Chapter I

The Zimmermann telegram

There is no single event that decided the outcome of the First World War 1914–1918. But the entry of the USA as a belligerent—after long hesitation—was a decisive factor in the success of the Entente, originally led by France and Great Britain. And the (in)famous telegram discussed in this paper played a role in changing the anti-war attitude in large parts of the US population and giving President Thomas Woodrow Wilson the popular and political majority for entry into the war on the side of the Entente, clinching its victory. The cryptanalytic solution has been called “the greatest intelligence coup of all time.”

The telegram is an instructive display of German failures and British successes, both in cryptology and in diplomacy.

I.1. Capturing the Magdeburg’s codebooks

We start with a tale from the early stages of the British cryptographic bureau, concerning a marvellous gift they received and which got them started on their breaks into the German cipher systems. The story begins less than a month after the German military had embarked on the adventure that would eventually lead to their downfall, by attacking Belgium
and France.

In the middle of the night of 26 August 1914, the German light cruiser SMS Magdeburg was sailing in a Baltic Sea flotilla intending to wreak havoc on the Russian ships in the Gulf of Finland. She followed the leading ship, the light cruiser Augsburg, who tried to sneak south around a suspected Russian mine field. But she lost visual contact in a dense fog, and just as she was turning around from a southerly to an easterly course, she ran aground in shallow waters off the northern tip of the Estonian island of Osmussaar (Swedish: Odensholm), at 12.37 am. After desperate attempts to get her off, also with the help of the torpedo boat V-26, her captain Richard Habenicht ordered her to be blown up, around 9.00 am. By mistake, the fuses were lit too early, and the men had less then five minutes to abandon ship.

The Magdeburg had four copies of the codebook Signalbuch der Kaiserlichen Marine on board; see Figure I.1 for an excerpt.\footnote{Signalbuch der Kaiserlichen Marine = signal book of the Imperial Navy. The plaintext words are: insult, to scold; dishonorable, disgrace; umbrella, to protect (against); umbrella (folding) anchor; battle; to offer a battle; to accept a battle; to evade a battle; battle begins; during the battle; after the battle.} One was burned in time. One was jettisoned overboard. Radioman Second Class Neuhaus jumped overboard with the third one and was not seen again. And the fourth one—was forgotten.

By then, Russian ships had arrived. Lieutenant Galibin of the tor-