

The Sinking of the Lusitania: How the British won American hearts & minds

By John Maxwell Hamilton and Elisabeth Fondren, *The Conversation*, adapted by Newsela staff on 01.04.18 Word Count 1,090 Level 1180L, John Maxwell Hamilton is a professor of communications at Louisiana State University. Elisabeth Fondren is earning her Ph.D. in media and public affairs at Louisiana State University.

Image 1. Sinking of the Lusitania. Engraving by Norman Wilkinson, *The Illustrated London News*, May 15, 1915. Image from the public domain. →

On May 7, 1915, a German torpedo sank the British passenger boat Lusitania, taking the lives of 1,195 people, including 123 Americans.

For many in the United States, this act solidified the belief that Germany was a brutal, enemy monarchy. The public was not yet ready to go to war, but many Americans began to speak out for entering the conflict on the Allies' side — that is, with Britain, France, Russia and Italy.

By any measure, the torpedoing of the Lusitania was horrific. But there is a story behind the story, and it provides one of our earliest examples of the effective – and ineffective – use of government propaganda, a new weapon used in the war.

New Departures In Naval Warfare

World War I was unlike past wars in many ways, especially in its sea battles. From the war's start in August 1914, the British imposed a blockade that may not have been legal — it extended over the entire North Sea, which was not an area of actual fighting. This prevented both soldiers and food from reaching the Germans.

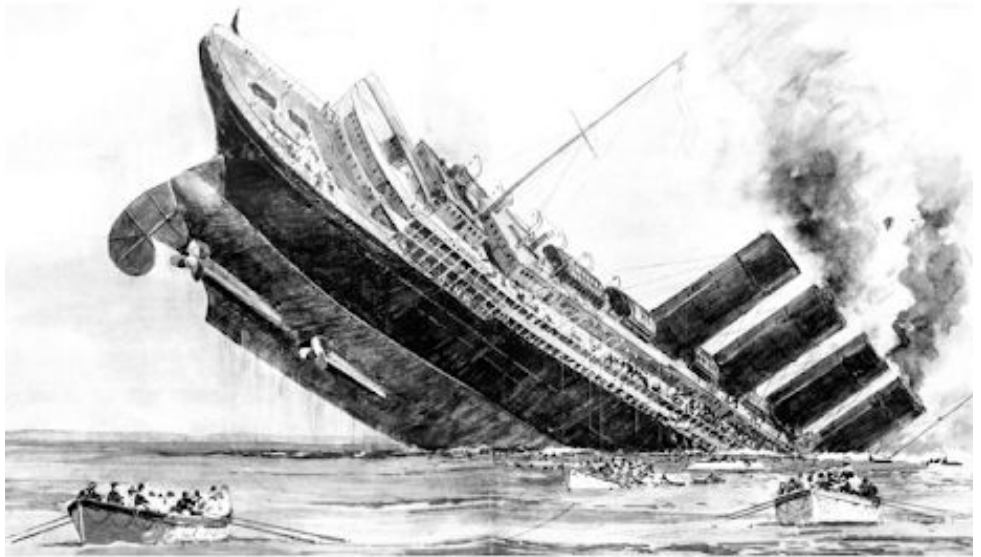
Much of Germany, wrote journalist Carl Ackerman, looked “like a grocery store after a closing-out sale.” Few truly starved, but many were malnourished, and as many as 300,000 people may have died from this. Germans also had U-boat submarines, a new form of warfare, which also changed the rules.

The rules of war said that a U-boat had to announce it was about to sink another boat. To do this, it had to rise to the surface, making it an easy target. This could be problematic, even when confronting merchant and passenger boats, as the Allies sometimes carried weapons on these boats anyway. Also new was the wide-ranging use of propaganda — information either put out or suppressed by governments to attack an enemy or promote a political cause.

Heavy-Handed Messaging From Berlin

The Germans restricted what their own citizens knew. They stirred up support not only among their citizens at home but also among German-Americans, whose influence they hoped might keep the United States out of the war.

