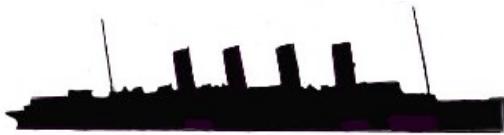


# LUSITANIA'S LAST VOYAGE

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## R.M.S. LUSITANIA

DISPLACEMENT 31,550 gross tons (44,000 tons full load)  
LENGTH: 787 feet  
BEAM: 87 feet  
SPEED: 25 knots (service): 26.7 (maximum)  
POWER PLANT: Steam turbine  
PASSENGERS: 563 first class, 464 second class, 1138 third class  
CREW: 802  
LAUNCHED: 7 June 1906  
SUNK: 7 May 1915  
BUILDER: John Brown & Co., Clydebank, Scotland

To address the first issue, one has to understand why LUSITANIA was built. At the beginning of the 20th century, Germany was luring away transatlantic passenger business from the British with larger, faster and more luxurious liners. Meanwhile, American financier J. Pierpont Morgan had purchased control of all of the British passenger ship companies except Cunard Line. For an island nation dependent upon the sea, the loss of dominance was not merely an injury to national pride but also a threat to national security. "It was therefore [a] matter for keen satisfaction when Mr. Balfour's Government, in 1903, after long consideration and negotiation entered into an agreement with the Cunard Company in order that the latter should be maintained as a British institution, with fast ships available at all times for war services," a contemporary magazine wrote.

Cunard agreed to build two large steamships with an average speed of not less than 24 knots. In return, the government would loan Cunard £2.5 million at 2.5% interest and give Cunard a £150,000 annual subsidy for 20 years. However, this was not merely a government bail-out of a beleaguered industry. The British Admiralty obtained substantial power over the company. Cunard had to guarantee that it would remain British and that no director, or principal officer would be "a foreigner." During the agreement, all of the ships in the Cunard fleet - - not just

No ships tie-up at Manhattan's Pier 54 these days. However, on 1 May, 1915, it was teeming with activity as the most famous ocean liner in the world prepared to embark for England. The ship was the LUSITANIA and she was commencing a voyage that would change the history of the world. On the ninetieth anniversary of her sinking it is appropriate to examine three issues. First, was LUSITANIA a military ship? Second, how did her sinking come about? Third, did the sinking cause America to enter the First World War?

the two new ships- - would be at the disposal of the Admiralty. Moreover, the masters, chief engineers, watch officers and 75% of the crews had to be British. Preference in hiring was to go to members of the Royal Naval Reserve and the Royal Fleet Reserve.

With regard to the new ships, the plans and specifications were subject to Admiralty approval and an Admiralty inspector would oversee their construction. The Admiralty would have storage space on the new ships and Cunard would "afford every facility to the Admiralty for placing fittings on board in the event of the vessels being taken up for use as armed cruisers."

When war between Britain and Germany broke out in August 1914, the two ships built under the agreement, LUSITANIA and MAURETANIA, were requisitioned. However, the Admiralty quickly decided that the ships consumed too much coal to justify their use as cruisers. Consequently, while MAURETANIA was retained for use as a troop ship, LUSITANIA was returned to Cunard. Thus, at the time of the sinking, LUSITANIA was back with her civilian owner and was crewed by civilian officers and sailors.

After the sinking, the Germans claimed that LUSITANIA had been armed. The United States Department of Justice investigated and found the charge to be false. Fittings for four six inch guns were installed during a refit in 1912 or 1913 (depending upon the source) but the guns themselves were never installed. Indeed, no guns were found during a United States Customs inspection prior to sailing and none were seen by the passengers on the final voyage. Although the wreck is in very

poor condition, no guns have been found by those who have explored it.

The Germans also charged that LUSITANIA was transporting a detachment of Canadian troops. Once again, this charge appears to be baseless as it is contrary to the testimony given by U.S. Customs officials and by the survivors at the various inquests.

The charge that LUSITANIA was carrying munitions, however, is true. Her cargo included rifle bullets, shrapnel shells, and percussion fuses. This is not surprising as the United States was supplying a large portion of Britain's armament needs at the time. Furthermore, under contemporary international law, the fact that LUSITANIA was carrying contraband would only have justified the Germans in seizing the cargo, not sinking the ship without warning.

In sum, LUSITANIA clearly had Admiralty connections and was being used to aid the war effort. However, at the time of her sinking, she was not a Royal Navy ship and not a legitimate target.

Tuning to the second issue, life onboard LUSITANIA did not return to normal after the Admiralty returned her to trade. In November 1914, her schedule was reduced to a monthly trip from Liverpool to New York and back. To save coal, one boiler room was closed, reducing her maximum speed to 21 knots. Also, her forward hold was enlarged to carry war supplies home from New York.

