

## *An Update on the Interpretation of the Ultra Documentation*

by JOHN P. CAMPBELL

When Group Captain F.W. Winterbotham published *The Ultra Secret* in 1974, thereby breaking the oath of lifelong secrecy he himself had administered to wartime recruits for the Government Code and Cipher School (GC&CS) at Bletchley Park, he caught the general public and professional historians alike completely by surprise. Gustave Bertrand's *Enigma ou la plus grande énigme de la guerre 1939-1945* (1973) had not attracted much attention. It was only in retrospect that the significance of published hints dropped inadvertently or perhaps mischievously by Malcolm Muggeridge and others became clear. Winterbotham also solved the mystery of fleeting references to *Most Secret Source*, *Very Special Intelligence*, or *Boniface* — all synonyms for *Ultra* — to be found in Intelligence and other service records for the Second World War released at the Public Record Office (PRO) in 1972.<sup>1</sup>

There can be little doubt, however, that the most significant pre-Winterbotham publication was Sir John Masterman's *The Double Cross System in the War of 1939 to 1945* (1972). Not only did Masterman force a reluctant government's hand by arranging for publication in the United States so as to evade the Official Secrets Act, but a close reading of his text made it clear that the XX system run by MI 5 could never have lasted for as long as it did without some reliable means of verification. Masterman's monograph, originally written at the end of the war as an official report on the running of double-agents and with no thought of publication, never actually mentioned *Ultra*, but the one source that could have provided the necessary insight into the inner workings of the *Abwehr* and other agencies of German Intelligence was Signals Intelligence (Sigint) which was of a very high grade indeed.

Once the first breaches of official security had been made, the most extraordinary developments followed. The opening of the new PRO building at Kew in 1977 coincided with the unexpected release of the first batches of Enigma decrypts and other *Ultra*-related material.<sup>2</sup> Then the Callaghan government sanctioned the publication of the first volume of Sir F.H. Hinsley's official history, *British Intelligence in the Second World War* in 1978, which was followed by two more volumes in 1981 and 1984, bringing the story up to 1944. The release of wartime Intelligence sources in London was matched in the United States by the National Security Agency's clearance of comparable Allied material for presentation at the National Archives (NA).

To preserve some sense of perspective, it should perhaps be borne in mind that there has never been an official history of Intelligence (British or otherwise) for the First World War; that most of the official historians who contributed to the Grand Strategy and Campaigns series for the Second World War were not “in the know,” as Sir David Hunt put it, where *Ultra* was concerned; that the authorities in Whitehall refused as much as to admit to the peacetime existence of the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS or MI 6) until 1980, although it had been in business since before 1914; and that Intelligence has been, and is likely to remain, the “missing dimension” from the diplomatic history of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> Seldom have historians been handed a more dazzling historiographical opportunity. What interpretation, then, have they placed on the *Ultra* documentation?

The initial reaction to Winterbotham’s book, which of necessity had to be written from memory and was demonstrably inaccurate in places, frequently took the form of enthusiastic claims that the history of the war would now have to be entirely rewritten, *Ultra* having won it. Some exponents of “instant” history were quick to offer conspiratorial explanations for various Allied military calamities, alleging that they were the result of mishandling *Ultra* or of suppressing its use to protect the source. Such allegations may in fact have encouraged the government to go ahead with the publication of the official history.<sup>4</sup> Since the mid-1970s, however, there has been an upsurge of professional interest among historians in the UK, U.S., Canada and West Germany into all aspects of Intelligence, Counter-Intelligence, and Deception. The deliberations of several international conferences and the impersonal and authoritative tone of the Hinsley volumes have been instrumental in raising the level of scholarly debate. Besides, the release of the first decrypts must surely have driven home the idea that the essence of Intelligence lies in the patient accumulation of detail rather than in dramatic revelation. In *Ultra*’s case the detail is overwhelming: the naval *Ultra* alone from June 1941 to January 1945 runs to roughly 324,000 decrypts; and the decrypts of the *Luftwaffe* Enigma traffic, once released, should exceed this total by a considerable margin.<sup>5</sup> This is scarcely the stuff of instant history.

There are two main categories of publications which consider the *Ultra* documentation. The first consists of books and articles dealing with cryptanalysis itself, with the mathematical and technological work of decrypting intercepted signals enciphered in various Enigma keys. This part of the *Ultra* story rather got off on the wrong foot, thanks to an unfortunate disagreement about the extent of GC&CS’s indebtedness to Polish cryptanalysts before 1939.<sup>6</sup> To fathom how the Poles first broke Enigma signals and how GC&CS later kept abreast of German modifications to improve the security of the machine is probably beyond the grasp of most non-mathematicians. The difficulty has been compounded by the continued classification of all official files dealing with wartime cryptanalysts at Bletchley Park. As a result, Gordon Welchman’s *The Hut Six Story* (1982), the best first-hand account, had to be written, like *The Ultra Secret*, from memory. Perhaps the outstanding book in this category is Alan Hodges’ biography of another of Bletchley’s Cambridge mathematicians, *Alan Turing: the Enigma* (1983).

