

Wilhelm Flicke

German Intercept Successes Early in World War II

A German cryptologic officer's account of intercept in the West

The campaign in the West in the summer of 1940 appears to many people to be the master stroke of a military genius. Even when we take into account the German superiority in numbers and materiel and appraise adequately the spirit of the German troops, many things still remain inexplicable — in particular the swift drive through the northern continuation of the Maginot Line. On the basis of what I was able to learn, I shall attempt to throw a few side lights on this campaign, without pretending to be able to explain everything.

I have already reported on the situation in the intercept service. Conditions for successful intercept work were as favorable as one could desire in France, Holland, and Belgium.

From intercept traffic the French assembly and the Belgian and Dutch frontier defenses could be recognized so clearly both in respect to organization and geographical distribution that the information was fully adequate for making German dispositions. It was a pleasure for the German command to be able to enter the enemy's troop dispositions on its own situation maps on the basis of the results of the intercept service. In the present case, however, this did not suffice. Before the war the great question was: how good will the mighty defense system of the Maginot Line be? Will it be possible to break through quickly or will a war of position on a large scale develop here? Will modern heavy artillery be able to crack these defenses? Who could answer these questions?

Earlier we reported how Poland and Czechoslovakia were thoroughly reconnoitered by the German espionage service. In France there was no such degree of success although the German intelligence service did receive current reports and single notices. France had no extensive German minority and conditions were less

favorable. Nevertheless, in the summer of 1939 the German Secret Service succeeded in pulling off something which absolutely made up for the previous years. In August it was possible to get a photograph of a French map showing all forts, barriers, obstacles, communications routes and communications points of the Maginot Line and of its extension to the coast. This showed how imperfectly the French had developed their system of defense along the Belgian frontier and one did not need to study the map long in order to put his finger on the weakest point in this system of defense. This map was reproduced in Germany and was the basis for planning the campaign in France.

In order to drive at this weak point in the French system of defense, it was necessary to advance through Holland and Belgium. Consequently, this move was decided upon in Germany without hesitation. The prospect of overrunning the French line swiftly was too inviting, and it was impossible for the French to build up this weak point within a few months to match the strength of the Maginot Line proper.

The campaign against Poland was followed by a period of calm. Only in the air and at sea did some minor engagements take place, which no one regarded very seriously. People were already beginning to crack jokes about the "phony war." Many thought there would be no serious conflict and that France and England were in a state of war merely "to save face" with respect to Poland. Peace would surely come in the spring.

The monitoring of French and English traffic, however, did not indicate that people in those countries were concerned with "saving face." War production was under way; they were arming for battle, though only for a defensive struggle. The whole system of land defense for France since 1919 had been based on the invincibility of the Maginot Line, while England was convinced that economic measures directed against

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Germany would not fail. Anyhow, one could not count on a conciliatory attitude in either France or England.

On 27 January was broadcast Churchill's speech in which he said: "Hitler has already lost his best opportunity."

On 9 April the German people were surprised by the information that "German troops have undertaken the protection of Denmark and Norway." The National Socialist Government tried, naturally, to throw all blame on the English and Norwegians. Of course no mention was made of the fact that the invasion might not have been successful, if the intercept service of the German Navy had not ascertained the position of the British naval forces and calculated the time so that no surprises need be feared from that quarter. Despite heroic resistance, all Norway was occupied within four weeks during which the German intercept service played a notable role against both land and naval forces. At Narvik, both the British and Norwegians used radio very incautiously. The course of British ships could be followed perfectly at all times. Several Norwegian units were encircled and captured because of their incautious use of radio, and the capture of Bergen with its war stores was possible only because of frivolous use of radio.

Of course the Germans sometimes made mistakes, too, and the British followed German ship movements.

Simultaneous with increase in military radio traffic at the beginning of these operations was the enormous increase in diplomatic and press traffic. It was interesting to see how the German advance against the two northern countries affected neutral lands. While the German press tried to characterize the whole action as a "British Crime" against which the entire press of the world was clamoring indignantly and while German papers were printing quotations from foreign papers, which had been paid for with German money, intercepts from foreign countries gave a very different picture. British action against Norway had been started only after Germany's intention had become known to England at the last moment. Consequently it was not England but Germany that had attacked, and this unjustified attack in defiance of all international law lost Germany the respect of the world and laid the groundwork for her defeat.

