allied forces. This forced British naval strategy to adapt quickly to the new kind of warfare that nearly ended the war very quickly. If Britain had not fortified themselves enough with naval technology to defend against German submarines and without the decline of U-boat activity in 1916, Britain may have been forced to surrender or withdraw from the war entirely.<sup>35</sup>

The German announcement of unrestricted warfare and the Zimmermann Telegram, the culmination of both which forced United States involvement, was not a gamble made by the Germans. The Germans had calculated that continued fighting would bring Britain to its knees shortly and to them this was mathematically certain. American reports of the tonnage lost at sea by German submarine totaled over three and half million between 1914 and 1916. Germany saw victory before the United States could mobilize effectively. They had never considered the

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<sup>34</sup> Simonds, *History of the World War*, Vol. 4, 203.

<sup>35</sup> Simonds, *History of the World War*. Vol 4, 194-195.

submarines' campaign would lead to an accelerated retaliation offensive and believed American hostility would not affect their course.<sup>36</sup>

The Zimmermann Telegram presents an interesting historical perspective and American propaganda has immortalized it as the reason for entry into the war. The document originally thought a forgery, was confirmed by Zimmermann and further separated American-German relations. However, it wasn't the document alone but also the German return to unrestricted submarine warfare in February of the same year that drove the United States to war by April 1917. Over the course of the war with the declaration of neutrality in 1914 by the United States to the sinking of the *Lusitania* in 1915, the American ideology of isolationism was shifting to a global perspective. The irritation of constant insult and siege on American naval interests forced a response by American powers. German naval powers knew United States entry into the war was imminent and in an effort to calculate their victory made grave errors in underestimating American response. The Zimmermann Telegram provides not a historical document for the cause of United States entry, but rather a case of German miscalculation on the timing of British surrender and speed of United States mobilization.

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<sup>36</sup> Simonds, *History of the World War. Vol 4*, 195-196, 203.

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