If all had gone as the war planners had envisioned, LUSITANIA's release back to trade would have placed her out of harm's way. Both the British and the Germans had thought that the war at sea would consist of a series of

clashes between opposing lines of battleships. No one anticipated the major role the submarine would play.

Upon the commencement of hostilities, the British declared a blockade of Germany. However, Germany evaded the blockade by trading through the ports of its neutral neighbors. Seeing this, Britain expanded its blockade so as to close off the Baltic and North Sea to any trade ultimately bound for Germany. This proved very effective.

The German High Seas fleet was smaller than the British Grand Fleet, and thus the Germans were reluctant to try to use their battleships to break the blockade. Instead, the Germans decided to use submarines to cut off Britain from her sources of supply. Accordingly, on 4 February 1915, Germany announced that the area surrounding the British Isles was a war zone and that Allied merchant ships would be subject to attack without warning.

On 1 May 1915, the Germans printed a warning in the New York newspapers -- often next to the advertisement for LUSITANIA's next voyage -- reminding the American public of their new policy. However, as the New York Times reported a few days later: "The feeling among officials and others appeared to be that the Germans would not go to the extreme of sinking a passenger vessel with women and children and many American citizens aboard. Even the advertisement inserted in American newspapers . . . by the Germans . . . did not cause alarm here with particular reference to the LUSITANIA, although it produced a feeling of irritation." Indeed, Cunard received only one cancellation and a few requests to transfer to other ships.

The technological limitations of early submarine warfare also made many people think that submarines posed little threat. Even with one boiler room closed, LUSITANIA could easily outrun a U-boat, which had a maximum underwater speed of less than ten knots. Indeed, with contemporary torpedoes' limited range, LUSITANIA would almost have to run directly into the path of a U-boat in order for her to have a chance of a shot. Even then, some 60% of German torpedoes failed to explode.

On the morning of 7 May, U-20, 210 feet long with a submerged displacement of 837 tons, was off the southern coast of Ireland. She had three of her seven torpedoes left after a successful cruise attacking merchant vessels. Since standing orders called for submarines to hold two torpedoes in reserve in case enemy warships were encountered on the voyage home, there could be only one more attack. At 11:50, Kaptaian-Lieutenant Walter Schwieger spotted a large ship and attempted to give chase. However, the obsolete British cruiser JUNO outran the Germans.

The British had known U-20's general whereabouts since the night of 5 May and had been broadcasting warnings to all ships that U-boats were active off southern Ireland. Onboard LUSITANIA, Captain William Turner ordered the lifeboats run out to facilitate quick launching. All portholes and watertight doors not necessary for the operation of the ship were closed. The lookouts were doubled and two quartermasters were stationed on the bridge wings to look out for U-boats. The engine room was instructed to be ready to give full speed. The atmosphere on the bridge and amongst

the passengers became tense as additional warnings were received. However, Turner disregarded an Admiralty directive to zigzag because he did not believe in its effectiveness.

Fog on the morning of 7 May caused Turner to worry about his position and he reduced speed to 15 knots. As the fog lifted and the Irish coast came in sight, Turner ordered speed increased to 18 knots. Because the most recent submarine warnings placed the danger further west than where he thought his position was, Turner decided to ignore an Admiralty directive to stay as far out to sea as possible and ordered LUSITANIA closer to shore in order to determine his precise location.

Turner's change of course headed LUSITANIA directly for U-20. Schwieger had watched the liner come over the horizon but had thought that it was unlikely he could get close enough to attack. Nonetheless, he had prepared his boat, ordering the forward torpedo room to load one G-type torpedo. He also confirmed with his pilot that the new target was either LUSITANIA or MAURETANIA, both of which were listed in the boat's copy of Brassey's Naval Annual as armed merchant cruisers. Ignoring one crewman's protest that the target was a passenger ship carrying women and children, Schwieger fired at about two p.m. with the target less than 300 feet away.

The LUSITANIA's lookouts and some passengers spotted the torpedo but nothing could be done before it struck. A few seconds later, a second large explosion occurred. (Writers have speculated that this was an explosion of the munitions that LUSITANIA was carrying. However, explorer Robert

Ballard concluded after an examination of the wreck that it was most likely an explosion of coal dust in an empty bunker near where the torpedo struck.) The ship took on a 25 degree list to starboard.

