

# **Dead Wake Study Guide**

## **Dead Wake by Erik Larson**

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## Summary

“Dead Wake” by Erik Larson tells the story of a fabulous steamship, the Lusitania. It was called the “magnificent ship” standing seven stories from dock to bridge and consuming coal at a rate of 140 tons a day while just standing still. This splendid example of man’s advancements in shipbuilding was a commercial vessel that carried passengers and cargo. While some of Britain’s private steamships had been converted for the war, the Lusitania had no connection whatsoever with the war or wartime maneuvers. However being an ocean liner for passengers wasn’t to be the reason why it became an important part of world history.

Just like the Titanic before it, the Lusitania was considered to be virtually unsinkable. Its size alone was daunting; its image would scare off most warships that were smaller and barely faster than the swift steamship. It was fully capable of ramming and destroying a smaller ship. Besides while the Great War between Great Britain and Germany had been ongoing for years, there was a tacit agreement that neutral and commercial vessels were not fair game.

Despite an announcement from the German embassy which ran in the New York Times on May 1, 1915, warning that commercial vessels were vulnerable to attack in waters encompassed in the war zone, no one paid much attention. On the morning of May 1st, passengers boarded, luggage and cargo was loaded and the officers and crew of the Lusitania did their daily inspection of lifeboats and all systems of the gigantic ship. While the German warning didn’t rattle anyone about the dangers of taking the transatlantic journey from New York Harbor to Liverpool, England, perhaps the ship’s captain and crew and the passengers would have been alarmed to find out that a top secret unit called Room 40 working under British intelligence was tracking the movements of U-boats in British waters, especially U-20 which was the most notorious and ruthless of the German subs, and that there was great concern about the possibility of submarine attacks on British ships. A chill would have gone down the collective spine of all those on board the Lusitania had they known that the Germans specifically mentioned the Lusitania in a number of intercepted messages. But the British Admiralty, led by a young Winston Churchill, did not want to share the intel with the Lusitania captain because it might expose the existence of Room 40.

On May 7th, when passengers and crew could see the coastline of Ireland coming into view, the Lusitania was struck in its hull with one torpedo launched by U-20. In just ten minutes after being struck, all the systems on the Lusitania were inoperable. The rudder no longer functioned and all the lights were out. The elevators stopped, some filled with panicked passengers. The baggage workers down below in the hull were all dead or soon would be. Water began to seep through opened portholes. There were 70 opened portholes causing the starboard alone to take on water at 260 tons a minute.

The crew of the U-20 was jubilant that it had attacked the Lusitania, an important symbolic victory. The ocean liner that was too big to sink, sank in eighteen minutes. Over half of the people on board were lost. The Lusitania disaster was a pivotal event in

the war and one of the stepping stones that led President Woodrow Wilson to abandon his policy of neutrality and eventually enter the war.

Ironically, Great Britain and Germany agreed on one important element in their conflict: each, for their own purposes, wanted America in the war. The British had been eager for America to enter the war as an ally and the Germans had been trying to lure them into the conflict by baiting them with attacks on their vessels. The tragedy on May 7, 1915, represented a strange confluence of the goals of these two nations. There remains a mystique about the Lusitania, unanswered questions that have never been resolved in a century and, at this point, never will be.



# Part 1: Pages 11 - 47

## Summary

The Lusitania ocean liner was huge and imposing and docked on the Hudson off Manhattan. The captain inspected the ship which was to set sail on May 1, 1915, for another Atlantic crossing. The voyage was sold out in spite of the war in Europe that had been raging for ten months. Nearly 2,000 were booked to be on board. The ship's displaced weight was estimated to be 44,000 tons and clocked a top speed of 24 knots. The Lusitania was the fastest civilian ship of its day. Only battleships or destroyers were faster. It was a miracle to many that such a large ship could move that fast.

On August 11, 1914, Ellen Wilson's body was taken to the train station in Rome, Georgia, to make its way to Rome, Georgia, for the funeral service. Ellen Wilson was the wife of President Woodrow Wilson who was now a widower. She had died of Bright's disease a few days after Britain had entered the European war. The president felt the burden of his responsibility evermore. He'd been in office only 18 months and had turned his head away from the war that raged across the Atlantic. Wilson suffered immense grief at the passing of his wife. She had been his companion and closest advisor. He told close friends he didn't know how he would see the rest of his presidency through. There were domestic problems led by a lingering recession.

