

The Enigma Girls

**How Ten Teenagers Broke Ciphers, Kept
Secrets, and Helped Win World War II**

Candace Fleming

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WAR!

Poland was just stretching awake on that first day of September 1939. Golden sunlight spread over fields of ripening corn and villages of straw-thatched log houses. Suddenly, the pink horizon grew dark with airplanes—one thousand of them. They flew so low that those on the ground could see their painted crosses and swastikas. Nazis! Bullets and bombs rained from the sky. The noise was deafening—the boom of explosions, the groan of collapsing buildings, shouts and screams. Black smoke blotted out the sun. The hot growing rush of flames was everywhere.

Meanwhile, 1.5 million German soldiers swarmed across the Polish border. The Polish army was no match for the Nazi war machine. This was *blitzkrieg*—lightning warfare.



German troops march victoriously into Warsaw, Poland, after the city's surrender on September 28, 1939.



German soldiers watch a Polish factory burn after a lightning-quick Nazi air raid.

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Swift, focused, and using an overwhelming force, the Nazis easily overran Poland. Soon, Germany's ruthless dictator, Adolf Hitler, would rule this country. But invading Poland was just a first step in Hitler's larger plan to conquer *all* of Europe. Someday, he believed, Paris would be his. So would London. And no one would be able to stop him.

In Britain, Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain was both stunned and furious. A year earlier, after seizing Czechoslovakia, Hitler had signed an agreement with Britain promising not to grab any more territory. Now he'd broken that promise—reason enough to declare war. But matters were made worse by the fact that both Britain and France had signed an agreement with Poland promising to come to its defense if it was ever attacked. What could Chamberlain do? He gave Hitler an ultimatum: Pull out of Poland immediately, or Britain and France would declare war. Hitler had until eleven o'clock on the morning of September 3 to respond.

Hour after tense hour passed.

All of Europe waited.

At eleven a.m. on Sunday, September 3, citizens across the British Empire gathered around their radios to hear a special announcement from Prime Minister Chamberlain. Was it war?

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Chamberlain came on. His voice was grave. Hitler had ignored his ultimatum, leaving England with no choice. “This country is at war,” he said. No people—or country—could feel safe in the face of Nazi aggression. The Germans had to be stopped. Europe must be saved. “For it is evil things that we shall be fighting against,” he concluded, “brute force, bad faith, injustice, oppression and persecution; and against them I am certain that right will prevail.”



Fearing the Germans would drop poison gas bombs on Britain, the British government passed out gas masks to every citizen. Here, a nursery school class practices using them.



A view of London's famous clock, Big Ben, from behind barbed wire. Barbed wire was used to both protect important structures and snare potential enemies.

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The country quickly mobilized. Blackout was strictly enforced. This meant that the windows and doors of all buildings were tightly covered at night to prevent any glimmer of light that might aid enemy aircraft during night bombings. Sandbags were placed in front of doors, and trenches were dug in parks. Gas masks were handed out like candy, and air raid shelters cropped up in small towns and city neighborhoods. London looked especially strange as barrage balloons—blimps on wires to keep low-flying aircraft from attacking at close range—filled the city's sky. Even the wrought-iron fences around the country's cemeteries and public squares were pulled out and melted down for munitions.

Men and women wearing uniforms were suddenly everywhere. So were ration cards. The German navy had begun sinking ships headed for Britain that were carrying essential goods like grains, sugar, meat, and gasoline. As these goods grew scarce, rationing was set up as a way of guaranteeing that everyone got his or her fair share. The British government now limited citizen consumption of butter, sugar, meat, canned milk, shoes, gasoline, silk, rubber, and more.

Meanwhile, officials began moving important government agencies out into the countryside in hopes they'd be



Mandatory nightly blackouts were monitored by a local citizen volunteer known as an "air raid precautions warden." Here, one such warden adjusts a public sign indicating what time everything should go black.



The British government issued every citizen a ration card with coupons. These coupons were used to buy rationed food items. The fixed amount for each person per week was one egg, two ounces of tea and butter, an ounce of cheese, eight ounces of sugar, and four ounces of bacon and margarine. Here, a grocer stamps the ration coupons in a book, indicating that the customer has bought his or her allotment for the week.

WAR!

safe from bomber raids. One of these agencies was the Government Code and Cipher School (GC&CS). An arm of the Secret Intelligence Service, GC&CS's job was code breaking. And its very existence was hush-hush. Packing up their files and equipment, the small team of code breakers slipped out of London. They set up their new base of operation in a redbrick manor house located on a country estate fifty miles away.

The estate was called Bletchley Park.

Code name: Station X.

Here the team gathered intelligence of the most crucial nature. They strove to outwit the Nazis and break into German codes and ciphers. If they succeeded, they would be able to penetrate to the very heart of the enemy's operations. What was Hitler planning? Where were German troops? What kind of equipment was being used? Intelligence like *that* could save lives. It could affect how commanders fought battles. Above all, it could win the war.