Secondly, there are the publications about *Ultra* that deal with the much larger question of the evaluation and distribution of the product of cryptanalysis and its subsequent effect on operations. It is here that an invaluable contribution has been made by GC&CS veterans and others who kept the *Ultra* secret during the war and for thirty years afterwards. The first man across the threshold of the new PRO in October 1977 was Ralph Bennett (*Ultra in the West* (1979)), a Cambridge historian who had been an Army duty

officer in Hut Three during the war. Peter Calvocoressi, later Chief Executive of Penguin Books, gave the first insider's account of GC&CS in "The Ultra Secrets of Station X" (1974), followed by what is still the best short introduction to the subject, *Top Secret Ultra* (1980). Hinsley himself was recruited for GC&CS as "a third-year man from St. John's" in 1939. Patrick Beesly (*Very Special Intelligence* (1981)) served in the Admiralty's Operational Intelligence Centre, where all incoming intelligence, including *Ultra*, was collated for input into operational decisions; and Ewen Montagu (*Beyond Top Secret U* (1977)) was "indoctrinated" to receive *Ultra* in his capacity as naval liaison officer to the Deception authorities. Ronald Lewin had no wartime connection with Bletchley Park or Intelligence, but performed a useful role after 1974 by collecting the oral testimony of many who had, in the course of his research for *Ultra Goes to War* (1978). From a generational point of view, the timing of Winterbotham's bombshell was most fortunate because Welchman, Beesly, Montagu, and Lewin have all died since 1984; had *The Ultra Secret* been delayed for another ten years, they would not have been heard from at all.

The majority of historians interested in Intelligence during the Second World War enjoys neither the privileged access to official sources reserved for official historians nor the personal experience of wartime work at Bletchley Park or elsewhere in the Intelligence community. They must make do with the material already released at the PRO and NA and with the Hinsley volumes. Consequently, the general impact of research into the *Ultra* factor has so far been uneven, with naval history being best served and air history least.<sup>7</sup> Very few historians, for example, have adopted Correlli Barnett's expedient of publishing a post-*Ultra* edition of a monograph (*The Desert Generals* (1960) and (1983)) simply by tacking on a postscript derived largely from Hinsley at the end of each chapter. On the other hand, Shelford Bidwell and Dominick Graham showed in 1986 that it was still possible to write an acclaimed history of the Italian campaign from a fighting soldier's point of view without mentioning *Ultra* more than three times. Perhaps the outstanding example of the scholarly assimilation of *Ultra* documentation into a relatively familiar story is the latest volume of Martin Gilbert's official biography of Churchill. Here again, though, privileged access came into play.

The truth of the matter is that research in this field will likely continue to be limited somewhat by both a lack of sources and restricted access. The sketchy nature of all German Intelligence sources is a major handicap unlikely to be overcome, while the PRO, possibly for reasons of underfunding, has been depressingly slow to follow up the initiative taken in 1977. Even when this comes to pass, there is no more reason to look forward to the release of all categories of decrypt than there is to anticipate the opening of the central registries of MI 5 and MI 6 to research. It is difficult to imagine how the *Abwehr* Enigma decrypts (ISK) might be declassified when Sir Michael Howard's official history of Deception has still not been cleared for publication. Worse still, some irreplaceable *Ultra*-related documentation has apparently been destroyed by Ministry of Defence "weeder" in the name of national security. Judging by Peter Calvocoressi's "Appendix One: Note on Documents," future historians will spend a needlessly difficult time connecting source with user and fitting the raw decrypts into some sort of administrative context. For instance, the half-dozen leading experts on the *Luftwaffe* were all to be found in England in the second half of the war, and their expertise relied heavily on a splendid card index.<sup>8</sup> If it is indeed true that this index has been destroyed, the prospects for research so unexpectedly held forth will have suffered a setback.

The forecasts of wholesale revision and rewriting that greeted *The Ultra Secret* are now generally dismissed as an over-reaction. With the refutation of the early conspiracy theories, some thoughtful revisionist points of view might reasonably be expected to have emerged, especially in light of the heavily official and semi-official character of most publications on the subject. This has not really happened, except for some rumblings that the impact of *Ultra* was less than “its recent trumpeting would have us believe” because of excessive concern for security and, rather more dubiously, that the failure to share *The Secret* with Stalin contributed to the breakdown of the wartime alliance and the start of the Cold War.<sup>9</sup>

Instead, a consensus has taken shape about the value of *Ultra* to the Allies. There is now widespread agreement that *Ultra* played a decisive part in three particular stages of the war against Germany. But for *Ultra*, Rommel would almost certainly have reached Alexandria and Suez after the fall of Tobruk in June 1942. *Ultra* and lower grades of Sigint guided the offensive against Rommel’s supply lines across the Mediterranean and contributed directly to the defensive victories at El Alamein in July and Alam Halfa in August. Secondly, *Ultra* (in the guise of *Very Special Intelligence*) turned the battle of the Atlantic in the Allies’ favour. After a blackout in reading U-boat signals for most of 1942, the *Triton* key was broken in December, with the result that the U-boat Enigma was again being read during the crucial six months that followed. Thirdly, *Ultra* was the prerequisite for the success of the cover and deception plans for *Overlord*. The Germans were defeated in Normandy, according to Eisenhower, for lack of infantry. Yet a large German army sat north of the Seine for weeks after D Day in anticipation of the main invasion still to come across the narrowest part of the Channel. The painstaking creation of a national Allied order of battle in the UK by means of XX agents and through other channels was possible only because of *Ultra*.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, *Ultra* provided the Allies with an unprecedented wealth of information about the enemy: his order of battle, his operating procedures and routine, his strategic intentions. This scale of detail gave Allied staffs the supreme advantage of going about their planning secure in the knowledge that they had nothing to fear from German deception.

