

# HISTORICAL COUNCIL

The Zimmermann Telegram Crisis (1917)

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## *1. History of the Committee*

The Historical Committee was established in the Model United Nations (MUN) on January 24, 1946. Its purpose is to review a specific historical topic that has already occurred. It allows participants to explore and understand historical context and provides them with the opportunity to explore new possible solutions, different from how the event ended. The committee evolved from informal groups to complex bodies. Early committees were often temporary and focused on specific issues; however, standing committees with broader jurisdictions became most common.

## *2. Introduction*

In January 1917, during the height of World War I, British intelligence intercepted a secret telegram sent by German Foreign Minister Arthur Zimmermann to Mexico. The message proposed a military alliance between Germany and Mexico, promising the return of lost territories (Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona) if the United States entered the war against Germany.

When the telegram was revealed, the U.S. public was outraged, pushing President Woodrow Wilson toward declaring war on Germany. The discovery sparked diplomatic chaos, suspicion, and propaganda battles across Europe and the Americas.

In this crisis committee, delegates must navigate espionage, war mobilization, and conflicting national interests. Will they prevent a world war — or accelerate it?

### *3. Historical Context*

In 1917, during the heat of the Great War (WW1), the battle was reaching a brutal stalemate. After more than 2 years of nonstop fighting, both the Allied forces and the Central Powers were exhausted, but Germany was in a dire situation. The British naval blockade intercepted ships bound for Germany, bringing in all sorts of supplies, including food and raw materials. Starvation, economic crisis, and big military losses led German officials to take drastic measures.

Meanwhile, the United States was currently stationed as a neutral country, only giving supplies to the Allied forces. The U.S. wanted to keep away from the war as much as possible, as President Woodrow Wilson and the people wanted nothing to do with this military conflict. Though U.S.-German relations were deteriorating due to Germany's policy of **unrestricted submarine warfare**, in which German U-boats attacked ships without warning. After the Lusitania sank, Berlin temporarily went into submarine warfare shutdown, but, as stated previously, the British took control over German ports, so Germany had to do something about it. Their next action was to mobilize the U-boats again to get the British out of the ports and try to provoke the U.S. as little as possible, and try to force a quick victory

(for Germany). High-ranked German officials knew that this would most likely bring the U.S. into the conflict, but they thought that they could win the war before this ever happened.

The same goes for U.S.-Mexico relations, which were tense. The Mexican Revolution had destabilized the country, and the U.S. was leading a Punitive Expedition in 1916 in pursuit of Pancho Villa (he was a politician, guerrilla member, and revolutionist for Mexico). This led to armed clashes between the U.S. and Mexico. Germany saw an opportunity: to tell Mexico to attack the U.S. southern border to delay the U.S. troops from going to Europe.

#### *4. Current Issue*

As of today, January 17, 1917, British intelligence has successfully decoded a secret diplomatic message sent from the German Foreign Office to the Mexican government. In this decrypted telegram, Germany proposes a military alliance with Mexico should the United States enter the war against the Central Powers. The revelation is nothing short of alarming. Germany's final attempt to delay the United States' arrival in Europe appears to have failed, and the American government—already suspicious of Germany's renewed submarine warfare—is now more enraged than ever. A sense of uncertainty has fallen over the international community as people now wonder whether this intercepted message will become the spark that pushes the United States into the global conflict.

This moment may very well shape the fate of the entire Great War. For nearly three years, the United States has maintained a careful stance of neutrality, hoping to avoid involvement in a European catastrophe. Yet the combination of unrestricted submarine warfare, the sinking of passenger vessels, and now this covert proposal to Mexico threatens to shatter American patience. Nations around the world watch anxiously as the U.S. inches closer to abandoning neutrality—a shift that could drastically alter the balance of power. The governments of Britain and France quietly hope that this crisis will draw American support, while Germany fears that its gamble has backfired catastrophically. The question now stands: Will the United States tolerate such a threat to its sovereignty, or is war now inevitable?

Mexico, caught in the turmoil of its own revolution, faces a complicated reality. The promise of reclaiming Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona may appeal to nationalist sentiment, yet the nation remains internally unstable and militarily strained. Still, the mere suggestion of German–Mexican cooperation has shocked the American public. Civilian reactions vary—from outrage at the threat against their homeland to fear of a wider war that has already taken millions of lives in Europe. The borderlands, already tense from earlier conflicts, now find themselves at the center of global diplomacy.

Meanwhile, German-Americans and Mexican-Americans face growing scrutiny, as suspicion and patriotism collide in the United States. The public divides between those who demand immediate retaliation and those who plead for calm, insisting that war must be a last resort. Across the Western Hemisphere, newspapers publish dramatic headlines, politicians

scramble for information, and citizens brace themselves for what may come next.

The Zimmermann Telegram has turned the political landscape upside down. What once seemed like a distant European struggle has now crossed the Atlantic, landing at America's doorstep. The world, gripped by fear and uncertainty, can only wait and wonder: Will this secret message become the turning point that brings the United States fully into the Great War, or is there still time to avert catastrophe?

### *5. Past International Actions*

Germany: They had already taken many major steps in the crisis, creating a policy of unrestricted submarine warfare and sinking multiple cargo ships without any warning. This made U.S.-Germany tensions worse, and it didn't help that the German vessels sank Lusitania, where many American citizens were killed, which pushed Americans closer to entering the war.

