

## Chapter 9

### Neutrality and the Lusitania

**R**ules for war: Is such a thing possible? In the past, many nations agreed on a body of international laws governing how countries should act while at war. Among the important agreements were the following:

- The right of neutral countries to be free from unprovoked attack.
- The right of neutral countries to freedom of the seas, to travel to and trade with countries at war.
- The right of civilians to travel in unarmed ships, that could be sunk only if passengers and crew were given enough time to get into lifeboats.

#### How the Rules of War Were Broken by Germany and England

The international rules of war were quickly broken following the beginning of World War I. First, Germany fought its way across neutral Belgium to attack France. Then Germany declared war on England and planted mines along shipping routes in the North Sea to prevent British trade with Holland and other countries in the area. Neutrals could ask for a map to learn where these mines were located, but the British had to take their chances.

Great Britain quickly responded to Germany's violation of neutrality rights. It strictly prohibited all trade of war goods (contraband) with Germany. Taking no chances, the British insisted that any ship trading with Germany submit to a thorough search. Furthermore, England's definition of contraband expanded as the war continued. Originally the list covered only guns and ammunition, but as time wore on, contraband included most food and clothing. The British hoped to destroy Germany's and Austria-Hungary's ability to continue fighting.

#### Submarine Warfare Announced and Debated

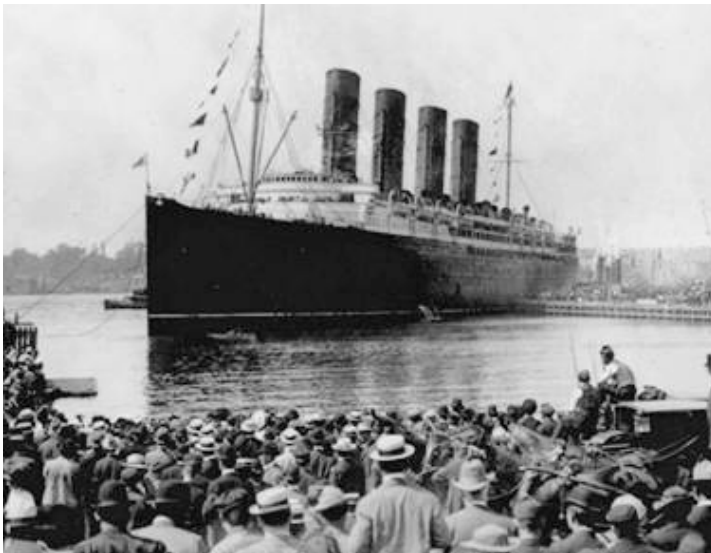
On February 4, 1915, Germany announced the beginning of unrestricted submarine warfare. After February 18th, her fleet of submarines would sink the ships of every neutral and belligerent country without further warning. Passenger ships were not excluded; no attempts would be made to give passengers time to board lifeboats. This ban applied to an area roughly three hundred miles from The Hague where many of the rules for warfare and the rights of neutrals that Germany was violating had been written.

Many people throughout the world were shocked that Germany would sink passenger ships belonging to neutral countries. They pointed to the international rules that allowed neutrals to trade with countries at war and required warnings to give civilians time to get off their ships. But Germany argued that its fragile submarines should not be treated like normal ships. If a submarine surfaced to warn of an oncoming attack it would be quickly sunk. Furthermore, German spokesmen pointed out that England's illegal food blockade threatened their survival as a nation and the lives of innocent women and children. They also claimed that the ammunition and other contraband that the US was selling to England and her

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allies would be used to kill Germans. Furthermore, German officials noted that the British often flew flags of neutral countries and sent ammunition on passenger ships. Finally, Germany reasoned that since the U.S. had already submitted to England's blockade of contraband as well as food and clothing, it would be



**Lusitania begins her last voyage, May 1, 1915**

unfair for the U.S. to allow England to block its trade with Germany without allowing Germany to respond in kind.

