



Sailing And Sinking The RMS Lusitania: A Century Of Lying America Into War

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The British luxury passenger liner RMS Lusitania was torpedoed a century ago. The sinking was deemed an atrocity of war and encouraged American intervention in World War I. But the ship was carrying munitions through a war zone and left unprotected by the Royal Navy. The “Great War” was a thoroughly modern conflict, enshrouded in government lies.

Indeed, the British were propaganda pros, creating an entire “information” operation based in the U.S. dedicated to misleading America into the conflict. London began with a brilliant campaign built on the faked “Belgian atrocities” allegedly committed by the German Army. Years after the Lusitania went to the ocean’s bottom the British government still obstructed efforts to learn the truth about the ship.

We see similar activities today. Washington attributed phantom horrors to countries which had committed more than their share of documented crimes, Iraq and Serbia. Americans were lied into invading Iraq when the Bush administration relied on falsehoods from Iraqi exiles, most spectacularly Saddam Hussein’s supposed weapons of mass destruction. Much was made of Muammar Khadafy’s nonexistent plan to slaughter Libyan civilians after he threatened his *armed* opponents. Most recent has been supposed Iranian “support” for Yemen’s Houthis, a local group fighting over domestic grievances for decades.

World War I was a mindless imperial slugfest triggered by an act of state terrorism by Serbian authorities—the murder of the heir apparent to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Contending alliances acted as transmission belts of war. The Serbs wanted to destroy the so-called “dual monarchy,” which in turn believed it had to impose “regime change” in Belgrade. The Russians backed Serbia to ensure their predominance in the Balkans, but Imperial Germany was unwilling to allow the destruction of Austro-Hungary, its main ally. The revanchist French supported Czarist tyranny as the only means to recover Alsace and Lorraine, territories lost to Germany

after the Franco-Prussian War 43 years before. Great Britain entered the conflict citing Berlin's violation of Belgian neutrality but mostly to maintain the continental balance of power and neuter German maritime power. Every state was willing to risk war for interests that look dubious, even foolish in the light of history. Nearly 20 million died in the resulting military avalanche.

America's Woodrow Wilson initially declared neutrality, though he in fact leaned sharply toward the motley "Entente." The German-led Central Powers (Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire) were no prize. However, the British grouping included a terrorist state (Serbia, whose ruling dynasty was built on murder), an anti-Semitic despotism (Russian Empire, which held numerous peoples in bondage), a ruthless imperial power (Belgium, which brutalized unfortunate residents of the Belgian Congo), a militaristic colonial republic (France, which once had plunged the entire continent into war and was responsible for starting the Franco-Prussian War), and Britain. The latter was the best of the lot, but it ruled much of the globe without the consent of those "governed" and cared little for those crushed beneath its global ambitions. This clash of empires was no "war for democracy" and "war against war," as often characterized.

Never a great land power, London relied on its navy to dominate. The outnumbered German navy ventured out only once—winning a tactical victory at Jutland, but achieving nothing strategically. The maritime war centered around commerce, an especially effective tactic given British and German dependence on international trade.

London ignored the traditional rules of war when imposing a starvation blockade on Germany and neutrals supplying the Germans. Belligerents traditionally stationed ships near the three-mile territorial limit, but the Royal Navy conducted a "distant" blockade, declaring entire seas and oceans to be war zones. Moreover, Britain treated food and other civilian goods as unconditional contraband of war. Previously such goods were "conditional contraband" only subject to seizure if meant for military use.

London's tactics hurt American farmers but were far more devastating to civilians in Austria-Hungary and Germany, as intended. Explained Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty, Britain's policy was to "starve the whole population—men, women, and children, old and young, wounded and sound—into submission." By the end of the war malnutrition and starvation stalked the Central Powers. London maintained the blockade even after Berlin had signed the armistice and surrendered its heavy weapons, to ensure compliance with the "peace" treaty being drafted by the victors. A study by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace figured that the blockade probably killed around 600,000 civilians during the conflict and perhaps 100,000 afterwards. German sources claimed even more casualties.

Since Berlin lacked the warships necessary to break Britain's naval cordon sanitaire, Germany could retaliate only with surface raiders, which were vulnerable to London's globe-spanning navy, and submarines. However, while U-boats had the advantage of stealth, they were unable to play by the normal rules of war and stop and search suspect vessels. The British Admiralty armed some passenger liners and cargo ships, used such vessels as auxiliary cruisers, and ordered captains to fire on or ram any submarines that surfaced. Britain also misused neutral flags to shelter its ships.