War that had begun over a relatively minor incident raged across Europe and nations forged alliances and pacts in desperate attempts to save themselves. Germany readily emerged as the leader with visions of conquering the entire continent. U.S. newspapers ran daily stories about the cruelty of the German soldiers who burned villages and executed men, women and children. What caught Wilson's attention and wouldn't let go was the destruction of Louvain, Belgium, which was an old university town and was referred to as the Oxford of Belgium. The Germans destroyed a library that had priceless manuscripts and artifacts that dated back to medieval times. More than 200 innocent people were murdered and the town was incinerated. Wilson feared that the war would reverse the advancements that mankind had made by throwing it back centuries. Yet he remained adamant that the U.S. not get involved.

The daily reports that filtered back to D.C. kept Wilson in a constant state of anguish and dismay. Both Britain and Germany had been developing submarine warfare but it was Germany who first introduced it into battle. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle had warned that even a small country with a fleet of submarines could topple the celebrated British Navy. There was fear that German submarines could attack a passenger ship and kill everyone aboard.

The HMS Aboukir was struck by a torpedo and sank within minutes. While the other two ships, the Hogue and the Cressy were attempting to rescue the sailors, the former was struck by two torpedoes. The Cressy was struck, exploded and sank. Three large British cruisers had been destroyed by one German submarine. More than 1,400 British sailors



lost their lives that night. A new policy was established after this disaster that disallowed such rescue attempts.

Wilson worried more than ever that a U.S. ocean liner might be attacked especially when Germany declared that the waters around the British Isles were war zones and, therefore, any ship sailing through them were subject to attack. Britain was known to raise the American flag as a “ruse de guerre” to appear neutral when sailing through dangerous waters. This practice made American ships even more at risk. Wilson warned the Germans that they would be held responsible for an attack on an American vessel or on a vessel carrying Americans.

Wilson met an attractive widow named Edith Bolling Galt through his cousin, Helen Woodrow Bones who acted as proxy First Lady for the president. Wilson was taken with the woman who was 16 years his junior. Around the same time, the British merchant ship, the Falaba, was attacked by a German U-boat. More than 100 people died in the incident one of whom was a U.S. citizen. Secretary of State Williams Jennings Bryan who was a pacifist urged Wilson not to go to war over the loss of one American who should have known better than to book passage on a ship in the war zone. But pressure was mounting on Wilson to send American troops to Europe.

## Analysis

The author provides basic information about the Lusitania – its huge size and capacity – so that the reader can visualize this “magnificent ship.” He also sets the stage for his story by providing the geopolitical environment that existed at the time. He describes the many diverse factors that were involved in this piece of world history. He tells of the distracted U.S. President who was in deep mourning over the death of his beloved wife. Larson hints at how his lack of focus on world events contributed to the American policy of neutrality. President Wilson found it difficult to concentrate on the many responsibilities and challenges that he faced as president.

Germany had emerged as a cruel aggressor who was bent on war. Wilson was aware of the atrocities that the Germans were responsible for and detested their behavior. However, he remained steadfast that American would not become involved in the European War. He was adamant that the U.S. remain neutral.

Although both Great Britain and Germany were developing submarine warfare, it was the Germans who escalated their program and made it a key part of their overall strategy. Wilson worried that an ocean liner carrying Americans might be attacked by a German U-boat. Wilson was further distracted during 1914 when he met a young woman who he fell hard for. With Germany become bolder and more ruthless in their military tactics, Wilson was continually pressured by Great Britain to commit American troops to the war.



## Vocabulary

escarpment, circumnavigation, epitome, cataclysm, hubris, bilge, quartermaster, commodore, travail, extolling, fjords, transfixed, conscription, conflagration, atrocities, macabre, malaise, prescient



# Part I: Pages 48 - 86

## Summary

Passengers for the May 1st voyage of the Lusitania began arriving in New York a week before departure. There was no sign of war on the Great White Way or in the posh restaurants that provided free entertainment with their meals. The New York economy along with most of the country had recovered from the recession due to the demands that the European war brought on. Real estate and construction was booming in New York. Gala parties were thrown for the elite. Extravagance was the mode of the day. War stories covered in New York papers were overshadowed by reports of scandal and murder.

Charles Lauriat, Jr., kept up the tradition of his father who founded the celebrated Boston bookstore, Charles E. Lauriat Company, and was on board for an annual trip to London to buy up old books for resale in America. When he bought his ticket, he was assured that the liner would be escorted through the war zone. He brought with him to priceless diaries containing drawings done by William Makepeace Thackeray that were coveted by collectors.

Prior to departure, Captain Turner was deposed before eight attorneys at Hunt, Hill & Betts. The White Star Line, owners of the Titanic was attempting to limit their liability in the sinking of the ocean liner. He testified in favor of families whose loved ones had been lost in the tragedy and had sued White Star. He stated that it had been reckless for the ship to travel at 20 knots through ice. Turner refuted the claim that any ship was unsinkable.

