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Sinking of HMS *Lusitania* – I

Lead: On May 7, 1915, German submarine *U20* torpedoed the Cunard passenger liner *Lusitania*. 1198 passengers and crew including 128 Americans went to their deaths. The sinking of so prominent a target provoked outrage, accusations, and questions, and helped draw the United States into World War I.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: Just months into the war, Allied Forces—initially France, Russia, Serbia, and Britain— used a

time-honored offensive strategy against the Central Powers—initially Austria-Hungary, Turkey, and Germany. Britain also mined parts of the North Sea to block both military and civilian supplies from reaching Germany. The latter responded with submarine attacks against shipping in the waters around British Isles.

The captain of the *U 20*, Lieutenant Commander Walther Schwieger was in a bit of a quandary. He was running out of fuel and on May 6th aborted his hunting mission around the west England port of Liverpool and headed for home. The next day he spied the *Lusitania*. The liner was making its 101st voyage from New York City's Pier 54 in the

then-neutral United States.

Schwieger was under strict orders to attack any British ship, but he knew that international law required men-of-war to announce impending attacks on merchant and passenger ships so that the intended target could evacuate noncombatants. Against this he weighed the danger of ramming by the *Lusitania* since such an announcement was sure to draw attention to his position. At that time the fast British merchant ships (sometimes disguised as American vessels by flying the American flag and often defensively armed) rammed German subs as directed by the British Admiralty and the First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill.

Self-preservation prevailed, and Schwieger sent his deadly torpedo on its way. Shortly after the initial strike, there a second explosion, now believed to be a reaction of heat and stored coal. This further ripped the ship and it sank in just 18 minutes, unusually fast for so large a ship, especially one deemed unsinkable. Next time: who was to blame?

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

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