

# 1915: World War I

## Context

In 1915, Europe was embroiled in war, but U.S. public sentiment opposed involvement. President Woodrow Wilson said they would “remain neutral in fact as well as in name.”<sup>23</sup>

## Pretext Incident

On May 7, 1915, a German submarine (U-boat) sank the *Lusitania*, a British passenger ship killing 1,198, including 128 Americans.<sup>24</sup>

The public was not told that passengers were, in effect, a ‘human shield’ protecting six million rounds of U.S. ammunition bound for Britain.<sup>25</sup> To Germany, the ship was a threat. To Britain, it was bait for luring an attack. Why?

A week before the attack, British Admiralty leader, Winston Churchill wrote to the Board of Trade’s president saying it is “most important to attract neutral shipping to our shores, in the hopes especially of embroiling the U.S. with Germany.”<sup>26</sup> Churchill, had previously asked Commander Joseph Kenworthy, of Naval Intelligence (Political Section), to report on the “political results of an ocean liner being sunk with American passengers on board.”<sup>27</sup>

For his book, *Freedom of the Seas* (1927), Commander Kenworthy wrote: “The *Lusitania* was deliberately sent at considerably reduced speed into an area where a U-boat was known to be waiting and with her escorts withdrawn.”<sup>28</sup>

Patrick Beesly’s history of WWI British naval intelligence, notes: “no effective steps were taken to protect the *Lusitania*.” British complicity is furthered by their foreknowledge that:

- U-boat commanders knew of the *Lusitania*’s route,
- a U-boat that had sunk two ships [the *Candidate* and the *Centurion*] in recent days was in the path of the *Lusitania*,
- although destroyers were available, none escorted the *Lusitania* or hunted for U-boats,
- the *Lusitania* was not specifically warned of these threats.<sup>29</sup>



“The manoeuvre which brings an ally into the field is as serviceable as that which wins a great battle.”

**Winston Churchill**  
First Lord of the  
British Admiralty

## Follow Up

U.S. newspapers aroused outrage against Germany for ruthlessly killing defenceless Americans. The U.S. was being drawn into the war. In June 1916, Congress increased the size of the army. In September, Congress allocated \$7 billion for national defense, “the largest sum appropriated to that time.”<sup>30</sup>

In January 1917, the British said they had intercepted a German message to Mexico seeking an alliance with Germany and offering to help Mexico recover land ceded to the U.S. On April 2, Wilson told Congress: “The world must be safe for democracy.” Four days later the U.S. declared war on Germany.<sup>31</sup>

## Real Reasons

Influential British military, political and business interests wanted U.S. help in their war with Germany. Beesly concludes that: “Unless and until fresh information comes to light, I am reluctantly driven to the conclusion that there was a conspiracy deliberately to put the *Lusitania* at risk in the hope that even an abortive attack on her would bring

the U.S. into the war. Such a conspiracy could not have been put into effect without Winston Churchill’s express permission and approval.”<sup>32</sup>

In Churchill’s WWI memoirs, *The World Crisis*, he states: “There are many kinds of manoeuvres in war, some only of which take place on the battlefield.... The manoeuvre which brings an ally into the field is as serviceable as that which wins a great battle.”<sup>33</sup>

In WWI, rival imperialist powers struggled for bigger portions of the colonial pie. “They were fighting over boundaries, colonies, spheres of influence; they were competing for Alsace-Lorraine, the Balkans, Africa and the Middle East.”<sup>34</sup> U.S. war planners wanted a piece of the action.

“War is the health of the state,” said Randolph Bourne during WWI. Zinn explains: “Governments flourished, patriotism bloomed, class struggle was stilled.”<sup>35</sup>

## Footnotes:

23. Woodrow Wilson, Message to Congress, Aug. 19, 1914, *Senate Doc.566*, pp.3-4, WWI Document Archive.
24. Greg Feldmeth, “The First World War,” *U.S. History Resources*, Mar. 31, 1998.
25. Colin Simpson, *Lusitania*, 1972, p.151.
26. Winston Churchill, cited by Ralph Raico, “Rethinking Churchill,” *The*

- Costs of War: America’s Pyrrhic Victories*, 1997.
27. Simpson, p. 128.
28. Simpson, p. 129.
29. Patrick Beesly, *Room 40: British Naval Intelligence, 1914-18*, 1982, cited by Raico.
30. Peter Young, “World War I,” *World Book Encyclopedia*, 1967, pp.374-375.

31. Wendy Mercurio, “WWI Notes, From Neutrality to War,” Jan. 2002.
32. Patrick Beesly, cited by Raico
33. *The World Crisis*, cited by Simpson.
34. Howard Zinn, “War Is the Health of the State,” *A People’s History of the United States*, Sept. 2001.
35. Zinn

# The Sinking of the Lusitania

In *Lusitania* (1972), Colin Simpson presents detailed evidence showing that in order to create a pretext incident to draw the U.S. into WWI, the British Admiralty deliberately plotted to ensure that a German submarine would sink the *Lusitania*.

## Churchill's Strategy

On Sept. 21, Churchill, referring to the *Lusitania*, said: "To me she is just another 45,000 tons of livebait." (p.34)

"Churchill's strategy was to goad the Germans into a confrontation with them [the Americans] and by doing so... he hoped to neutralize pro-German sentiment in America and to consolidate his own sources of supply.