Do the “decisive” interventions plus *Ultra*’s other cumulative offerings add up to a war-winning contribution? The question lacks nothing in oversimplification. Evaluation of the relative decisiveness of a number of disparate factors in the overall outcome of the war is difficult enough at the best of times, as the debate about the strategic bombing offensive against Germany has amply demonstrated. Where intelligence of any description is involved, the problem is even greater because the best intelligence is irrelevant unless it is available in time and the means are at hand to turn it to operational advantage. In the final analysis, the outcome of the Second World War was settled by the huge disparity in the economic and military might of the coalitions that fought it. *Ultra*’s importance was that it shortened the war against Germany and Italy by many months, arguably by a year and more, and thereby saved hundreds of thousands of lives on both sides.<sup>11</sup>

### Notes

- 1 Malcolm Muggeridge, *Chronicles of Wasted Time: 2, The Infernal Grove* (London, 1973), pp. 127-32. *Boniface* originated as an attempt to disguise the decrypts sent to the War Office and Air Ministry by attributing them to an SIS agent of that covername; it was used throughout the war by the Prime Minister — see Martin Gilbert, *Road to Victory: Winston S. Churchill 1941-1945* (London, 1986), p. 1379. *Ultra* was originally merely a security classification beyond *Top Secret*, although it is now widely used (as here)

- to cover the substance of intelligence derived from cryptanalysis; the Admiralty always used *Very Special Intelligence* (*VSI*) or *Z* to refer to the information itself — see Patrick Beesly, *Very Special Intelligence: The Story of the Admiralty's Operational Intelligence Centre 1939-1945* (London, 1977), p. 100. Strictly speaking, therefore, *VSI* is not a synonym for *Ultra*.
- 2 Great Britain, Public Record Office, Ministry of Defence — Intelligence from Enemy Radio Communications (DEFE 3) 1941-1944. 28 feet.
  - 3 For an excellent collection of essays by leading specialists, see Christopher Andrew and David Dilks, eds., *The Missing Dimension: Governments and Intelligence Communities in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana and Chicago, 1984).
  - 4 Possibly the most notorious example was the version of the bombing of Coventry in November 1940 provided by Anthony Cave Brown in *Bodyguard of Lies* (New York, 1975), pp. 32-44, which was answered in Appendix 9 to F.H. Hinsley *et al.*, *British Intelligence in the Second World War: Its Influence on Strategy and Operations* (London, 1979), I, pp. 528-48.
  - 5 There was a session on cryptanalysis and codebreaking at the annual convention of the American Historical Association in 1976 and a conference on naval *Ultra* at Annapolis in 1977. The proceedings of a more general conference at Stuttgart in 1978 were published in Jürgen Rohwer and E. Jäckel, eds., *Die Funkaufklärung und Jähre Rolle im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Stuttgart, 1979), from which the total for naval *Ultra* decrypts was taken (p. 96).
  - 6 Jean Stengers, "Enigma, the French, the Poles and the British, 1931-1940," in Andrew and Dilks, *The Missing Dimension*, pp. 126-37. See also the review by Sir Stuart Milner-Barry of W. Kozaczuk, *Enigma* (Frederick, Md., 1984) in *The International History Review*, 7, no. 1 (February 1986), pp. 144-47.
  - 7 Part of the reason for the preeminence of the history of naval *Ultra* lies in the nature of naval warfare, with its heavy reliance on W/T communications, part in the fact that the Admiralty was an operational HQ, unlike the Air Ministry and War Office, and part in the considerable gifts of Patrick Beesly as a historian.
  - 8 The depredations of the Ministry of Defence weeders are attested to by two official historians — Captain S.W. Roskill and Sir Michael Howard (*The Times*, 12, 19 May 1977). ISK stood for Intelligence Service Knox after Dillwyn Knox of GC&CS. Peter Calvocoressi, *Top Secret Ultra* (New York, 1980), pp. 62-63, 115-17.
  - 9 Phillip Knightley, *The Second Oldest Profession: The Spy as Bureaucrat, Patriot, Fantasist and Whore* (London, 1986), pp. 160, 172-75.
  - 10 See for example, Christopher Andrew, *Her Majesty's Secret Service: the Making of the British Intelligence Community* (New York, 1986), p. 487.
  - 11 This conclusion is well brought out by Jürgen Rohwer in "War 'Ultra' kriegsentscheidend?" in Rohwer and Jäckel, *Die Funkaufklärung*, pp. 404-6.