The Sinking of the Lusitania: Who’s to Blame?

**As you read, highlight evidence to determine who is at fault in the sinking of the Lusitania.**



In February, 1915, the German government announced that any ship taking goods to Allied countries was in danger of being attacked. This broke international agreements that stated commanders who suspected that a non-military vessel was carrying war materials, had to stop and search it, rather than do anything that would endanger the lives of the occupants.

German military officials argued that this policy was unrealistic because it gave away the one advantage of submarines, the element of surprise. This agreement would require submarines to surface which would expose it to enemy fire. One sailor recounted the story of a U-boat that sank with all aboard and could not be raised for four months… As to what had occurred within, a seaman present when the hatch was forced open found vivid evidence of the kind of death submariners most feared. He wrote, “the scratches on the steel walls, the corpses’ torn finger-nails, the blood-stains on their clothes and on the walls, bore all too dreadful witness.”

Despite the war in Europe, by now in its tenth month—longer than anyone had expected it to last—the passenger ship, the *Lusitania,* was booked to capacity, set to carry nearly 2,000 people, or “souls,” of whom 1,265 were passengers, including an unexpectedly large number of children and babies. The *Lusitania* left the New York on May 1st, 1915 and set off to enter the war zone waters en route to Liverpool. There was some concern on board as a few days previously the German Embassy had published a statement that warned that any ship entering British waters was entering a war zone and could be sunk so they did so at their own risk.

On May 7th, 1915, the German submarine U-20, only ten miles from the coast of Ireland, surfaced to recharge her batteries. Soon afterwards Captain Schwieger, the commander of the German U-boat, observed the *Lusitania* in the distance. Schwieger gave the order to advance on the liner. The U20 had been at sea for seven days and had already sunk two liners and only had two torpedoes left. He fired the first one from a distance of 700 meters. Watching through his periscope it soon became clear that the *Lusitania* was going down and so he decided against using his second torpedo. After a second, larger explosion, the *Lusitania* rolled over and sank in eighteen minutes. A total of 1,198 people died (785 passengers and 413 crew). Those killed included 128 US citizens.

The sinking of the *Lusitania* had a profound impact on public opinion in the United States. The German government apologized for the incident, but claimed its U-boat only fired one torpedo and the second explosion was a result of a secret cargo of heavy munitions on the ship. If this true, Britain was guilty of breaking the rules of warfare by using a civilian ship to carry ammunition. British authorities rejected this charge and claimed that the second explosion was caused by coal dust igniting in the ship's almost empty bunkers.

***The Great World War: Volume III* (1917)** It alleged…that though the *Lusitania* continued to run as a passenger-ship she was loaded with contraband in the form of explosives, that the travellers who crossed the Atlantic…were, in fact, allowed to embark in ignorance of the danger they were running, and in the hope that their presence would save the ship from attack.

 … If it had, it possessed an easy means of both stopping the *Lusitania* and discrediting the British Admiralty. The laws of the United States forbid the carrying of large quantities of explosives in passenger ships. Had the German Government held evidence that explosives were being smuggled on board contrary to the United States law it would have taken the correct legal steps to call the offenders to account. There can be but one explanation of the failure of the German Embassy at Washington to avail itself of so effective a weapon; and it is, of course, that there was no proof of the alleged violation of neutrality and American Law.

**Who’s to blame and why?**

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**Should the US go to war? Why or why not?**

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**Greg Bemis Jr, purchased the *Lusitania* in 1968. He was interviewed about the disaster in an article published in the** [***Sunday Times***](http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/JtimesS.htm) **(5th May 2002)** The fact is that the ship sank in 18 minutes. That could only happen as the result of a massive second explosion. We know there was such an explosion, and the only thing capable of doing that is ammunitions. It's virtually impossible to get coal dust and damp air in the right mixture to explode, and none of the crew who were working in the boiler rooms and survived say anything about a boiler exploding. I don't think there's any question that there was a steamline explosion, but that wouldn't have damaged the ship to the point where it sunk in 18 minutes. It's blarney, part of another cover story.