From October 1914 on, a steady stream of inflammatory orders were issued to masters of British merchant ships. It was made an offence to obey a U-boat's order to halt. Masters must immediately engage the enemy, either with their armament if they possessed it, or by ramming if they did not.

*The World Crisis* [Churchill's memoirs] again identifies both the strategy and the responsibility: "The first British countermove, made at my responsibility...was to deter the Germans from surface attack. The submerged U-boat had to rely increasingly on underwater attack and thus ran the greater risk of mistaking neutral for British ships and of drowning

neutral crews and thus embroiling Germany with other Great Powers."

In order to assist the making of such a mistake, the Admiralty issued an instruction ordering all British ships to paint out their names and port of registry, and when in British waters to fly the flag of a neutral power. These orders were distributed from the Admiralty to all shipping companies. On the copy sent to Cunard is the note, "Pass the word around that the flag to use is the American." (pp.39-40)

Since September 1914 the Admiralty had been in possession of the German naval cyphers and from February 1915 a chain of ...stations established around the English and Irish coasts, had enabled Naval Intelligence not only to read almost every German naval signal but also to pinpoint where it came from." (p.126)

"On 5 May, the admiralty signalled the *Juno* to abandon her escort mission... The *Lusitania* was not informed that she was now alone, and closing every minute to the U-20 [German sub]. It was an incredible decision by any standards and can only be explained on two grounds. Firstly, that Churchill and Fisher [Admiral of the Fleet] were so preoccupied...that they failed to appreciate it; or secondly, that it was the pinnacle of Churchill's higher strategy of embroiling the U-boats with a neutral power." (p.128)

## Naval Weapons on Deck

"The [*Lusitania's*] shelter deck was adapted to take four six-inch guns on either side, making a total complement of twelve guns...each firing a shell of high explosive. Her armament was installed and on 17 September she entered the Admiralty fleet register as an armed auxiliary cruiser, and was so entered on the Cunard [Steam Ship Company] ledgers. The *Lusitania* was ready for war." (pp.31-32)

"*Jane's Fighting Ships 1914* and *The Naval Annual 1914*... were standard issue to each U-boat. Both British naval publications listed her [the *Lusitania*] as armed, *Jane's* as an auxiliary cruiser, *The Naval Annual* as an armed merchantman." (pp.72-73)

## A Cargo of Ammunition

Evidence shows that the *Lusitania* was carrying about six million rounds of ammunition, including:

- "1248 cases of 3 inch Shrapnel shells filled; 4 shells to each case and 250 cases to each lot; weight of the lot being 51 tons," and
- "4927 boxes of cartridges. These had been consigned by the Remington Small Arms Co. and were addressed to the Royal Arsenal at Woolich. Each case contained 1000 rounds of .303 ammunition, and the net weight of the consignment was 173 tons." (p.106)

"All the News That's Fit to Print."

# The New York Times.

EXTRA  
5:30 A. M.

VOL. LVII, NO. 3888

NEW YORK, SATURDAY, MAY 8, 1915—TWENTY-FOUR PAGES

ONE CENT

**LUSITANIA SUNK BY A SUBMARINE, PROBABLY 1,260 DEAD;  
TWICE TORPEDOED OFF IRISH COAST; SINKS IN 15 MINUTES;  
CAPT. TURNER SAVED, FROHMAN AND VANDERBILT MISSING;  
WASHINGTON BELIEVES THAT A GRAVE CRISIS IS AT HAND**

### SHOCKS THE PRESIDENT

Washington Deeply Stirred by the Loss of American Lives.

### BULLETINS AT WHITE HOUSE

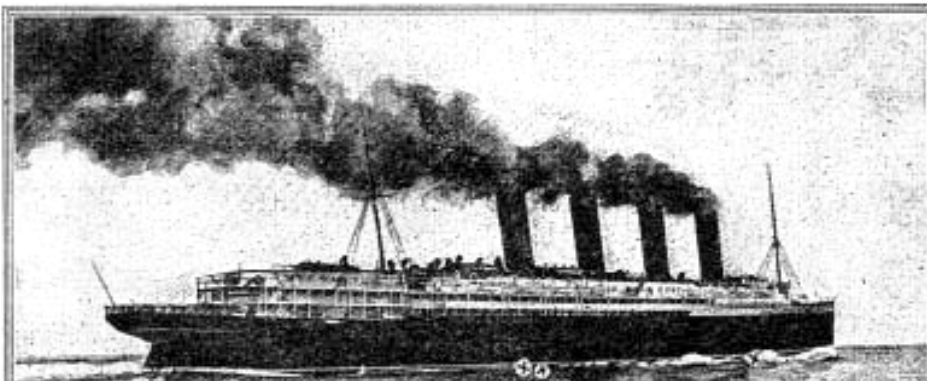
Wilson Reads Them Chiefly, but is Silent on the Nation's Course.

### SENATE OF CONGRESS CALL

Loss of Lusitania Reviveth Fears of Our First Meeting to Germany.

### CAPITAL FULL OF GUMMERS

Wagon Train Lined with the Dead; Many More Before Return Home.



### SOME DEAD TAKEN WHERE

Several Hundred Sailors at Queenstown and Wexford.

### STEWARTS OF DISASTER

One Torpedo Crashes into the Disabled Liner's Bow, Another into the Engine Room.

### SHIP LISTS ENER TO PORT

Makes it Impossible to Learn Many Details, the Handful Must Have Gone Down.

### ATTACKED IN BROAD DAY

Passengers of Lusitania Warning Not Best Given by Germans to See the Ship Left Her Way.