

PRIMARY SOURCE ACTIVITY: THE ZIMMERMANN TELEGRAM

One of the motivators for the U.S. to enter World War I was a secret telegram from German Foreign Minister Arthur Zimmermann to the German Minister to Mexico. This telegram was intercepted and deciphered by the British in January 1917. The following month, the British released the telegram to President Woodrow Wilson, and the contents were published widely in newspapers. Americans were shocked to learn that Zimmermann had tried to convince Mexico to join Germany in the war effort in return for U.S. territory Germany believed Mexico could seize from the U.S.

The image shows a Western Union Telegram form. At the top, it says "WESTERN UNION TELEGRAM". Below that, there is a grid of numbers. The numbers are arranged in rows and columns, with some numbers circled. There are also handwritten notes and a date stamp "JAN 19 1917". The bottom of the form has the text "Charge German Embassy."

130	13042	13401	8501	115	3528	416	17214	6491	11310
18147	18222	21500	10247	11518	23877	13805	3494	14936	
98092	5905	11311	10392	10371	0302	21290	5161	39895	
23571	17504	11269	18276	18101	0317	0228	17894	4473	
23284	22200	19452	21589	07893	5569	13918	8958	12137	
1333	4725	4458	5905	17108	13851	4458	17149	14471	0706
13850	12224	0929	14991	7382	15857	07893	14218	38477	
5870	17553	07093	5870	5454	18102	15217	22801	17138	
21001	17388	7446	23638	18222	0719	14331	15021	23845	
3186	23552	22096	21804	4797	9497	22461	20855	4377	
23610	18140	22280	5905	13347	20420	39889	13732	20887	
6929	5275	18507	52242	1340	22049	13339	11265	22295	
10439	14814	4178	6992	8784	7632	7357	6926	52262	11267
21100	21272	9346	9559	22464	15874	18502	18500	15857	
2188	5376	7381	98092	16127	13486	9350	9220	78036	14219
5144	2831	17920	11347	17142	11264	7887	7762	15099	9110
10482	97556	3569	3870						

TRANSCRIPT OF ZIMMERMANN TELEGRAM (1917)

(Decoded message text of the Zimmermann Telegram)
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 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. 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, 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, ZIMMERMANN.

Citation: 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. To view the telegram in digital format visit:

www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=60

DOCUMENT-BASED QUESTIONS

1. What does the telegram reveal about Germany's plans regarding submarine warfare?
2. What role does Zimmermann want Mexico to play in World War I?
Do you think Mexico would have agreed to this plan if given the opportunity?
3. Why do you think the Zimmermann telegram provoked the U.S. to enter World War I?
What were some of the other factors that contributed to the U.S. declaring war against Germany in April 1917?

ACTIVITY

After analyzing the telegram as a class or in small groups, ask students to respond to question #3 in essay format.