The Abbey

Enigma: Strategy vs Kindness

Matilda, Upper III (Year 7)

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In the summer of July 1939, some men met in a wood outside of Warsaw. They were Polish, British and French, and had met to exchange the key to the Enigma code - the complex cipher which the Germans used to transmit their messages during World War II. Solving it, they felt, would win the war.

The Polish had worked out that solving Enigma was not a matter of languages, but of maths. By hiring their best mathematicians to work on it, they had managed to crack basic Enigma and even make a model of the very machine used to transmit it. And now, they were going to be invaded by Germany, and there was nothing they could do, except give over their work in the hopes that at least their German occupation would be short-lived. Of course, the Germans kept evolving their code, but this was the proper start of the race to solve the Enigma.

Instead of clever linguistics, Enigma relied solely on mechanics. The Enigma Machine, as it was called, featured many complicated mechanisms that would take the input of a letter and output another letter - but the settings of how it did this changed every day. When the clock struck midnight, the Enigma codebreakers had to start all over again. One of the codebreakers in particular, called Alan Turing, created a machine that would try, using brute force, to decode it daily, but it wasn't quick enough - until they realised a common theme. Weather reports, for instance, would always appear at a certain time in the morning. So if you set Alan Turing's machine with the knowledge

that behind an encrypted passage lay the word 'Wetter' (weather), then the machine would have far fewer possibilities to go through. And this is how they solved Enigma.

However, once they cracked it they had a hard decision to make. What was more important - stopping every German attack they discovered, or keeping their knowledge of the code a secret? If they swooped in and saved thousands of British lives, the Germans would become suspicious, and eventually would change their code. Although nobody knows for sure, it is highly suspected that the bombing of Coventry - one of the worst in the war - was known beforehand by the Enigma codebreakers, who chose not to prevent it for fear this might make the Germans suspect that they had solved the code. This utilitarianism is one of the examples of choosing strategy over kindness - they had to let a whole city be flattened.

As they were scared of their achievement being known, the British also chose not to share it with the Americans, their allies in the war, although they did utilise the American intelligence that they saw. During the war, Alan Turing went over to America to be grilled on the British progress with

Enigma, and repeatedly had to play dumb and pretend to be impressed with American innovations. While the British desire for total secrecy is understandable, many lives might have been saved if the secret of Enigma had been given to the Americans, who were risking their lives to send boats of food to Britain during the war.

As for the Polish, when the process of breaking the Enigma code became declassified, they got little to no recognition for their work. In the famous film 'The Imitation Game' about Enigma, the efforts of the Polish cryptographers were reduced to one line. The solving of Enigma is estimated to have shortened the war by 2 years, saving approximately 14 million lives. This achievement was finally revealed in the 1970s, a time of oil shortages, three-day weeks and mass inflation. News of a British accomplishment such as this, albeit one that happened thirty years prior, would have been a welcome distraction at the time. Although the Poles have started to be acknowledged for their contribution, promoting British patriotism and morale by leaving out the contribution of other countries was strategy, not kindness.

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