As the Lusitania was taking on passengers and cargo, the German submarine U-20 with Captain Walther Schwieger in command was traveling toward the Irish sea constantly scanning the horizon for targets.

Lauriat borrowed a copy of the original printing of "A Christmas Carol" from a client to take with him to London. It was a copy owned by Dickens himself. Lauriat was bringing it to London because it was needed in a legal proceeding involving piracy litigation. Lauriat promised the owner to guard the copy with his life. On the morning of the launch, Turner ordered a lifeboat drill to ensure that the boats all met the required safety standards. The ship carried 48 life-boats. After the Titanic disaster, all ocean liners were required enough life boats to accommodate passengers and crew. There wasn't adequate space on the Lusitania for regular life-boats and a portion of its life boats were collapsible. All together, the lifeboats could accommodate 2,605 people which was more than enough for the passengers and crew on May 1st.

No one seriously believed that the Lusitania would be attacked. However, if there were to be an emergency, Turner was aware that his wartime crew was not as fit and experienced as was necessary. Most able-bodied British seamen had been snatched





from ocean liners and placed in the British Navy. But the Lusitania was able to recruit a few experienced seamen one of who was 18-year-old Leslie Morton. He and his brother Cliff had booked second-class passage on the Lusitania so they could return to England and join the fight against the Germans. They were spotted by Chief Officer John Preston Piper who thought they looked like seamen. Piper offered them spots on the crew which allowed the boys to refund their tickets and sail home free. The ship was inspected by federal agents to ensure that none of the cargo violated America's neutrality laws. A full list of consignment aboard the ocean liner would be released after departure to keep the information from the prying eyes of German spies who were particularly focused on the Lusitania.

Cunard was so concerned with a German attack on the Lusitania that it hired a Liverpool police detective, William John Pierpoint, to keep watch aboard the vessel as it made its May 1st voyage. The crew boarded the ship during the evening, night and early next morning. The evening before the voyage, Captain Turner took in a Broadway show and had his favorite German food at Lüchow's. Lauriat showed the Thackeray works to his sister and brother-in-law that night. He had originally paid only \$4,500 for them in 1914 knowing he could get four times that much for them. He was bringing them back to London so that Lady Richie, from whom he bought them, could make some important notes about them. Passenger Alta Piper couldn't sleep that night in her hotel room. She was the daughter of a famed psychic. Perhaps Alta had inherited the gift of prophecy from her mother.

## Analysis

The author describes the days leading up to the Lusitania's final cross-Atlantic voyage. He describes how the crew prepared and inspected the ship which was docked in New York Harbor prior to the May 1, 1915, departure date. The author tells the stories of some of the people who had booked passage on the Lusitania – why they were traveling to London and insight into their personal and professional lives.

The author juxtaposes the introduction and background of Captain Turner, the commander of the Lusitania, against the introduction and background of Walther Schwieger the commander of the German U-boat, U-20. Although neither one was aware, the two ship commanders had a date with destiny that was less than a week away.

Larson stresses that although everyone knew the war was raging, neither passenger nor crew was concerned about their safety on the journey. No one seriously thought that the Lusitania would be attacked and if it were, it would survive by its sheer size and might alone. The captain had his crew perform a lifeboat drill to make sure that the boats were prepared for use. The captain knew that his current crew wasn't as experienced as they should have been. The majority of the top seamen in England had been pulled from ocean liners to serve in the British Navy. The author hints that the relative inexperience of the crew may have more meaning later in the story.

## Vocabulary

impromptu, sweltering, minstrels, cumbersome, artifact, prudent, moorage, volatility, propensity, urbane, davit, milieu, lazaret, parlance



## Part I: Pages 87 - 125

### Summary

The movement of U-20 was monitored through wireless intercepts by a secret unit of British intelligence called Room 40. Only a handful of people with knew of the unit's existence. On New Year's Day 1915 a German submarine sank a British warship which killed 547 men. British warships were nearby but could not try to rescue survivors due to the policy established after the Aboukir disaster. German warships were shelling innocent civilians in British coastal towns killing 100 and injuring more than 500 men, women and children. In mid-January, Germany sent two zeppelins in an air attack. In April 1915, the Germans gassed allied forces in Ypres, Belgium, with 160 tons of chlorine gas. It was the very first use of gas in warfare. Two-thousand Canadian soldiers were killed along with casualties from other nations.

