Time Machine (1915): German Submarine Sinks the Lusitania in WWI

America Joins WWI

Editor's Note: The Lusitania was a British passenger ship. At the time of its launch, it was the largest, fastest and most luxurious ship in the world. On May 1, 1915, it left New York for England. More than 1,900 people were on board. On the way, a German submarine sunk it with a torpedo. The attack took place in World War I. After the U.S. found out that 128 of the 139 Americans on board were killed, the country was outraged. The U.S. began to lean toward war. However, in 1915 many people were still against war. The U.S. finally joined WWI in 1917.

The following article was originally published in the New York Tribune on May 8, 1915. It was titled "1,300 Die as Lusitania Goes to Bottom."
Washington, D.C., May 7 -- The news of the heavy loss of life on the Lusitania stirred Washington as it has not been stirred since the sinking of the Maine by Spain in 1898. Many are to be counted among the victims of German savagery near Queenstown, Ireland.

President Woodrow Wilson made little effort to conceal his feelings. At 8 p.m. tonight the president received the following message:

“Lusitania sank at 2:30 o’clock. Probably many survivors. Rescue work proceeding favorably. Shall I send you list of survivors?”

As soon as he read it he put on his hat and walked out of the White House. The Secret Service men had no knowledge he had left. The president walked up Sixteenth Street to Corcoran Street, crossed over to Fifteenth Street and came back to the White House. He went into his study to await further information. He is working on the message he will send to the German Foreign Office as soon as all the details of the disaster are known.

Our government stands challenged by the German government. The State Department has stated that Germany must be held responsible for any ill treatment of American citizens and property. The death of U.S. citizen Leon Thresher in March, when the British ship *Falaba* was sunk by Germany, was a hint of how far Germany might go. But nobody thought that Germany would so quickly shock the world and in such a violent and tragic manner.

**Price of Peace May Be Too High**

This attack was so brutal that those who want peace at any price are now worried. The price may be too high.

Spain's destruction of our battleship, Maine, in Havana harbor in Cuba 17 years ago is still denied by the Spanish government. It destroyed good relations with Spain and led to war.

The Maine tragedy came without warning. But the Lusitania tragedy came after a bold advertisement by Germany in April that read, "NOTICE! TRAVELLERS ... 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. ... 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."

**U.S. Was Concerned That Attack Might Happen**

President Wilson is silent tonight. Soon the details of all the horror will come to him. Then he will act as an American president ought to act.
State Department officials feared this type of disaster a few days ago. They announced there would be no passports for Americans going to Europe for pleasure.

Tonight no one wants to think about this country being drawn into the war. Many still believe Americans will have survived the attack.

However, if there is a loss of American lives, things will be very different. Germany will have to take responsibility for the disaster, if the act was performed by a German submarine.

Some suggest the Lusitania struck a mine. However, the British navy has said no mines were in the area.

**Any Steps Necessary to Protect American Citizens**

Even if no American lives had been lost, a strong protest will be sent to Germany.

The United States knows that those at war with one another can stop, visit and search ships.

The United States has no concern over the sinking of the Lusitania itself. But it is gravely concerned over the probable loss of the lives of American citizens.

The American government sent a note to the German Foreign Office on February 10. It was stated that this country would take any steps necessary to safeguard American lives and property on the high seas.

It is believed the destruction of the Lusitania was surely planned by the Germans long before it sailed. The German Embassy’s warning advertisement cannot hide their responsibility and guilt.

**Germany May Try to Hide Behind Warning**

Already there is talk from Germany that it is not responsible for sinking the Lusitania. It claims a warning had been given.

One interesting fact about the sinking is whether or not the Lusitania was flying the American flag when it was sunk. A little more than two months ago the Lusitania flew the American flag in the German war zone while on its way to this country. This led to a warning from Germany as to the use of the American flag by British ships. However, America responded that the important fact is American lives must be protected.
Naval officers in Washington believe that the commander of the German submarine that torpedoed the Lusitania selected the spot for the sinking because its closeness to land would minimize the loss of life.

News of the sinking quickly ended a luncheon with several members of the president’s Cabinet. The luncheon was at the Shoreham Hotel, and just as the coffee had been finished a newspaperman informed the Cabinet officers of the sinking of the liner.

Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan started for his office almost on a run to get more information, while the president's lawyer and private secretary, Joseph Tumulty, went quickly to the White House to inform the president. Secretary of the Interior Franklin Lane, Secretary of Commerce William Redfield, Secretary of Labor William Wilson, Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels and Secretary of War Lindley Garrison hurried back to their departments.

The German Embassy said that no news of the sinking of the Lusitania had been received. The German ambassador was in New York and had no statement.

The British Embassy was also without information.

Writing Activity

Significance: Why is the event described in the article taught in schools today? What are the lasting lessons that we can learn from studying this event? Support your response with evidence from the text.

Multiple Choice Questions

1. Which section highlights the idea that President Wilson was deeply disturbed by the attack on the Lusitania?
   
   A. The introduction [paragraphs 3-7]
   B. Price of Peace May Be Too High
   C. U.S. Was Concerned That Attack Might Happen
   D. Any Steps Necessary to Protect American Citizens
2. Which piece of evidence BEST explains why Germany attacked the Lusitania?

A. The death of U.S. citizen Leon Thresher in March, when the British ship Falaba was sunk by Germany, was a hint of how far Germany might go. But nobody thought that Germany would so quickly shock the world and in such a violent and tragic manner.
B. State Department officials feared this type of disaster a few days ago. They announced there would be no passports for Americans going to Europe for pleasure.
C. A little more than two months ago the Lusitania flew the American flag in the German war zone while on its way to this country. This led to a warning from Germany as to the use of the American flag by British ships.
D. Naval officers in Washington believe that the commander of the German submarine that torpedoed the Lusitania selected the spot for the sinking because its closeness to land would minimize the loss of life.

3. Which answer choice BEST characterizes Germany's attitude toward the sinking of the Lusitania?

A. Germany is faultless for any of its actions because it warned the United States of the dangers of entering British waters in support of England.
B. Germany was justified in torpedoing the Lusitania because it perceives the United States as its enemy in war.
C. Germany was not responsible for the sinking of the Lusitania because its destruction was actually caused by running into British mines.
D. Germany only sank the Lusitania to pressure the United States to support them in the war with England.

4. According to the article, Americans would MOST LIKELY agree with which of the following statements?

A. The United States has been waiting for the right moment to join the war against Germany.
B. The United States should avoid joining the war at all costs, including the loss of American life.
C. The United States should immediately declare war against Germany.
D. The United States should go to war with Germany if Americans died aboard the Lusitania.