Thoughts on *Code Girls* by Liza Mundy

Back in the 1960s, when I pursued credentials as a graduate student, the historical profession undertook a self-examination. The upshot was backlash against the so-called “Great Man” approach to the American past. Instead of elitism baked into imbalanced and incomplete interpretations, historians started to write histories “from the bottom up.” Rather than generals, presidents, and big businessmen at the center of narratives, some researchers now focused their passions and skills not on prominent leaders but on lives of plain folk. Their mission, to render a more even-handed story about the meaning of the American experience, met with uneven results over the past half-century.

*Code Girls* is a fresh example of an old historical movement. Its author, Liza Mundy, is a consummately talented practitioner of a more democratic reconstruction of earlier times, once envisioned long ago. Hanging her analysis on the hook of super-secret codebreaking operations undertaken by the U.S. Army and Navy, her contributions to a fuller understanding of World War II are many and profound. She has crafted a stellar example of revisionist history. For thousands of long overlooked and voiceless young women, whose achievements shortened that war and saved incalculable lives, she has given voice at last. “Rosie the Riveter” has to make room for “Dot the Codebreaker.” We can finally offer public recognition as well as sing about their previously unsung accomplishments. No longer will their stature be diminished, or their roles marginalized as mere secretaries, file clerks, and pencil-pushers.

Thanks to the author’s tenacity of purpose as a researcher, clearly revealed in prodigious digging into archives, conducting interviews, gathering recollections, and mining oral histories, the gag on code girls has been lifted. Credit for the famous code-breaking successes of wartime can at last be spread around more equitably. And because of the author’s mastery of the esoteric methods, machines and nomenclature of an enterprise cloaked in secrecy, and often confused with sorcery, readers can now, with confidence, acknowledge the rightful place of thousands of gifted, patriotic women in histories of the Second World War, as well as confer on them overdue laurels. That the author is also conversant in the arcanum of cribs, super-encipherments, bombes, five-rotor Enigma machines, additives, keys, five-digit groups, et al, reassures us greatly.

The mobilized young women hailed from a cross-section of social classes and educational backgrounds. They spoke across a spectrum of regional accents. Recruited largely out of traditional women’s colleges to a swelling nation’s capital from remote places like Beech Bottom, West Virginia, and Bourbon, Mississippi, they comprised more than fifty percent of the nation’s codebreaking force, and as many as seventy percent of Army cryptanalysts. Whether their alma maters were Sweet Briar, the University of Buffalo, or one of the more illustrious “Seven Sisters,” first-rate intellects prevailed in that internal migration.
Among those outstanding recruits, however, flashes of pure insight were rare, with Genevieve Grotjan’s “eureka moment” while helping to crack the Japanese diplomatic “Purple” cipher an exceptional case. In this crucial regard, Liza Mundy does students of history a major service by sweeping away an enduring myth of individual genius that has burrowed into conventional wisdom as a cultural prejudice. Difficult ciphers were unbuttoned, she underscores time-and-again, by genuine team efforts, not by romantic, lonely, personal epiphanies. Though equally heroic, genius functions essentially as a collective rather than an individual phenomenon. Legendary breakthroughs into enemy systems that occurred at Arlington Hall, headquarters for Army crypto operations, were attributable, in the well-chosen words of the author, to “one big communal brain.”

In a sorcerer’s world of “MAGIC” and “ULTRA,” Tokyo and Berlin waged war on land, at sea, and in the air as if playing stud poker with their hole card face up. Foreknowledge of the enemy’s strengths, weaknesses, and intentions proved to be an invaluable advantage to American strategists and tacticians. In particular, the naval battles at Midway and Coral Sea, the cross-channel invasion of Normandy on D-Day, the aerial ambush of Admiral Yamamoto over Bougainville, and the defense of Allied convoys against German U-Boats in the North Atlantic exemplified the utterly vital non-combat role of the code girls.

Especially valuable was their contribution in the Pacific to the slaughter of the “marus,” Japanese supply ships whose sinking by American submarines meant starvation and inadequate medical supplies for the widely dispersed soldiers of the Imperial Japanese Army. In this pivotal success, skills possessed by an improbable duo stood out. Anna Caracristi, graduate of Russell Sage College from Bronxville, New York, and Wilma Berryman, with a degree from West Virginia’s Bethany College, spearheaded an attack on the Japanese Army address code system. Its cracking yielded priceless intelligence about enemy “order of battle.”

Despite a grueling work schedule of seven straight days on, and then one day off, the code girls still managed to forge lasting friendships. Proof of uncommon intelligence, their work with intercepts, decrypts, and bombes was also a true test of will, endurance, and resilience. So, too, were the oaths of secrecy they upheld and the codes of silence they lived by for the remainder of their lives. Liza Mundy has brilliantly broken those long-resistant codes.

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