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ABSTRACT

Between 1914 and the spring of 1917, Europe engaged in the conflict known as World War I. The United States remained neutral. In January of 1917, British cryptographers deciphered a telegram from German Foreign Minister Arthur Zimmerman to the German Minister to Mexico, Heinrich J. F. von Eckhardt, offering U.S. territory to Mexico in return for joining the German cause. This message helped draw the United States into World War I and changed the course of history. In an effort to protect their intelligence from detection and to capitalize on growing anti-German sentiment in the United States, the British waited until February 24, 1917, to present the telegram to President Woodrow Wilson. The U.S. press published news of the telegram on March 1, 1917. This lesson plan provides the background for the incident; identifies the National History Standards and National Civics and Government Standards correlations; presents three learning activities; and offers primary two documents--the coded telegram and the decoded message. Contains a written document analysis worksheet. (BT)

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TEACHING WITH DOCUMENTS

**The Zimmermann
Telegram**

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http://www.archives.gov/digital_classroom/lessons/zimmermann_telegram/zimmermann_telegram.html

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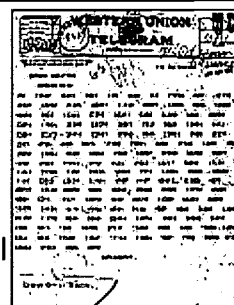
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Teaching With Documents Lesson Plan:

The Zimmermann Telegram

Background

Between 1914 and the spring of 1917, the European nations engaged in a conflict that became known as World War I. While armies moved across the face of Europe, the United States remained neutral. In 1916 Woodrow Wilson was elected President for a second term, largely because of the slogan "He kept us out of war." Events in early 1917 would change that hope. In frustration over the effective British naval blockade, in February Germany broke its pledge to limit submarine warfare. In response to the breaking of the Sussex pledge, the United States severed diplomatic relations with Germany.



In January of 1917, British cryptographers deciphered a telegram from German Foreign Minister Arthur Zimmermann to the German Minister to Mexico, von Eckhardt, offering United States territory to Mexico in return for joining the German cause. This message helped draw the United States into the war and thus changed the course of history. The telegram had such an impact on American opinion that, according to David Kahn, author of *The Codebreakers*, "No other single cryptanalysis has had such enormous consequences." It is his opinion that "never before or since has so much turned upon the solution of a secret message." In an effort to protect their intelligence from detection and to capitalize on growing anti-German sentiment in the United States, the British waited until February 24 to present the telegram to Woodrow Wilson. The American press published news of the telegram on March 1. On April 6, 1917, the United States Congress formally declared war on Germany and its allies.

The story of British intelligence efforts to decipher the German code is fascinating and complicated. *The Zimmermann Telegram* by Barbara Tuchman recounts that story in all of its exciting detail. It is an excellent historical account for high school students.

The coded telegram is from Decimal File 862.20212/82A (1910-1929), and the decoded telegram below is from Decimal File 862.20212/69 (1910-1929), General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59.

The Documents

Document 1: Coded Telegram

National Archives and Records
Administration
General Records of the Department of
State
Record Group 59

Document 2: Decoded Message

National Archives and Records
Administration
General Records of the Department of
State
Record Group 59

Lesson Resources

Standards Correlations

Teaching Activities

Document Analysis Worksheet

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URL: [zimmermann_telegram.html](http://www.archives.gov/digital_classroom/lessons/zimmermann_telegram/)

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Teaching Activities

Standards Correlations

This lesson correlates to the National History Standards.

- Era 7-The Emergence of Modern America (1890 - 1930)
 - Standard 2B-Demonstrate understanding of the causes of World War I and why the United States intervened.

This lesson also correlates to the National Standards for Civics and Government.

- Standard IV.A.2-Explain how nation-states interact with each other.

Cross-curricular Connections

Share this exercise with your history and mathematics colleagues.

Teaching Suggestions

1. **Decoding a Message:** In this exercise, students decode a fictitious message using a simple substitution code. As homework, ask students to write a message using the code, and then exchange the messages for decoding.
2. The Zimmermann telegram provides an opportunity to review geography with your students. Ask them to locate England, Germany, Mexico, and Japan on a world map or globe. Direct students to indicate on the map or globe the territory offered by the Germans to the Mexicans in the telegram. Ask them to calculate how much the territory offered to Mexico would increase the size of that country. What geographical advantages would the Germans gain by Mexican entry into the war? What was the role of Japan?
3. **Discussion questions:**
 - a. What other documents have changed the course of American history? For example, consider the effects of the Emancipation Proclamation, the Monroe Doctrine, and the DeLome Letter.