The most high-profile passenger was Alfred Gwynne Vanderbilt I who was heir to the Vanderbilt fortune. He was interviewed by reporter Jack Lawrence who referred to a notice from the German Embassy that ships flying under the flag of Great Britain were subject to attack. Vanderbilt took the threat in stride. "What would they gain by sinking the Lusitania?" he asked. No one took the warnings seriously. The Germans wouldn't dare attack a commercial ocean liner filled with civilian passengers. Cunard offered assurances that if need be the Lusitania could outrun a submarine and ram it if it surfaced. The warnings that passengers heard were treated with a kind of "gallows humor."

That morning, Lauriat and his brother-in-law carried on his rare collectibles with great care. Lauriat secured them in his room and locked them up. He had read the warning about the Germans but paid no heed to it. Dwight Harris took his valuables including a diamond and emerald engagement ring to the purser for safekeeping. He wrote his grandparents on Lusitania stationery before he left. He was very upbeat and reported that the weather had cleared. The reporter did not have the chance to talk to Captain Turner but noticed what a splendid figure he made.

Captain Hall was using psychological warfare against the Germans by feeding them false intelligence and convincing them that an attack by the British was imminent. His goal was to make the Germans pull forces from the main battlefield in France to defend their borders on the North Sea the site of the supposed invasion. Orders went out to U-boat commanders, including Schwieger, to destroy any vessel that appeared to be a troop transport. Sightings of German submarines were received by the dozens at the Admiralty. In response, the departure of two warships was rescheduled. Captain Hall passed on the German warning that was seen in the New York papers that morning, warning passengers not to travel on the Lusitania.

The public was aware of the threat against the Lusitania and awaited word of its safe harbor in Liverpool. However, Room 40 knew that the German's were monitoring the



movements of the Lusitania and broadcasting its schedule and that six German submarines were en route. Room 40 was most concerned about U-20 which had the reputation of being a ruthless killer ship. It was moving toward the patrol zone in waters through which the Lusitania would be sailing. None of this intelligence was radioed to Captain Turner. There was also no attempt to divert the Lusitania's course. The Admiralty was focused on a different ship that it considered to be more valuable.

Edith Galt had become a regular dinner guest at the White House and was occupying more and more of the president's thoughts. She was a happy diversion to the ills of the world, especially the escalating war in Europe that he had vowed to keep America out of. He began seeking Edith's counsel on the many challenges that faced him and the nation. She felt a bond with Wilson and found him bright and warm. Wilson's valet knew that as far as Edith was concerned, his boss was a goner.

Word came in late April that the Germans had bombed a U.S. merchant ship, the Cushing, in the North Sea. There were no serious injuries or damage but the aggressive act troubled Wilson. In the end, he chose to think of the incident as unintentional. On May 1, the day of the Lusitania's departure, a German U-boat had attacked an American oil tanker and killed two men.

## Analysis

The author describes a super-secret unit of British Intelligence. It was called "Room 40" and only a handful of British officials even knew of its existence. Its job was to intercept wireless transmissions from the German military and navy. German tactics were becoming increasingly problematic. They had deployed 160 tons of chlorine gas on allied forces in Belgium. It was the first use of gas in warfare in the history of the world.

On the day of the Lusitania's departure, the German embassy in Washington, D.C. ran an announcement in the New York Times. It warned the public that anyone traveling on a ship under the British flag was at risk of attack. Even with this stern warning, no one was worried. The Lusitania was thought of as unsinkable – just as the Titanic was. Alfred Vanderbilt was booked on the Lusitania. He laughed when asked about the German warning and dismissed it as absurd.

British intelligence was not only intercepting wireless messages, it was using psychological warfare against the Germans. The Germans were being fed false intelligence that would hopefully lead them to believe that Great Britain was on the verge of invading Germany. The goal was to deflate the Germans' hubris but it may have had the reverse effect. The Germans only became more aggressive.

Room 40 began to focus on the movements of U-20 which was seen as the most ruthless and aggressive German U-boat. Room 40 was aware that U-20 was heading for British waters but did not pass the information onto the Lusitania. There was more focus on keeping Room 40 a secret than there was on sharing vital information to the

Lusitania. The author provides this information as another factor that may have contributed to the Lusitania disaster.

## **Vocabulary**

manifest, coven, predilection, aphorism, flamboyant, asseverated, imponderable, suffragist, imperious, prolific, tectonic



## Part I: Pages 126 - 142

### Summary

There was a slight delay in departure when the Admiralty commandeered another British ship, the *Cameronia*, and had its relatively few passengers transferred to the *Lusitania*. Preston Richard, a 29-year-old medical student took advantage of the delay and snapped some photos of the harbor and New York skyline. He was traveling alone to visit his mother in London. There was another delay which Turner was responsible for. His niece was on board to bid farewell to several passengers. When she went to leave, the gangplank had already been removed and had to be replaced so she could return to shore.