It is true that England had successfully blockaded Germany. President Wilson allowed U.S. ships bound for Germany to be boarded and searched, allowing their cargo to be confiscated and subjecting them to innumerable delays. However, Wilson excused these violations because they involved only the loss of property, which was replaceable, and not the loss of human lives, which were sacred and irreplaceable. The President therefore informed German leaders that he'd hold their country "strictly

accountable" for the loss of American lives through submarine warfare

## The Last Voyage of the Lusitania

Like its sister ship, the *Titanic*, the *Lusitania* was headed for an unexpected and tragic end on the day it lifted anchor in New York. As you read the following narrative, ask yourself if you think the passengers and the ship should have been allowed to sail; if the *Lusitania* had been "adequately" warned; and whether its sinking should be a cause for the U.S. to declare war on Germany. The source of this interesting account with its wealth of details, is *Sports Illustrated*.

## Departure

*The Lusitania's departure from New York had not been an ordinary sailing. Most papers carried a notice from the German embassy warning Americans of the risk they would run in traveling on a ship subject to U-boat (submarine) attack. The notice fell next to Canard's (the shipping company's) advertisement that the queen of its fleet – the biggest, fastest, safest, and most luxurious liner in the trans-Atlantic trade – would leave New York on May 1,*

### NOTICE!

Travellers intending to embark on the Atlantic voyage are reminded that a state of war exists between Germany and her allies and Great Britain and her allies; that the zone of war includes the waters adjacent to the British Isles; that, in accordance with formal notice given by the Imperial German Government, vessels flying the flag of Great Britain, or any of her allies, are liable to destruction in those waters and that travellers sailing in the war zone on ships of Great Britain or her allies do so at their own risk.

IMPERIAL GERMAN EMBASSY WASHINGTON, D.C.,  
APRIL 22, 1915.

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1915. Mysterious messages were delivered that morning to the notables on board urging them to get off and stating the ship was to be sunk. Young Alfred Vanderbilt (one of the richest men in America) got one and tossed it away.

*There was tension, but there were no cancellations. The new third mate (later one of two surviving officers) remembers that "it was as if a cloud had passed over the sun and one felt a momentary chill."*

*Captain Turner was reassuring, pointing to the ship's 24-knot cruising speed. Cunard officials informed the press that the Lusitania was almost unsinkable, with her double bottom and her many compartments with their remotely controlled doors.*

*When the liner at last steamed down the Hudson River, she carried some 2,000 people and a cargo of which half (including 4,200 cases of ammunition) was for military use of the Allies.*

## Open Seas

*There were no incidents during the crossing of the Atlantic Ocean. As the ship approached the war zone around the British Isles, Turner had the boats swung outboard for launching. There was one boat drill.*

*Whether or not Turner knew that 23 ships had been sunk in the war zone since he left New York no one can say. Certainly, he was aware there was submarine activity ahead. And he was aware of the navy's rules for passing through the danger area. These included, make landfall only at night, travel at full speed, and zig zag. Yet Turner made his landfall at midday, reduced speed sharply, and made no precautionary direction or speed changes.*

## The Attack

*With the Lusitania committed to an unvarying speed and heading straight toward land, commander Schweiger was presented with a submariner's dream come true. He computed his shot and fired from 700 meters ... "torpedo hits starboard side right behind the bridge ... an unusually great explosion followed ... a second must have taken place."*

*From Gally Head, lighthouse keeper Duffy heard five explosions. He made nothing of this fact, but it was to become a crucial one in later investigations. It suggested that the disastrous results of the torpedoing were caused by a heavy cargo of contraband explosives.*

*On Old Head of Kinsale, lighthouse keeper Murphy heard several explosions and "looked west and saw a large steamer apparently all right." He went on whitewashing.*

*On board the Lusitania the telegraph operator repeated his message: "Come at once. Big list. Ten miles south of Old Head of Linsale." There was yammering, panic and frozen terror and occasional cold courage. Men forced their way ahead of women and children and were driven back by guns. Vanderbilt gave his life vest to an hysterical woman and stood by hatless, casual. He could not swim. Others refused to scramble for places on the boats and waited quietly for the waters to take them.*