United States: They mentioned a policy towards neutrality, meaning they won't enter the war in any way possible, only providing material assistance to the Allied powers. President Woodward made it very clear that the United States wouldn't enter the war, but they were not happy with how the Germans were taking action by sinking multiple American boats. This only made it clearer how the U.S. reacted when they found out the plan that Germany was

taking.

United Kingdom (British Intelligence): Shown by the hard workers during the beginning of the Great War, British Intelligence, since day one, has been decoding German messages. These early decoding advances were what led to the quick decoding of the Zimmermann telegram, which was the only reason this telegram was able to be decoded (because of the previous years of British Intelligence putting so much work into decoding German telegrams).

Mexico: Dealing with the revolution and political unrest, Mexico had a difficult relationship with the United States. Incidents like the Punitive Expedition into Mexico led to increased tensions between the two forces. Germany took advantage of this situation and thought that it was willing to attack the U.S.

## ***6. Subtopics***

### **A) How did the Zimmermann Telegram intensify the fragile diplomatic balance between the United States, Germany, and Mexico?**

The Zimmermann Telegram emerged in a moment when all three of these nations were in a tense and bad position. Each one of them had a reason to be in bad diplomatic relations with the other country, and this Telegram solidified the nail in the coffin. All tensions were set loose, and

each had a reason to go to war with the other (except Germany and Mexico). Mexico was still recovering from the revolution, Germany was in a bad spot where they needed the U.S. not to join the war, and the United States, being a neutral country, heard about this Telegram made them want to join the war faster. This text further magnified the situation and made the world divide itself further.

**B) Why did the issue of unrestricted submarine warfare become inseparable from the Zimmermann Telegram crisis?**

The submarine warfare and the Zimmermann telegram were brother to sister in making American neutrality turn into complete aggression against the Germans. Submarine warfare that started back in 1917 had a big impact on the us as it killed many export ships and civilians (like the Lusitania), but the Zimmermann telegram was what put the nail in the coffin, making American-German diplomacy, and ultimately leading to the US entering the war against Germany. If the telegram had gone through, Americans could assume that it was Mexican diplomacy that decided that path and not the influence of the Germans, and the naval warfare was only another thing to keep Americans tipped off, but not completely go to war. If these two variables had never seen each other, Germany couldve very possibly have won the war.

**C) How did internal Mexican instability influence the stakes of Germany's proposal?**

Mexico was passing through a governmental crisis, making the mexico-german alliance an implausible and disruptive alliance. Mexico in this moment was still trying to adjust and

recover from their recent revolution, power-hungry politicians were trying to raise to power, and their economic situation was not the best. Even though Germany was fully aware of this situation, and they were going to give Mexico troops and supplies, this could have been a ploy to use weak nations such as Mexico and use them in their favor to help Germany ultimately win the war. Who knew if Mexico would have accepted the proposal, but clearly the revelation of the telegram made it very clear that if Mexico said anything, they would be going into a deeper problem, and this time against the United States.

## *7. Positions*

### **A) Central Powers – In Favor of the Zimmermann Proposal**

- **German Empire:** Sought to prevent U.S. entry into the war by encouraging Mexico to open a second front against America.
- **Austria-Hungary:** Supported Germany's diplomatic strategy as part of the shared Central Powers' war effort.
- **Ottoman Empire:** Backed any German plan that might reduce Allied strength and prolong Central Power survival.
- **Bulgaria:** Supported Germany's initiatives, hoping to preserve alliances and maintain Central Power unity.

### **B) Allies – Concerned and Opposed to German Actions**

- **United Kingdom:** Intercepted and decoded the message, using it to push the U.S. closer

to joining the war.

- **France:** Viewed the telegram as further proof of German aggression threatening global stability.
- **Russia:** Saw German diplomacy as another destabilizing move during an already critical phase of the Eastern Front.
- **Italy:** Opposed Germany's tactics, hoping to maintain pressure on the Central Powers without provoking U.S. hesitation.
- **United States** (neutral at start): Outraged by the message, increasingly shifting away from neutrality toward intervention.

### C) Observers – Nations Mentioned or Affected Indirectly

- **Mexico:** Target of Germany's proposal, tempted by territorial promises but ultimately unwilling to risk war with the U.S.
- **Japan:** Mentioned in the telegram as a potential ally, but firmly aligned with the Allies and uninterested in Germany's plan.

## 8. Guiding questions

- How does Germany's decision to resume unrestricted submarine warfare reveal its strategic desperation, and did Berlin underestimate the United States' likely response?
- Should Mexico seriously consider the German proposal, or would accepting it guarantee

economic devastation and military defeat?

- To what extent does Britain's interception and decoding of the telegram justify its decision to delay informing the United States?
- Is Germany's promise to help Mexico "reconquer" Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona a genuine military strategy or unrealistic diplomatic manipulation?
- Does the telegram represent a direct threat to U.S. sovereignty, or is it simply an act of wartime diplomacy exaggerated for strategic effect?
- How might internal instability in Mexico during its revolution limit its ability to participate in any German alliance?
- Could the United States have maintained neutrality after learning of the telegram, or had public opinion already shifted beyond repair?
- Does the British release of the telegram constitute neutral intelligence sharing or an intentional push to drag the U.S. into the war on the Allied side?
- Should the United States prioritize protecting the Western Hemisphere under the Monroe Doctrine, even at the cost of entering a European war?
- If Mexico had accepted the alliance, how dramatically could the geopolitical landscape of North America have changed during and after the war?
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