On 9 May one of the leading German newspapers carried the headline: "Stupid British Diversionary Maneuver." The content was to the effect that the discovery by Germany of ostensible British plans had produced such an impression in England that they were resorting to diversionary maneuvers; news was being spread abroad that Holland was sorely threatened by Germany. There was a false report that two

German armies were moving toward Holland, but of course that was nonsense, an old wives' tale of the Ministry of Lies in London. But the next day at nine o'clock Doctor Goebbels delivered a long talk on the German invasion of Holland, Belgium, and Luxembourg. The war in the West had begun.

The attempt to attribute the blame for the outbreak of hostilities to the Dutch and Belgians was ridiculous. From everything that could be observed by monitoring their traffic, it was clear that both countries did everything possible to maintain neutrality. On 14 May the Dutch army gave up the hopeless struggle and a break was made in the extended Maginot Line at Sedan. On 16 May came a break through the Maginot Line on a front of 100 kilometers. On 17 May German troops entered Brussels. Soon Hitler's threat: "We will put them in a panic which will spread!" was made good.

This creation of panic was carried on by all modern technical means. Leaflets were dropped by the hundreds of thousands and served to spread the wildest rumors. Agents deposited by parachute behind the enemy front cut in on the telephone wires, called up all sorts of government offices, gave false instructions to civilian offices and troop units, and by reports of panic caused a chaotic flight on the part of the civilian population, which resulted in a hopeless blocking of the highways. Captured radio stations were likewise put into operation and issued alarming reports. With events moving so rapidly, the French command had no possibility of effectively counteracting these activities; moreover, the French did not catch on to these methods until too late. In several cases, whole divisions were forced in this fashion to surrender. A number of German agents equipped with small shortwave radio had been deposited behind the French front and were working from there with excellent success. These people watched everything that went on and reported each of their observations immediately to one of the three control stations by which their work was directed. For the first time in history a combat instrumentality was employed here which in the later years of this war was to give it its special character and which was to be turned in catastrophic fashion against Germany.

On 3 June the frightful slaughter known in history as the "Battle of Flanders" ended with the capitulation of the Belgian army and the encirclement and annihilation of British and French forces. These troops fought bravely but succumbed to superior force. The name Dunkirk became for the Germans the symbol of a decisive victory over England and for the British the symbol of a most successful evacuation, carried

out with the aid of the fleet. Both were right — everything depends on the point of view.

Once again there came a period of tense expectation. What would happen? Would the Germans turn south and attack the French divisions on the Aisne and the Somme, or would they follow British troops across the Channel? The word "invasion" began to spook around. The German High Command diligently spread the news that it was preparing to invade at once. In any case the fate of France was virtually sealed. This seemed to be a suitable time for Italy to enter the war. Pressure was put on Mussolini. A feverish exchange of telegrams between Berlin and Rome began. And finally it happened. On 10 June 1940, from the balcony of the Palazzo Venezia, Mussolini proclaimed to the Italian people and to the world Italy's entry into the war on the side of Germany. This was speculating on a cheap victory, on sharing the spoils after France had been completely subdued and England had pulled out of the war, as it was expected to do.

But even in this seemingly so favorable situation, the true attitude of a large part of the Italian Officer Corps, in particular General Staff Officers, was and remained adverse both to the war and to Germany. A not inconsiderable group of officers was outright anti-German in sympathy to such a degree that this could be clearly recognized from intercepted Italian traffic. We shall have occasion to speak of this later. For the moment, however, the chances seemed to favor the two Axis Powers and for the moment this outweighed everything else.

The battle along the Aisne and the Somme began and in a few days the French army was split into four groups. On 15 June, German troops crossed the Loire. On 18 June Hitler and Mussolini met in Munich to discuss the terms of an armistice. On 22 June, the armistice was concluded in the Forest of Compiègne; the French fleet remained in French harbors.