- b. What events in 1916 and 1917 contributed to the impact the Zimmermann telegram would have on the American public?
 - c. Would the United States have remained neutral if the Zimmermann telegram had not been revealed?
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Page http://www.archives.gov/digital_classroom/lessons/zimmermann_telegram/teaching_activities.html
URL: [teaching_activities.html](http://www.archives.gov/digital_classroom/lessons/zimmermann_telegram/teaching_activities.html)

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CLASS OF SERVICE REQUIRED
Fast Day Message
Day Letter
Night Message
Night Letter

Please check service if you wish the class of service indicated OTHERWISE THIS TELEGRAM WILL BE TRANSMITTED AS A FAST-DAY MESSAGE.

WESTERN UNION TELEGRAM

53817
The Flat

NEWCOMB-CALVERT METHOD

Send the following telegram, subject to the terms on back hereof, which are hereby agreed to.

via Galveston

JAN 10 1917

GERMAN LEGATION

MEXICO CITY

130 13042 13401 8501 115 3528 416 17214 8491 11310
 18147 18222 21560 10247 11518 23677 13605 3494 14938
 98092 5905 11311 10392 10371 0302 21290 5161 59695
 23571 17504 11209 18276 18101 0317 0228 17694 4473
 22284 22200 19452 21589 87893 5589 13918 8958 12137
 1333 4725 4458 5905 17188 13851 4458 17149 14471 6705
 13850 12224 8929 14991 7382 15857 67893 14218 56477
 5870 17553 87823 5870 5454 16102 15217 22801 17138
 21001 17388 7440 23638 18222 8719 14331 15021 23845
 3158 23552 22096 21604 4797 9497 22464 20855 4377
 23610 18140 22280 5905 13347 20420 39689 13732 20687
 6929 5275 18507 52262 1340 22049 13339 11285 22295
 10439 14814 4178 6992 8784 7032 7357 6928 52262 11287
 21100 21272 9346 9559 22464 15874 18502 18500 15857
 2188 5378 7381 98092 16127 13486 9350 9220 76036 14219
 5144 2831 17920 11347 17142 11264 7867 7762 15099 9110
 10482 97558 3509 3670

BERNSTORFF.

Charge German Embassy.

Document 1: The Coded Telegram



MAILED
Letter 1-8-88
W. H. Harrison, State Dept.

TELEGRAM RECEIVED.

By *Frank A. Schoff*
Date *Oct. 27, 1917*

FROM 2nd from London # 5747.

"We intend to begin on the first of February unrestricted submarine warfare. We shall endeavor in spite of this to keep the United States of America 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 an understanding on our part that Mexico is to reconquer the lost territory in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona. The settlement in detail is left to you. You will inform the President of the above most secretly as soon as the outbreak of war with the United States of America is certain and add the suggestion that he should, on his own initiative, ~~write~~ ^{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 ruthless employment of our submarines now offers the prospect of compelling England in a few months to make peace." Signed, ZIMMERMAN.

Document 2: Decoded Message



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Written Document Analysis Worksheet

1. TYPE OF DOCUMENT (Check one):

- | | | |
|-------------------------------------|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Newspaper | <input type="checkbox"/> Map | <input type="checkbox"/> Advertisement |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Letter | <input type="checkbox"/> Telegram | <input type="checkbox"/> Congressional record |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Patent | <input type="checkbox"/> Press release | <input type="checkbox"/> Census report |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Memorandum | <input type="checkbox"/> Report | <input type="checkbox"/> Other |

2. UNIQUE PHYSICAL QUALITIES OF THE DOCUMENT (Check one or more):

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Interesting letterhead | <input type="checkbox"/> Notations |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Handwritten | <input type="checkbox"/> "RECEIVED" stamp |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Typed | <input type="checkbox"/> Other |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Seals | |

3. DATE(S) OF DOCUMENT:

4. AUTHOR (OR CREATOR) OF THE DOCUMENT:

POSITION (TITLE):

5. FOR WHAT AUDIENCE WAS THE DOCUMENT WRITTEN?

6. DOCUMENT INFORMATION (There are many possible ways to answer A-E.)

A. List three things the author said that you think are important:

B. Why do you think this document was written?

C. What evidence in the document helps you know why it was written? Quote from the document.

D. List two things the document tells you about life in the United States at the time it was written:

E. Write a question to the author that is left unanswered by the document:

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Page URL: http://www.archives.gov/digital_classroom/lessons/analysis_worksheets/document.html

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