

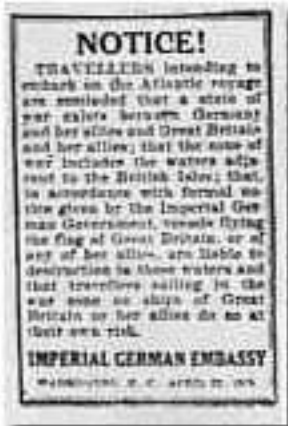
## RMS Lusitania: The Fateful Voyage

On April 30<sup>th</sup> 1915, the Lusitania was at New York, being loaded with meat, medical supplies, copper, cheese, oil and machinery, but she was also secretly being loaded with munitions for Britain for the war. That same day, Kapitänleutnant Walter Schwieger was ordered to take his U-boat-20 German submarine to the northern tip of Great Britain, then back down south on the Atlantic side and then east to the Irish Channel to destroy ships going to and from Liverpool, England.

Schwieger was known to frequently attack ships without warning them, and fired at any neutral ships he suspected may be British. In an earlier voyage, he narrowly missed hitting a hospital ship with a torpedo. His reputation made it more likely for him to destroy a British passenger liner, such as the Lusitania.



Beside the CUNARD advertisement was a notice:



### 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.

This notice was thought by most of the passengers as an idle threat.

The first days of the voyage were uneventful, but not for the U-20. On May 5<sup>th</sup>, Captain Schwieger spotted a small schooner, the *Earl of Lathom*. He surfaced to warn the crew, then destroyed the boat with gunfire. The next day as he continued further east in the Irish Channel, he fired two torpedoes at the *Candidate*, a 5858-ton steamer from Liverpool. About two hours later, he destroyed another ship, the *Centurion*. The British never warned the Lusitania of these sinkings which were taking place near where the Lusitania was about to travel through.

On May 7<sup>th</sup>, the U-20 was travelling west in the Irish Channel. At about noon,

Article modified from <http://www.firstworldwar.com/features/lusitania.htm>

Schwieger and his crew sighted an old war cruiser, the *Juno*. It escaped because it was zigzagging, which made it hard for a submarine to fire at it, due to its constantly changing path. Captain Turner of the *Lusitania* did not do this because he felt that it wasted time and fuel. Then, at 1:20pm British time, Schwieger sighted something of note.

*"Starboard ahead four funnels and two masts of a steamer with course at right angles to us..."*

He submerged and approached the large passenger liner at 9 knots and waited. To his luck, at 1:40pm, when the ship was roughly 700 meters away, it turned 30° toward him, making it easier to attack. He fired a single torpedo...

### **A Deadly Encounter**

As a result of the list (tilt) of the ship, the lifeboats on the port (left) side could not be launched. The starboard-side boats were swung out so far as a result of the list that many passengers had to jump from the deck to the lifeboats, risking falling into the water many storeys below. Many crew members panicked and a few lifeboats were launched that contained only crew members.

Other lifeboats capsized, and one or two were damaged when the torpedo hit the ship. Although the *Lusitania* had adequate lifeboats for all on board, most lifeboats simply could not be launched. The *Lusitania* sank below the waves shortly before 2:00pm. It sank in 90 meters of water, and since the *Lusitania* was 239 meters long, the bow (front of the ship) hit the bottom of the ocean while the stern was still up in the air.

Captain Turner jumped into the water as the bridge was about to go under. He swam for about 3 hours, until he finally found a nearby lifeboat, which was being swarmed with people trying to survive. A Canadian told some people to leave the boat to prevent it from collapsing. Turner decided to stay on the lifeboat.

The U-20 saw all this. Schwieger made the following note in his war diary:

*"An unusually heavy explosion takes place with a very strong explosion cloud (cloud reaches far beyond front funnel). The explosion of the torpedo must have been followed by a second one (boiler or coal or powder?). The superstructure right above the point of impact and the bridge are torn asunder, fire breaks out, and smoke envelops the high bridge. The ship stops immediately and heels over to starboard very quickly, immersing simultaneously at the bow. It appears as if the ship were going to capsize very shortly, Great confusion*

*ensues on board; the boats are made clear and some of them are lowered to the water with either stem or stern first and founder immediately. On the port side fewer boats are made clear than on the starboard side on account of the ship's list. The ship blows off [steam]; on the bow the name "Lusitania" becomes visible in golden letters. The funnels were painted black, no flag was set astern. Ship was running twenty knots. Since it seems as if the steamer will keep above water only a short time, we dived to a depth of twenty-four meters and ran out to sea. It would have been impossible for me, anyhow, to fire a second torpedo into this crowd of people struggling to save their lives."*

Many claimed that Schwieger added the last sentence after the voyage after the world became shocked by the sinking.

### **The Aftermath**



Seven hundred sixty-one people were picked up by boats from Queenstown. One thousand one hundred ninety-eight people perished, this death toll was rivaled only by the *Titanic* disaster. Many survivors were dazed at first. Then they became enraged at the Germans, and many claimed that they placed the "notice" beside the CUNARD ad because they were planning to destroy the ship. Many survivors lost family members, and in some cases, entire families were wiped out. Riots occurred in many countries, and many stores refused to serve Germans.

The Americans were particularly enraged by the *Lusitania* disaster. One hundred twenty-eight Americans were lost on the British ship out of 197. This was after many protests of Germany's unrestricted submarine warfare, in which many neutral ships, including those of the United States, were sunk, and some without warning. On May 13<sup>th</sup>, President Woodrow Wilson sent the first of four *Lusitania* notes to Germany. Anti-German protests and political cartoons appeared.

Germany tried to find ways to defend itself against these attacks and protests. It claimed that the *Lusitania* was armed and that it was carrying munitions for the destruction of German soldiers. The first claim was a false claim, and although the British denied it, the second claim was proven to be true many years later in secret British documents.

### **Pro-German Arguments**

Generally, the Americans believed that the Germans were violating the rights of humanity with its torpedoing without warning of the *Lusitania*, but the Germans had their reasons. Many Germans claimed that the British deliberately exposed the *Lusitania* and tried to get it sunk to embroil the Americans, and get them to join the war on their side. In 1916, the American ambassador to Germany interviewed the Kaiser (ruler of Germany) and found that he believed the ship was going slowly in dangerous waters so that it could be easily destroyed.

Captain Turner violated 5 top-secret Admiralty instructions, including zig-zagging, travelling near the middle of the (Irish) channel and avoiding headlands (such as the Old Head of Kinsale, 10 km away). Turner claimed that zig-zagging was a waste of time and thought that the Irish Channel was much narrower and therefore travelled closer to land. And why didn't the British Admiralty warn Turner of the sinking of the *Centurion* and *Candidate*?

The Germans also tried to justify the sinking by saying that the British were using their "illegal" blockade of stopping and confiscating ships carrying cargo to Germany in order to starve the German citizens, and this nation-wide suffering was worse than the suffering of the victims of the *Lusitania* disaster.

### **Pro-Britain Arguments**

The points against Germany were more obvious than those against Britain.

First of all, the British and all the neutral countries hated Germany's unrestricted submarine warfare. Germany claimed that their blockade was in response to Britain's blockade of capturing their own ships. But no one gets killed in a blockade like Britain's, and people, including innocent civilians die in unrestricted submarine warfare.

Second, the British could have blamed Walther Schwieger, who destroyed many neutral, passenger and hospital ships, and some without warning. If Schwieger didn't mean to sink the luxury liner, he should have been able to see that it was a passenger ship, and save his torpedo.