



## Battle of Wits: The Complete Story of Codebreaking in World War II

By Stephen Budiansky

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A million pages of new World War II codebreaking records have been released by the U.S. Army and Navy and the British government over the last five years. Now, *Battle of Wits* presents the history of the war that these documents reveal. From the battle of Midway until the last German code was broken in January 1945, this is an astonishing epic of a war that was won not simply by brute strength but also by reading the enemy's intentions.

The revelations of Stephen Budiansky's dramatic history include how Britain tried to manipulate the American codebreakers and monopolize German Enigma code communications; the first detailed published explanations of how the Japanese codes were broken; and how the American codebreaking machines worked to crack the Japanese, the German, and even the Russian diplomatic codes. The compelling narrative shows the crucial effect codebreaking had on the battlefields by explaining the urgency of stopping the wolf pack U-boat attacks in the North Atlantic, the importance of halting Rommel's tanks in North Africa, and the necessity of ensuring that the Germans believed the Allies' audacious deception and cover plans for D-Day. Unveiled for the first time, the complete story of codebreaking in World War II has now been told.

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### Editorial Review

#### Amazon.com Review

On December 3, 1941, officers of the U.S. Army Signal Intelligence Unit decoded a message sent from Tokyo to the Japanese embassy in Washington, ordering embassy staff to destroy its code books and other sensitive material. This, the officers determined, meant that Japan was preparing to break off diplomatic relations with the United States and go to war. When, they could not say; to gain a precise date, they would have had to break the Japanese naval codes. Therein, writes Stephen Budiansky in *Battle of Wits*, lay the rub: "Since mid-1939, America had not read a single message in the main Japanese naval code on the same day it had been sent. For most of the period from June 1, 1939, to December 7, 1941, the [U.S.] Navy was working on naval messages that were months, or even over a year old."

For all their lack of preparedness and occasional inefficiencies, and for all the disdain with which some Allied ground commanders held the work of military intelligence, writes Budiansky, Allied cryptographers were of critical importance in determining the outcome of World War II. The decoding of Japanese and German encryption engines, for instance, helped the Allied navies gain victory in the battles of the Atlantic and Midway, while the translation of secret German railroad schedules allowed Winston Churchill to warn Josef Stalin that the German army was about to invade the Soviet Union--though Stalin refused to take the warning seriously. The codebreakers, in short, "averted disasters that would have been terrible setbacks to the Allied cause," and they almost certainly saved a considerable number of lives as they labored to crack such profound puzzles as Enigma and Purple.

Budiansky's narrative is strong on the science of cryptography--so much so that readers without a background in mathematics and logic may have trouble following the arcana of key squares, bigrams, and all the other trade secrets of cryptanalysis. Readers willing to brave matters technical, however, will find Budiansky's comprehensive account to be the best single book on the subject, and one well worth their attention. --*Gregory McNamee*

#### From Publishers Weekly

In February of 1926, German codes, long intercepted and analyzed by Polish cryptanalysts, abruptly became impenetrable. As Budiansky, a *Dan Atlantic Monthly* correspondent, applied math degree-holder and former congressional fellow notes in this penetrating, edgy study, the wary Poles suspected that these new, seemingly unbreakable codes had been generated by a machine. How the Allies' mathematicians and cryptanalysts later deciphered nearly every top-level code produced by that machine, called Enigma whose internal rotors could be wired in 10 to the 80th power (1 followed by 80 zeroes) ways and by other machines in Axis use is a story already covered by David Kahn's classic *The Codebreakers* and many other books. Budiansky's bibliography reflects a reliance on those sources, deploying them along with a wealth of archival material; unlike *Codebreakers*, this book foregrounds the role of cryptanalysis in fighting the war, rather than treating the war as background to cryptanalysis. Readers of a technical bent will be particularly drawn to the meticulous explanations and diagrams depicting trial-and-error code breaking at work. Doling out a consistent measure of beautifully turned observations ("No matter how elaborate a scheme was used to scramble and disguise the original text, its ghost always shone through"), Budiansky is a master at interweaving the science of code breaking within its cultural and historical contexts. He depicts with clarity how the World War II-era code breakers struggled to halt German aggression at a time when the role of signals intelligence in heightening the impact of force was little understood, and delineates the remarkable achievement of those who recognized that the minutiae of enemy communications are well worth knowing.

This book gives a fascinating impression of just how crucial these efforts were. (Oct.)  
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From Library Journal

This is another entry in the fascinating history of the secret intelligence battle during World War II. Much of this story has been told many times before (especially the battle of Midway and the U-boat war), but interesting new details are always coming out. Journalist Budiansky takes advantage of the thousands of newly declassified files on the so-called war behind the war—feats such as breaking the Japanese code—that are legendary in the history of wartime espionage. Having conducted numerous interviews and dug into the primary sources, the author reveals the difficulties of organizing an efficient operation, the mind-numbing work, and getting the military brass to understand and use the product correctly. What is frightening is how stupid bureaucratic battles could cripple important operations. There is sufficient technical explanation of this complicated science/art form, as Budiansky has a degree in mathematics. A chronology, glossary, and notes are included. This easy-to-read work complements Maurice Freedman's *The Codebreakers, 1901-1945: Bletchley Park and the Second World War* (Leo Cooper, 2000). Suitable for both public and academic libraries. (Photos and index not seen.) [For another book by Budiansky, see *The Truth About Dogs*, reviewed on p. 106. AEd.]  
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