Naval Warfare & The Sinking of the Lusitania

Blockades, U-Boats, and International Provocations
Drawing the United States into WWI
Europe at War

The Allies Blockade the Central Powers

- The British declared war on Germany in August 1914 after German troops invaded Belgium.

- Utilizing the world’s most powerful Navy, the British declared the entire North Sea area a war zone in November 1914, signaling that any ship to enter those waters would be destroyed, especially any ships that might be carrying war munitions or contraband (which included food).

- The Germans objected to the nature of the blockade, which had an expanded definition of "war materiel" and items that would support the war effort, and by early 1915 the Germans were starting to feel the effects of restricted trade.

- The blockade against the Central Powers had major implications over the course of the war. As the European war continued, Germany and Austria-Hungary began rationing food (1,000 calories/day). By 1918 more severe rationing programs led to mass malnutrition and starvation and upwards of 900,000 German and Austrian civilian deaths.
The British Isles were dependent on unimpeded trade for food and supplies as well.

In retaliation to the blockade, the Germans sought to disrupt British trade by declaring the seas around the British Isles as a war zone in February 1915.

This escalation in the commerce war between the Germans and the British represented an affront to the pervading international rules and traditions of the time regarding the proper form of a naval campaign against an enemy’s commerce.
Europe at War
A Discussion on Trading Blockades and Naval Warfare During WWI
Run Time: 1 Hour
Video🔗
Submarine Warfare

A New and Significant Use of Force Arises During WWI

- German naval forces did not match the strength of the British Navy.

- To prevent other countries from trading with Britain, Germany employed submarine warfare tactics.

- U-Boats (short for the German word Untersee-boots meaning submarine) were primitive vessels that could submerge beneath the water and send torpedoes into any boats traveling in open water.
German U-Boats

Silent Footage of German Submarines Sinking Merchant Vessels During WWI

Run Time: 30 Minutes

Video
Submarine Warfare
A New and Significant Use of Force in War

Interactive Map: U-Boat Attacks in World War I
In April 1915, the German embassy placed an advertisement in a New York newspaper warning:

“Travelers 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 travelers sailing in the war zone on ships of Great Britain or her allies do so at their own risk. From the Imperial German Embassy”
The RMS Lusitania was a passenger liner setting sail from New York City to Liverpool, England, on May 1, 1915.

The cargo ship carried 1,959 passengers and crew.

Britain began arming merchant ships thus the Germans considered the Lusitania to be fair game as they suspected it may be carrying munitions.

As it approached its destination of Liverpool on May 7, 1915, it encountered a German U-Boat and was hit by a torpedo.
Cunard Line
S.S. Lusitania.
- Leaving New York, May 1st.

Last Voyage
Silent Footage of the RMS Lusitania Leaving New York City on May 1, 1915
Run Time: 5 Minutes

Video🔗
The use of submarines led to a merciless form of warfare that increased the sinking of merchant and civilian ships such as the Lusitania.

When it came to capturing merchant ships during wartime, ships that traveled on the surface were required to adhere to specific rules set by international treaties.

Any merchant ship that was stopped and discovered to be holding contraband cargo could be captured, boarded, and escorted to a designated harbor.

Enemy merchant ships could also be sunk if the crew was allowed an opportunity to use lifeboats.

At this time, Germany was practicing unrestricted submarine warfare.
An Affront to Maritime Custom

- The Lusitania was not granted this courtesy.

- After the torpedo hit, the 1,959 passengers and crew scrambled to the lifeboats with survival taking precedence over custom and law as those aboard discovered that many lifeboats were impossible to launch resulting in mass casualties.
The American Aspect

Massive Media Coverage of the Attack on Innocent Civilians Leads to Pro-British versus Anti-German Sentiment

- The Lusitania exploded from the direct hit, throwing 1,959 innocent passengers into the freezing Atlantic Ocean to drown as the ship sunk in only eighteen minutes.

- There were 1,198 civilian casualties including women and children. Among the fatalities were 128 American civilians.

- While the United States had been neutral in the war up until this point President Wilson issued a stern condemnation for the sinking of the Lusitania.
A Test of Neutrality

America: Are You With Us or Against Us?

- Until this point the war was predominately a European conflict with America remaining neutral.

- The United States was previously trading with both the Allies and the Central Powers, with a disproportionate amount of supplies and monetary support channelled to the Allies over the Central Powers.

- While American manufacturing and financing were crucial to the Allied war effort, the United States also conducted trade with Germany.
President Wilson demanded an apology from the Germans for the sinking of the Lusitania and assurances that there would not be similar incidents in the future.

Not wanting the United States to enter on the side of the Allies, the Germans complied with Wilson’s requests in September 1915 by agreeing not to attack passenger ships. The United States was able to stay out of the war for another two years.
A Stern Condemnation

From the May 18, 1916, edition of the Chicago Daily News, a satirical portrayal of President Woodrow Wilson getting tough with his foreign policy toward Germany. While most of Europe was involved in war, the United States had long tried to maintain a policy of neutrality.
A Fatal Voyage

The Historical Significance of the RMS Lusitania’s Transatlantic Voyage

Run Time: 7 Minutes

Video
A Prophetic Caution
An Urging to Maintain Neutrality

“It is not likely that either side will win so complete a victory as to be able to dictate terms, and if either side does win such a victory it will probably mean preparation for another war. It would seem better to look for a more rational basis for peace.”

—William Jennings Bryan
Secretary of State to President Woodrow Wilson
Extension Activity: The Military Lens
Music and Media Propaganda as Recruitment Tools
The Draft

Conscription, Enlistment & Conscientious Objectors in the U.S. Military

- In previous conflicts such as the Civil War, the United States had utilized conscription. World War I, however, marked the first time the nation's military raised its army primarily through a draft.

- To balance federal power with state autonomy, local civilian draft boards administered the selective service system. A national campaign utilizing posters, printed materials, films, and music helped the government convey the legal requirement for men to register with the selective service or to enlist.

- It was a struggle for officials to forge a unified fighting force from a segregated military consisting mostly of native-born whites, American Indians, and African Americans, along with large numbers of immigrants.

- The draft raised questions about patriotism and the obligations of citizenship, especially the duty to serve.

- The U.S. War Department created the status of "conscientious objector" for Americans who viewed military service as a violation of their religious, ethical, or political beliefs.
Enlistment

Destroy this mad brute!

Enlist!

Come on, boys! Do your duty!
By enlisting now!
Patriotic Duty

Uncle Sam asks: “What are YOU doing for Preparedness?”

- The Committee on Public Information was created as an independent government agency to influence public opinion supporting U.S. participation in World War I.

- Enlistment posters were intended to rouse American audiences against the German militarism threat to American liberty.

- Specific imagery was used to appeal to local populations by using regional language and distributed in targeted geographic regions to prompt immigrants to join the military.

- President Wilson and his advisers believed the war was an opportunity to reconstruct America domestically to better benefit average Americans while also reshaping international relations into a durable peace.
Growing an Army

Silent footage showing the enlistment, training, and equipping of soldiers during WWI

Run Time: 11 Minutes

Video🔗
Raising an Army

The sinking of the Lusitania was used as a stirring military recruitment tool.

The haunting image of a mother and infant sinking into the sea is based on news accounts from the time of the recovered dead:

“Most of the bodies there are women…. At the Cunard Wharf lies a mother still claspin in her arms the body of her 3-month-old baby.”
Powerful Propaganda
Powerful Propaganda

Music as a Motivator and form of Protest

World War I Era Sheet Music

Library of Congress


Image Resources


Image Resources


Image Resources


Video Resources


