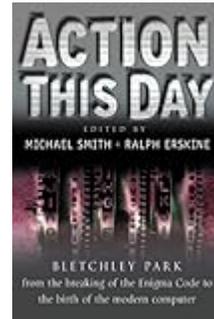


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Ralph Erskine, Michael Smith, eds. *Action This Day*. London: Bantam Press, 2001. xv + 543 pp. (cloth), ISBN 978-0-593-04910-5.



Reviewed by Jonathan D. Beard

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On October 21, 1941, four of Winston Churchill's "obedient servants" sent him a letter, giving "Hut 6 and Hut 8, Bletchley Park" as their return address. Despite their humble circumstances, the writers, who included Alan Turing, had no trouble attracting the Prime Minister's attention to their request for more staff. "Make sure they have all they want!" was Churchill's immediate response to an aide, and his memo was flagged with "Action This Day." Bletchley Park, after all, was the home of the Government Code and Cypher School—and the source of Churchill's most important source of intelligence: deciphered enemy communications, what today is called SIGINT.

Bletchley Park, the breaking of the German Enigma ciphers, and the effects of SIGINT on events in World War II have inspired dozens of books and hundreds of journal articles since the first reports emerged in the 1970s. There are memoirs, technical works on the math and machines, and histories of the use of SIGINT in various theaters of operation. Yet the subject is far from exhausted, and each new book provides new information. This is partly because a few more of the aging codebreakers themselves break their silence each year, but mostly because the United Kingdom's Public Records Office and the United States' National Archives continue to open thousands of pages of formerly classified material to researchers. This

has already resulted in such important works of diplomatic history as David Alvarez's *Secret Messages*.^[1] But it is apparent from both the essays and footnotes in *Action This Day* that this flood of new material—like the documents from former Soviet archives—will mean that many events of the last sixty years will have to be reevaluated.

Action This Day is a collection of twenty-two essays, nicely edited by Ralph Erskine, a retired lawyer who has written many journal articles on World War II codebreaking, and Michael Smith, a writer who was a codebreaker during the Cold War. Smith and Erskine both know the field well, and their brief introductions to the essays help to put them in context. Even so, a reader who is not familiar with the story of Enigma and codebreaking in World War II would be well advised to read an overview—such as Stephen Budiansky's *Battle of Wits*—before tackling *Action This Day*.^[2]

Several of the essays will interest diplomatic historians. Two stand out: one by Alvarez, a professor at St. Mary's College in California, and the other by John Cripps, a graduate student at Southampton University. "Most Helpful and Cooperative," Alvarez's article, is designed to show just how far the British, at Bletchley Park, were ahead of the American codebreakers when World War II started. In 1940, the US sent missions to the UK to find out what GC&CS was up to. As they discovered,

the British were reading—intercepting and decoding—the diplomatic communications of 26 countries, including Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador and Mexico, in Latin America. The Americans, at this point, were only reading Mexico’s correspondence. The reader is led to infer that since the British provided help with German and Italian codes, that they provided the same for Latin America: meaning that beginning in 1941, the United States was able to read the diplomatic communications of most, probably all, its Good Neighbors to the south. Have historians dealing with issues such as the flight of prominent Nazis to Argentina, or the 1954 coup in Guatemala, considered the impact of SIGINT?

A much greater challenge to traditional accounts is posed in John Cripps’ “Mihailovic or Tito?” One of the mysteries of British policies in the 1940s was Churchill’s 1943 decision to back Tito and his communist Partisans, over Gen. Draza Mihailovic’s Chetniks. Churchill was a dedicated anticommunist, and willing—as the UK’s actions in Greece demonstrated—to invest blood and treasure to prevent communist rule. Smith, in his introduction, says that some historians have focussed on James Klugmann, a KGB agent in the Yugoslav section of SOE, to explain this tilt to the left. But Cripps, who has studied the decrypts from GC&CS now available, shows that Churchill almost certainly made his choice because he was reading everyone’s mail. Not only were the British reading most German and Italian military and secret police communications to and from Yugoslavia, they were reading Chetnik and Partisan messages, as well. In addition, Tito kept in touch with his communist masters—the Comintern—by radio, and Churchill read these messages. Finally, there were the famous messages sent by Oshima Hiroshi, the Japanese ambassador in Berlin, back to Tokyo. Oshima had good access to Hitler and Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop, and reported what they said about the Balkans.

Cripps believes that this mass of SIGINT made the well known reports sent back from Yugoslavia by Fitzroy Maclean and other British agents superfluous. In fact, the reports were most useful as cover-ups: Churchill could refer to them and never mention the decrypted communications he actually relied upon. The “smoking gun” that caused Churchill to end support for Mihailovic and back

Tito, Cripps maintains, was a decoded report from Germany’s commander in the Balkans to Berlin. Summarizing a major anti-guerrilla offensive, the general said that 583 Wehrmacht soldiers had died, while 7,489 Partisans had been killed. Chetnik losses were put at 17. Shortly after reading this message, Churchill decided to back Tito and his communists, over opposition from his own Foreign Office.

Most of the other essays in this book are aimed at readers interested in cryptographic history. They will enjoy the reminiscences of the BP veterans, as well as the more specialized pieces on non-Enigma ciphering machines, and the use of computers in codebreaking. The best of these “techie” contributions may be Ralph Erskine’s own “Enigma’s Security: What the Germans Really Knew.” It is the best recounting this reviewer has read of the Germans’ incredible refusal to believe that their Enigma machine ciphers not only could be broken, but were being broken by the Allies. U-boats refueling in the middle of the Atlantic, far from convoy routes, were attacked by carrier aircraft. Two U-boats meeting at a remote island found a British submarine waiting in ambush. Yet Doenitz and the rest of the high command—despite the fact that they were making use of SIGINT, having broken the main UK-US convoy code—never were willing to take the obvious step of assigning a well equipped team of German experts to try to crack their own codes.

Action This Day, thanks to careful editing and the appendices and notes at the end, makes an attractive update to this fast-growing field. Regular readers of *Intelligence and National Security*, the quarterly to which both Smith and Erskine contribute, will find some familiar names among the contributors; those unfamiliar with the journal will be provided with a sample of what *INS* features.

Notes

[1]. David J. Alvarez, *Secret Messages: Codebreaking and American Diplomacy, 1930-1945*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000).

[2]. Stephen Budiansky, *Battle of Wits: The Complete Story of Codebreaking in World War II*, (New York: The Free Press, 2000).

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