After the sinking of the Lusitania, German officials pointed out that the ship was carrying weapons. The government had placed ads in New York newspapers before the Lusitania sailed warning that ships under British flags were “liable to destruction.”



The Germans could have pointed out that the British blockade seriously hurt the country's citizens and that it was an act of war. However, this would make them appear weak. Instead, they took a different tack and focused on their strength.

The American people were offended by the German government's pride over the sinking of the ship. The Lusitania was "drilled into the ground," read a headline in one German paper, and another celebrated the attack as "a success of moral significance."

Dr. Bernhard Dernburg was in charge of spreading pro-German propaganda in the United States. He correctly observed that Americans could not visualize thousands of "German children starving by slow degrees as a result of the British blockade, but they can visualize the pitiful face of a little child drowning amidst the wreckage caused by a German torpedo."

But Dr. Dernburg was so aggressive in his defense of the Lusitania attack that he made himself unwelcome in America and had to return to Germany. After the Lusitania sinking, the German ambassador to the United States said that Germany had no clear purpose to distributing propaganda in the U.S.

Subterranean Work By London

The British were far cleverer in their propaganda, which they worked on in a place called Wellington House. Wellington House worked so secretly that even members of British Parliament were unaware it existed.

In the United States, this propaganda work was carried out by the novelist Sir Gilbert Parker and other journalists who planted stories in the American press. A sign of their success was the lavish press attention given to German spying in the United States, while there was comparatively little reporting on Britain's underground activities.

The British also had an enormous advantage in communicating their point of view. In the first hours of the war, they cut Germany's transatlantic telegraph cable lines. The telegraph was like an early form of texting, and to make it work, a cable had to be laid thousands of miles under the Atlantic, connecting America and Europe. Britain cutting the line limited Germany's ability to send news to the United States and disallowed American journalists in Berlin from sending their reports home.

Once, William Randolph Hearst, who owned several high-profile newspapers in the U.S., wrote a news story that was kinder to the German side of the war. In retaliation, the British totally cut off Hearst's access to transatlantic cables. The British also cleverly magnified German stories to make them seem crueler.

Shortly after the sinking of the Lusitania, a merchant in Munich produced a medal that depicted the event. His business was small — he made fewer than 500 medals — but the British made it appear like all of Germany celebrated its brutality. The British distributed pictures of the medal to newspapers and magazines both inside and outside Britain.

Wellington House reproduced 50,000 copies of the medal. After that, at the suggestion of the Foreign Office, department store tycoon Harry Gordon Selfridge manufactured more, selling them around the world and donating the proceeds to the Red Cross.

American Reactions

Some Americans, however, believed all sides shared blame for the war's horrors. Following the sinking of the Lusitania, Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan wanted to protest the actions of both Germany and of Britain, whose blockade prevented food from reaching non-soldiers. In a meeting, he erupted, "You people are not neutral. You are taking sides!" Bryan resigned when the administration focused its protests on Germany.

Britain won the propaganda battle in the end. In April 1917 President Woodrow Wilson took the United States into the war. After entering the war, the United States itself undertook wide-ranging propaganda for the first time in its history and has not stopped since.

The fight for public opinion is today a regular part of diplomacy in war and in peace. "Conventional wisdom holds that the state with the largest army prevails," wrote Joseph Nye Jr., a former State Department official and foreign policy scholar. "But in the information age, the state (or the non-state actor) with the best story may sometimes win."

Reading Questions

Directions: read the article on the previous page and answer the questions below completely.

1. What was the Lusitania? What happened to it?
2. How did the sinking of the Lusitania make many Americans feel?
3. What was the British Blockade? How did it impact Germany?
4. What are u-boats? What did the rules of war say u-boats had to do? Why was this a problem?
5. Why did Germany restrict what Germans knew about the Lusitania?
6. How did Germany justify the sinking of the Lusitania?
7. Why were Americans offended by the way Germany handled the sinking of the Lusitania?
8. How did Britain and Americans spread propaganda against Germany?
9. Some Americans believed both were to blame for the violence and death in the war - Why?
10. Who won the Propaganda battle? What did America end up doing?