France was beaten. Hopelessly beaten in an astoundingly short time. How could this country, protected by the most modern line of fortification and with its strong army, be conquered so easily? For one thing the Germans, contrary to French expectation, had not hesitated to attack two neutral and almost defenseless countries, Holland and Belgium, and thus to reach the French frontier where it was least well protected. Moreover at the beginning of the war France was distinctly inferior in materiel. There was lack of planes, armoured tanks and other war equipment. Despite all warnings, including repeated reports to the Deuxieme Bureau regarding German armament, those in control refused to believe there was any serious danger.

When the campaign in the West began, the French greatly underestimated German strength, while espionage had revealed to the Germans the weak points in the French line of defense. Another unexpected factor was the systematic spreading of panic. In a very short time, millions of French and Belgians were in flight, blocking roads and bridges so that French troops and supplies could not get through. On top of all that, there was the German radio intercept service. Most of the French army cryptographic systems and two systems of the French Foreign Office were known to the German cryptanalytic service. Countless messages with highly important content could be read. Moreover, diplomatic representatives of various countries were transmitting by radio important information and were doing this in systems already solved in Germany. From a purely military angle, the system of French army traffic resulted in revealing to the German Intercept Service in a very short time the relation between the higher and medium units. The organization of the French front was known at all times. No movement and no dislocation remained concealed from the Germans. The French Air Force was most incautious in its use of radio and the ground stations gave countless clues. The picture was the same as that observed during French maneuvers from 1930 to 1939.

The map of the line of fortifications, the intercept service, the cryptanalytic service, the creation of panic, the blocking of highways, air superiority, and superiority of numbers and materiel on the German side, coupled with an ineffective intelligence service on the French side — nothing more was needed to gain a crushing victory in the West.

The campaign in the West had ended. Throughout Germany bells pealed and flags fluttered. People were convinced that victory in the West meant the end of the war; now it was up to the diplomats to find a way to bring about peace. It was incredible that England, the last remaining antagonist, would dare to continue the war. Goebbels organized a mighty reception for Hitler when the latter returned from the front; the rumor was spread that America had intervened and England would make peace. Plans for demobilization were worked out and a few people were discharged from the armed forces.

But although people were convinced in Germany that England would now try to get out of the war, longboats, light sailing vessels, motorboats and other craft began moving northward on special vehicles; they were to carry German troops across the Channel and few people doubted that this enterprise would shortly be crowned by success. Yet week after week passed and nothing happened. On the contrary, the German intercept service was obliged to report again and again

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that England had no thought of submission. Moreover, voices from America also had to be taken seriously.

While the public was thus forced to settle back and wait for the invasion which Hitler said was coming, it was remarkable that all preparations for invasion were carried on in the open instead of being carefully camouflaged as usual. Details which normally would have been strictly secret could be heard everywhere, until one almost had the impression that the invasion was nothing but a bluff.

Interception of English traffic, however, gave the impression that the British were counting on an attempted landing. Their air reconnaissance of points where the Germans were concentrating small boats became intensive and the assemblies were bombed constantly.

Meanwhile the air war against England began. It was supposed to break the will of the people to resist, but it soon brought two disappointments: first, the British fighter defense proved far stronger than expected; second, the effect of the bombs was by no means as great as had been expected. Furthermore, German aircraft losses increased rather than decreased — some days a hundred or more machines were lost.

Careful monitoring of all radio traffic between Great Britain and the U.S.A. showed no indication of any letup in England's will to resist. Week by week the United States was growing closer and closer to Great Britain. Unmistakably there was a resolve to put an end to the conquest of one country after another by National Socialism. The attitude of the U.S.A. was expressed in a speech in Philadelphia on 18 August by Mr. Bullitt, former ambassador to France.

Since the air war was not achieving its purpose, the German Government proclaimed in August a "total blockade of England." This step was aimed primarily at the U.S.A., but its effect was like pouring oil on a fire. It really betokened German weakness rather than strength.

While the German press printed long-winded articles on the effect of German air attacks on London, only small type was available on 10 September for the news that the House of Representatives had on the day before accepted the Bill for Compulsory Military Service. The question was no longer, "Will the U.S.A. fight?" but, "When?"