Thus, to be effective the U-boats were forced to torpedo allied and some neutral vessels, sending guilty and innocent alike to the ocean's bottom. Throughout the conflict Germany sank around 5000 ships. However, Churchill encouraged the voyages, noting that "if some of it gets into trouble, better still." Indeed, the week before the Lusitania's sinking he informed the President of the Board of Trade that it was "most important to attract neutral shipping to our shores, in the hope especially of embroiling the United States with Germany."

Wilson complained about the British blockade, but never threatened the bilateral relationship. Indeed, America's anglophile ambassador to the Court of St. James, Walter Hines Page, acted more as representative of His Majesty's Government than of his home country.

Washington took a very different attitude toward the U-boat campaign. The Imperial German government sponsored newspaper ads warning Americans against traveling on British liners; the standard notice ran directly under Cunard's ad for the Lusitania, listing its May 1 departure. But that didn't stop the foolhardy from booking passage. Despite reports of nearby subs and destroyers based nearby, the Royal Navy sent no escort for the Lusitania as the ship neared the British Isles. Off Ireland's coast the vessel went down after a single torpedo hit; the coup de grace apparently was a secondary explosion of Lusitania's cargo of munitions, including 4.2 million rounds of rifle cartridges (declared) and perhaps much more (undeclared). Among the 1,198 dead were 128 Americans, who had knowingly put their lives in danger.

There was a political firestorm in the U.S., but the flames subsided short of Churchill's desired declaration of war. Still, the president demanded "strict accountability" for the German U-boat campaign. His position was frankly absurd: Americans should be able to safely travel on armed vessels of a belligerent power carrying munitions through a war zone. If one American set foot on a boat full of munitions, the Germans should allow it to sail to Britain unmolested, so the bullets and shells could be used to kill German soldiers. Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan argued that British conduct was similar to "putting women and children in front of an army" and soon resigned in frustration at Wilson's bias. The president eventually issued a de facto ultimatum which caused Berlin to suspend attacks on liners and limit attacks on neutral vessels.

As the war dragged on, however, with stalemate on the trench-ridden Western front and the British blockade imposing an ever-greater burden, Berlin tired of placating Washington. With his navy promising dramatic results, in January 1917 the Kaiser approved resumption of submarine warfare. That decision gave Wilson the pretext for war he had long desired, since touched by megalomania he desired to reorder the entire globe.

German submariners sank a lot of ships, but Britain and America developed increasingly effective counter-measures. And the effort could not redress Germany's continental military disadvantages, especially after Berlin's allies began falling. An armistice was reached on November 11, 1918, with the Versailles "Peace" Treaty to follow in June 1919. The egotistical, vainglorious Wilson was outmaneuvered by cynical European leaders and ended up committing the U.S. to defend the territorial and financial plunder accumulated by the victors.

Unfortunately, the treaty turned out to be but a generational truce during which the participants prepared for another round of war. The U.S. Senate refused to ratify the Versailles Treaty. London grew embarrassed by the pact's manifold injustices. More powerful states swallowed what Germans called Saisonstaaten, or "states for a season"—created out of the wrecked Austro-Hungarian and Russian Empires. The French grew timid, unwilling to insist on enforcing the treaty, allowing concessions to Adolf Hitler that were refused earlier democratic governments. Most Germans desired to overturn the "Diktat," as they called the treaty. Across the continent the Great Depression mauled the middle class and radicalized burgeoning numbers of poor. The result was World War II, with far greater murder, horror, tragedy, and loss.

No one emerges from World War I with much honor, especially Wilson. He posed as a liberal defender while circumscribing civil liberties at every turn. He sacrificed American lives not to achieve a grand triumph of morality and democracy, but to allow one set of imperial powers to vanquish another in the latest, and greatest, example of moronic European blood-letting. A time of relative peace, increased prosperity, and growing liberty known as Le Belle Epoch morphed into the one of the worst periods of human history, a half century marked by two huge spasms of mass death and destruction.

It was tragic enough that Europeans brought such horror upon themselves. Wilson unforgivably dragged Americans into other people's war. The Lusitania played a role in that decision, though much happened in between the sinking and Washington's decision to enter the conflict. But many Americans succumbed to Britain's deceitful propaganda campaign, highlighted by the Lusitania and aided and abetted by their own leaders.

Today America's unofficial war lobby routinely clamors for Washington to bomb, invade, and occupy other lands. The motives and arguments are as suspect as those used by the British during World War I. On the centennial of the Lusitania's demise Americans should remember the importance of just saying no. In 1914 any of Europe's great powers could have stopped the suicidal march toward war. The U.S. could have refused to join the other governments as they rushed, lemming-like, into the abyss. Now as then Americans need a president and Congress that believe war to be a last resort for use only when necessary to protect this nation, its people, liberties, and future.

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