**Who’s to blame and why?**

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[**Howard Zinn**](http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USAzinn.htm)**, *A People's History of the United States* (1980)** It was unrealistic to expect that the Germans should treat the United States as neutral in the war when the U.S. had been shipping great amounts of war materials to Germany's enemies. In early 1915, the British liner Lusitania was torpedoed and sunk by a German submarine. She sank in eighteen minutes, and 1,198 people died, including 124 Americans. The United States claimed the Lusitania carried an innocent cargo, and therefore the torpedoing was a monstrous German atrocity. Actually, the Lusitania was heavily armed: it carried 1,248 cases of 3-inch shells, 4,927 boxes of cartridges (1,000 rounds in each box), and 2,000 more cases of small-arms ammunition. Her manifests were falsified to hide this fact, and the British and American governments lied about the cargo.

**Who’s to blame and why?**

Impact

AS THE TORPEDO PASSED FROM VIEW BELOW THE EDGE of the deck, there was an interval when nothing happened and one could indulge the notion that it had missed or malfunctioned. “I saw it disappear,” one passenger said, “and for a bare second we all had a kind of hope that maybe it wouldn’t explode.”

In the next instant, 350 pounds of explosives detonated against the plates of the hull, at a point under the bridge about 10 feet below the waterline. Immediately the payload turned from solid to gas. This “phase change” released heat at a temperature exceeding 5,000 degrees Centigrade, 9,000 Fahrenheit, at immense pressure. As one early-twentieth-century submarine builder put it, “The side of the ship is nothing but tissue paper in the hands of these enormous forces.”

A geyser of seawater, planking, rope, and shards of steel soared upward to twice the height of the ship. Lifeboat No. 5 “was blown to atoms,” one lookout said. The ship continued forward through the geyser, which almost immediately collapsed back onto the decks. Seawater drenched passengers; debris thudded off the shuffleboard courts. The children jumping rope on A Deck stopped jumping.

A hole the size of a small house now existed below the waterline. Its shape was more horizontal than vertical, roughly 40 feet wide by 15 feet high. The effects of the blast spread well beyond this, however. Thousands of rivets and the steel plates they anchored came loose over an area about fifteen times greater than the hole itself; the glass in nearby portholes fractured. Bulkheads were damaged and watertight doors dislodged. The relatively small doors and chambers of passenger ships did not dispel explosive forces as readily as the open holds of cargo vessels and thus were prone to destruction. The Lusitania’s builders had installed these barriers with collisions and groundings in mind; none had imagined that a torpedo might one day be detonated against the hull from underwater.

The forward motion of the ship, initially 18 knots, caused “forced flooding,” which drove seawater into the ship at a rate estimated at 100 tons a second. Water surged into the cross-bunker and into Boiler Room No. 1, a cavern that housed two one-ended boilers and two double boilers, and the beginning of a main steam line. Water also flowed into the longitudinal bunkers along the starboard side, nearest the impact zone. As these bunkers filled with water, the ship began to list to starboard. At the same time, the water filling Boiler Room No. 1 and the forward cross-bunker caused the bow to begin sinking. The stern began to rise and the hull to twist.

Dead in the Water

ALL THE ship’s systems were now dead. The rudder no longer operated. The main electric dynamo had failed. All lights were out; anyone walking along an interior corridor now found himself in blackness. The operator in the Marconi room on the topmost deck switched to emergency power. The two first-class elevators at the center of the ship stalled. According to one account, passengers within began to scream.

The elevator that provided the only access to the ship’s baggage room also stopped. The scores of men working to get passengers’ luggage ready for arrival either were dead from the torpedo blast, or would be soon, as water filled the bow. A fireman who escaped Boiler Room No. 2, Eugene McDermott, described a “rush of water that knocked me off my feet.” Many of the dead crewmen were precisely those who would have been assigned to help launch the ship’s lifeboats.

Now the sea found a new path into the hull. Water began to flow through open portholes, many of which were barely above the water to begin with. Those of E Deck, for example, normally cleared the water by only 15 feet. By one estimate, at least 70 portholes had been left open [by passengers against the Captain’s instructions] in the starboard side. Multiplied by 3.75 tons of water per minute per porthole, that meant that 260 tons was entering the ship each minute through the starboard portholes alone.

Falling Life Boat

At the lifeboat, Ogden balked at climbing aboard, out of respect for the maritime custom that gave women and children priority. Mary refused to go unless Ogden came too, so the couple stood aside, watching the process and waiting. At last Ogden agreed to get in. He and Mary took a place near the bow. The boat was half full, with about thirty-five people, when the attempt to launch it began.

Men at the bow and stern manipulated the ropes—the falls—that ran through block and tackle at each end of the boat. A sailor at the bow lost control of his rope. Ogden tried to grab it, but the rope was running so fast it tore the skin from his hands. The bow plunged; the stern rope held. Everyone fell from the boat into the sea, 60 feet below.