Following the TITANIC disaster three years earlier, LUSITANIA had been re-equipped so that she had 48 lifeboats in her davits, 26 collapsible lifeboats, 35 life buoys, and 2,325 lifejackets. Notices regarding how to use the lifejackets were posted around the ship and, on this voyage, a committee of passengers had given demonstrations on how to use the lifejackets. However, circumstances did not permit the well-ordered disembarkation contemplated in today's cruise ship life boat drills. LUSITANIA sank in 18 minutes. Because of the severe list, it was impossible to launch the port side lifeboats. Moreover, the list caused the starboard side boats to hang so far away from the ship that passengers had to leap for them. Furthermore, the ship continued to plow through the water at 18 knots causing most of the lifeboats that were launched to capsize when they hit the water. Only eight boats got away. Meanwhile, panic gripped many passengers and crew. Fights broke out, lifejackets were stolen, and people jumped into the water wearing their lifejackets in an unsafe manner. Of the 1,959 souls onboard, 1,198 died including 95 children.

There, thus, appears to have been no causal connection between the events in New York and the sinking. Although the German newspaper warnings give the impression that the sinking was part of a well-coordinated plan, the submarine that sunk LUSITANIA was not hunting her. Rather, it was just a

matter of luck that LUSITANIA encountered her. Furthermore, the justifications offered for her sinking are clearly post-hoc rationalizations. Even assuming *arguendo* that there was a basis for the German charges and that German agents had reported this information home, there is nothing to show that Schweiger had any such knowledge or that it was why he decided to attack. Instead, the evidence indicates that he attacked because he thought that LUSITANIA was an armed merchant cruiser.

Turning to the final issue, when Germany announced that it was commencing unrestricted submarine warfare, it put itself on a collision course with the United States. President Woodrow Wilson termed the German policy "unprecedented in naval warfare." International law required that a warship attacking a merchant ship first signal the merchant ship, board her, make sure of her identity, and assist the passengers and crew to safety before sinking her. Since the early submarines were small, slow, fragile craft, they would be vulnerable to being rammed or to fatal fire from hidden deck guns if they attempted to conform to these rules. Nonetheless, Wilson sent a note to the Germans warning that Germany would be held "strictly accountable" not only if an American ship were sunk but also if any Americans were killed or injured during a submarine attack on an Allied merchant ship.

Not all Americans, however, were upset by the German policy. For example, in April 1915, the German government informed Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan it was going to place warnings in American newspapers saying that ships entering the war zone

could be sunk without warning. Bryan acquiesced because in his view any American traveling on an Allied ship was taking the same chance as if he or she decided to walk across a battlefield

Yet, when LUSITANIA was sunk, few people had time for legalistic intellectual debate. To understand the public reaction it is necessary to understand the place LUSITANIA held in the public view. When LUSITANIA was launched in June 1906, all of the first-class tonnage on the Atlantic became obsolete. She was the first liner of more than 30,000 gross tons and the first to cross the Atlantic in less than five days. LUSITANIA was not only a technological marvel. As the Washington Post wrote: "Her cabins were designed to look more like a hotel than a ship. There were fireplaces, windows shaped and curtained as in a private house, elaborate suites and a series of tapestried reception rooms, smoking rooms and cafes." Even the steerage passengers had luxuries not found on other liners including electric lights and heat. As a result, New York greeted LUSITANIA when she entered New York for the first time in 1907 with the same excitement that surrounded the premiere of the QUEEN MARY 2 last year. In addition, people could not believe that such an unthinkable act could occur. Regardless of the various German justifications, the fact remained that the ship was known to be carrying innocent civilians including many neutral Americans.

Former Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft called upon Wilson to declare war immediately. "In God's name how could any nation calling itself civilized [do] so horrible a thing." Wilson told his private

secretary. However, Wilson realized that the country was not ready for war. Even with this outrage, much of the country, particularly the far west, wanted to have nothing to do with Europe. Moreover, the United States Army was then smaller than the standing army of Portugal and the fleet was in no condition to sail.

Accordingly, Wilson embarked upon a series of diplomatic exchanges that eventually led to the Germans promising, in effect, to renounce unrestricted submarine warfare. As proof that he had correctly judged the mood of the country, Wilson was re-elected by a narrow margin in 1916 based upon the slogan: "He kept us out of war." When, in 1917, the Germans decided that America posed no real threat, they resumed their submarine campaign. After several American ships followed the LUSITANIA to the bottom, Wilson reluctantly took a still largely unprepared nation to war.

While the sinking of the LUSITANIA did not immediately lead to America's entry into the war, it did set the wheels in motion. Because of the sinking, the United States took the position that attacks on passenger ships were intolerable. Because, as became especially apparent after the inconclusive Battle of Jutland, Germany had no means of breaking the British stranglehold other than to engage in unrestricted submarine warfare, conflict with America became inevitable. Since the arrival of large numbers of Americans in France in 1918 is generally credited with bringing the war to an end, the sinking of the LUSITANIA can also be seen as a first step in Germany's defeat.