Supposedly, the invasion was to take place during the night of 15-16 September 1940, but the English fighter defense was still too strong, the Navy was still intact, and German preparations were too inadequate. Only a few of the 1,000 large transport gliders called for had been completed. The espionage service had almost completely failed to function; in particular the establishment of a network of radio agents had never

gotten beyond very modest beginnings. The intercept service provided virtually no information regarding the military situation in the British Isles.

Of course the decisive factor was Hitler himself. He did not seriously believe it would be necessary to invade by force; he expected England to make peace and Ribbentrop held the same view. Not until four weeks after the conclusion of the campaign in the West did Hitler realize that this assumption was not correct. Hitler could pursue a goal with great obstinacy but he was an easily influenced, emotional character and now he shifted suddenly and ordered the General Staff (or at least part of it) to make plans for a Russian campaign which had never been mentioned before. He thought that England would change its attitude immediately, if Germany should attack the Soviet Union. Hess entertained the same opinion. Points of difference between England and the Soviet Union were well known, likewise Churchill's aversion to Bolshevism. If the English attitude took the course they expected, then invasion was superfluous.

It is true that there was a dilemma; Hitler must say one thing to the Germans and another to the English. It was necessary to explain to the German people why the invasion did not come off: first there was fog, then there were storms, then it was said spring was the only proper time, and then when at Headquarters the idea had long since been dropped, "preparations for the invasion" were carried on in an ostentatious manner. The British were to get the impression that the invasion was imminent and the bombing attacks continued, although their intensity decreased. The main activity was confined to threats.

Amid this tense expectation there was concluded with great pomp on 26 September 1940 the so-called Three Power Pact between Germany, Italy, and Japan. This act was purely theatrical. It was the first confession of the fact that from now on the whole threat of an invasion was merely a bluff, because if there were an invasion and England were defeated, then there would be no need of exerting pressure on England in the Far East. The fact that this step was taken proved that the German Government had no illusion regarding the invasion, even if it should be carried out. Actually the plan had already been given up. It was interesting to see how they reached the same conclusion in England; this was revealed by the mass of intercepted diplomatic messages of other governments, Poland in particular.

The Polish Government had fled to London and was in close contact there with all organs of the British Government and with the British armed forces. The English on their part esteemed this cooperation since the Polish element all over Europe gave a unique basis

for the organization of a large scale spy network for the English secret service. The reverse of the medal lay in the fact that the Polish Government in London talked too much out of school in its exchange of telegrams.

The cryptographic systems of the Polish Government in Exile for the most part had been solved in Germany. Consequently, insight was obtained into the thinking and the plans of influential English offices. It could be seen that the British took the invasion seriously for only a short time. In any case, they were ready to accept it and were resolved, in case it succeeded, to continue the struggle from overseas. The fleet was to go to America and the struggle would be organized anew from there. Africa was to constitute the starting point for the attack on the Axis Powers. There were similar revelations in the intercepted traffic of diplomats representing other nations.

The German plan aimed, by threatening British possessions in the Far East, to force Britain to change her military dispositions. The idea appeared very clever and in those days Ribbentrop was considered in Germany a very competent and clever diplomat. However, he had neglected one important factor: should Japan try to disturb the balance of power in the Far East, this would inevitably arouse opposition in the U.S.A., and relations between the two countries were already tense due to the conflict in China. When the Japanese raised this objection, Ribbentrop assured

them that the U.S.A would not be in a position to employ its whole strength against Japan because Germany would, in case of conflict, declare war on the U.S.A.; this would mean for both the U.S.A. and Great Britain a splitting up of forces, and the Americans would be too weak to threaten Japan seriously.

At that moment, what Ribbentrop said was valid, but one factor was omitted: in September 1940 we had from intercepted traffic a fair picture of war production in the U.S.A. with production estimates for the two ensuing years. Compared with German production these figures were enormous. Hitler and Ribbentrop said these figures were pure pipe dreams. What induced them to take such an attitude is not known to me. The figures were not based on propaganda speeches but were carefully compiled from authentic sources. On this occasion Hitler displayed a characteristic trait; he would believe only what accorded with his ideas, everything else he rejected abruptly.

Wilhelm Flicke worked in German cryptologic organizations, as an analyst and administrator, from World War I through World War II. The rights to his *Kriegsgeheimnisse in Aether*, which covers both wars, was purchased by the U.S. Government shortly after World War II.