Ogden came to the surface; his wife did not. He reached for an oar floating nearby.

Falling Life Boat 2

AT THE NEXT port-side boat, No. 18, another launching attempt had stalled. This boat contained forty women and children, and was held in place by a restraining pin. The sailor in charge refused to lower it, in accord with Turner’s orders, but held an ax, ready to knock the pin loose should the orders change. Several dozen passengers stood between the boat and the outer wall of the first-class smoking room.

Isaac Lehmann, the New York businessman, was shocked that no effort was being made to launch the boat. He had managed to find a life jacket; his revolver was in his pocket. He glanced toward the ship’s bow and saw water advancing along the deck. He demanded to know why the sailor didn’t act.

“It is the captain’s orders not to launch any boats,” the sailor replied.

“To hell with the captain,” Lehmann said. “Don’t you see the boat is sinking?” He drew his revolver. “And the first man that disobeys my orders to launch the boat I shoot to kill!”

The sailor complied. He swung his ax to knock out the restraining pin. The boat was heavy to begin with, but now loaded with three tons of humanity it swung inward, crushing everyone between the boat and the wall. At least two passengers, sisters in their fifties, died instantly, of injuries associated with severe crushing. Lehmann’s right leg was damaged, but he managed to crawl from the mass of wounded bystanders. This was not easy. He was a large, round man and wore a long overcoat and alife jacket.

Passengers and crew again attempted to launch the lifeboat. They were making progress when something went awry and this boat too dumped its passengers into the water. At about the same time, Lehmann said, a “terrific explosion” rose from the deck in the direction of the bow. This new convulsion was likely caused by water infiltrating yet another boiler room and coming in contact with a superheated tank, one of a number of such secondary eruptions. Only about fourteen minutes had passed since the torpedo impact, but the sea was climbing fast.

Adrift

A LIFE JACKET DID NOT GUARANTEE SURVIVAL. MANY who entered the sea had their jackets on incorrectly and found themselves struggling to keep their heads out of the water. The struggle did not last long, and soon survivors who did manage to outfit themselves properly found themselves swimming among bodies upended in poses their owners would have found humiliating. Able-bodied seaman E. S. Heighway wrote, with a degree of exaggeration, “I saw myself hundreds of men & women dead with life belts on in the water after the ship had gone.”

For children—those who did not drown outright—the killer was hypothermia. Fifty-five degrees was not nearly as cold as the water confronted by passengers of the Titanic, but it was cold enough to lower the core temperatures of people large and small to dangerous levels. A drop in the body’s internal temperature of just 3 or 4 degrees, from the norm of 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit to 95, was enough to kill over time. Passengers in the water found that their lower bodies went numb within minutes, despite the warm sun above. Those who wore coats under their life jackets were better off than those who had stripped down, for coats and other warm clothing, even though wet, provided insulation for the heart. Thin people, old people, women, and children, and especially infants, lost body heat the fastest, as did any passenger who had drunk wine or spirits with lunch. With the onset of hypothermia, those in the water began to shiver severely; as the danger rose, the shivering subsided. With a water temperature of 55 degrees, adults could be expected to experience exhaustion and loss of consciousness within one to two hours; after this the skin took on a blue-gray pallor, the body became rigid, and the heart rate slowed to almost imperceptible levels. Death soon followed.

Adrift 2

DWIGHT HARRIS swam toward an overturned lifeboat. “The most frightful thing of all was the innumerable dead bodies floating about in the water!,” he wrote. “Men, women and children. I had to push one or two aside to reach the lifeboat!”

On the way he came across a little boy, Percy Richards, calling for his father. “I swam to him and told him not to cry, and to take hold of my collar, which he did. The bravest little chap I ever saw.”

Harris pulled the child with him to the overturned boat and pushed him onto its hull. Nearly exhausted by the effort, Harris climbed on after him. “I could hardly move, my limbs were so cold!—I must have been in the water about one-half to three quarters of an hour.”

He spotted one of the ship’s collapsible lifeboats, manned by two sailors and partially filled with passengers. He called to them. Soon the boat was near enough for Harris and the boy to climb aboard. The sailors picked up a dozen more survivors but had to leave others in the water because the collapsible was on the verge of being swamped. “The cries for help from those in the water were most awful!” Harris wrote.

No ships were in sight.