*The starboard boats were lowered so frantically that one end often dropped below the other dumping the passengers into the sea. And during these last precious minutes, the 32,000-ton vessel rushed onward so that even properly launched boats often swamped as they struck water.*

*Eighteen minutes after taking a single torpedo, the “unsinkable” Lusitania sank. Many went down with the ship, many more splashed hopelessly in the calm, cold sea, holding onto anything that floated – including corpses. One lady sat in a wicker chair, undisturbed and unconscious. A few lifeboats circled, picking up swimmers. Others went away before they were half full.*

*Rescue vessels were a long time coming, particularly since a British Admiral delayed their warships, fearful that they might be sunk. At dusk, all the boats that had come out were gone again and there was nothing left alive in the darkening sea. 1,198 people had died; 124 were Americans.*

### **Were There Mounted Guns on the Lusitania?**

*No one could deny that the Lusitania was designed to double as an armed cruiser. But Robert Lansing, soon to replace William Jennings Bryan as Secretary of State said, “The absolute fact is that she had no guns, mounted or unmounted.” Customs collector of the Port of New York so swore in court, as did Captain Turner. The top British naval brass, Cunard, and 109 survivors, all swore there were no guns. In New York, four witnesses came forward to contradict these statements. The chief of these, a German named Gustav Stahl, described in detail four hidden guns that he had seen aboard while visiting a friend before sailing. Stahl was believed to have been produced by German agents and his testimony was suspect. He was indicted for perjury by a federal grand jury in New York. On September 8 he pleaded guilty and was sent to prison where he remained 18 months.*

### **Reactions to the Sinking of the Lusitania**

Americans were shocked by the news of the sinking of the Lusitania with loss of 1198 innocent lives. Some people wanted to go to war; others demanded an immediate apology and explanation. Still others said we should keep American passengers off ships sailing in the war zone and selling contraband to England and France. Two such comments on opposite sides of the issue are provided below. As you read each comment try to decide what each would do, and why you either agree or disagree with his recommendation:

<b>Roosevelt Sees a Pattern</b>	<b>Bryan Wants to Warn Americans</b>
<p>None of the old time pirates committed murder on so vast a scale as in the case of the Lusitania.</p> <p>The destruction of cities, (by Germans) the terrible wrong-doing to civilians, men women and children in Belgium and northern France in order thereby to terrorize the civilian population – have now been paralleled by what has happened on the sea.</p>	<p>We cannot well justify a failure to warn American citizens against going into the danger zone on foreign ships – especially on ships, which by carrying ammunition invite great risks. If the elected officials of a city are justified in warning people off the streets of the city in which they live, surely a nation is justified in warning its citizens off of the water highways which belong to no nation alone, but to all nations in common.</p>

## Wilson's Dilemma

President Woodrow Wilson was shocked and upset by the sinking of the Lusitania and the loss of 124 American lives. But, he did not want to risk even more American lives by declaring war on Germany. He also did not like the other choice offered by Secretary of State William Jennings who wanted US ships to stay out of the war zone proclaimed by Germany. Others in the country wanted the U.S. to stop trade with England and France as well as with Germany.

### ***Suggested Student Exercises:***

1. Describe the last voyage of the Lusitania and the warnings that were received.
2. According to your definition, did Germany commit a war crime by sinking the Lusitania, or do you think that the Germans gave the passengers and crew of the Lusitania an 'adequate warning', and that those on board sailed at their own risk?
3. Which of the following actions do you think President Wilson should take following the sinking:
  - a. Declare war on Germany without making further diplomatic effort to avoid it.
  - b. Warn Germany that a continuation of submarine warfare would lead to war with the U.S.
  - c. Stop trade with England until the blockade is lifted or England allows the US to trade with Germany.