These delays didn't seem important at the time but they would have significance later. Finally at noon, the huge ship eased backward out of its docking position and was escorted out of the harbor by two tug boats. While still on the Hudson, Turner maintained a slow speed due to the crowded waters. The ship picked up speed as it passed Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty.

The discovery of three stowaways who only spoke German were interrogated by Inspector Pierpoint. They apparently wanted to take photos of evidence that the ship was armed. The men were confined in a temporary brig for the duration of the voyage. Alta Piper could not ignore the voices that told her not to take the voyage. She failed to board ship that morning. The U-20 was traveling through thick fog. Schwieger ordered a descent to 72 feet. After the fog cleared somewhat, Schwieger ordered the U-20 back to the surface where it could maintain a faster speed. His destination was Liverpool Bay. There were probably plenty of targets but it was still too foggy for attack.

Passengers on the *Lusitania* settled into their quarters. Many unpacked and organized their personal items. Children played on the decks and made new friends. Theodate and her traveling companion sat in the reading room where she read newspaper articles about the criticism that President Wilson was getting on allowing the film based on book, *The Clansman*, to be screened at the White House. The film portrayed the Ku Klux Klan in a romantic, heroic way. She also read about the war which she detested. She held Germany to blame for the conflict and supported Britain's defense of Belgium. She also read for the first time the warning from the German Embassy about the possibility of attacks on the *Lusitania*. She was sure that the ship would receive an escort once entering British waters.

As soon as the *Lusitania* reached international waters, Turner spotted three British warships. They were stationed there to keep several German passenger ships locked into New York Harbor where they had fled to keep from being attacked. It was then full speed ahead for the *Lusitania*. The ship was unable to travel at its top speed because of fuel conservation necessitated by the war. The slower speed increased the length of the voyage by one day.



Room 40 intercepted a series of transmissions that provided them with U-20's exact location as he traveled toward his destination.

## Analysis

The author is building the case that many factors contributed to the Lusitania disaster. Timing was another factor that may have played a role in the tragedy. The departure of the ship was delayed for several different reasons. One delay was caused when passengers were transferred from another ship that had been commandeered by the British Navy. Another delay occurred when Captain Turner's niece who was bidding friends goodbye failed to get off before the plank was raised. Departure was delayed because the plank had to be repositioned so that she could go ashore. Had the ship departed on time, it would not have crossed paths with U-20.

Captain Turner had instructions to travel with one boiler room inactive. The ship was not able to travel as fast as it could have had it been running at full power. This restriction added one day to the voyage.

The author focuses much attention on the weather which also contributed to the timing factor. There were periods of very thick fog on the Atlantic during the first week of May 1915. It caused the U-20 to travel submerged during much of its voyage to the Irish Sea. Traveling underwater required the U-boat to greatly reduce its speed. Had there not been dense fog, the U-boat would have traveled on the surface and probably would not have encountered the Lusitania. Both ships were heading for the Irish Sea and Liverpool.

Passengers learned about the warning from the German embassy. Most were not worried and most assumed that the Lusitania would receive an escort from the British Navy once they entered waters considered to be in the war zone. Room 40 closely monitored U-20 and knew its whereabouts at all times. They did not share this information with the Lusitania.

## Vocabulary

pinnacle, inherent, salient, belligerently, benign

## Part II: Pages 143 through 185

### Summary

On Sunday, Schweiger spotted Fair Isle three miles off but could not see the Orkneys archipelago off northern Scotland. The U-20 presented a danger but the U-boat was also in peril. Upon spotting two destroyers, he immediately ordered the U-20's descent. Shortly after noon on Sunday, Schwieger gave the order to ascend which was another blind moment until the vessel reached the surface. Once he could scan the surrounding surface, he saw no immediate danger but upon fully emerging he saw that the sea ahead was filling with British patrol vessels and behind him were two British destroyers.

Captain Turner found the voyage to be routine. There was no real danger of attack until they came closer to Ireland but the captain was not worried about submarines. However, within Cunard, concern was growing. Turner began receiving dispatches about the threat from submarines and procedures to follow in case the ship was confronted with a U-boat. Turner received orders not to make any wireless transmissions except in an emergency. There were instructions about ramming submarines and disguising ships as neutrals. Cunard claimed that Turner was sent instructions about using a zigzag course to reduce the possibility of surprise attacks. Later there was a dispute about whether or not Turner actually received that communiqué. Turner wasn't concerned. The Lusitania could far outdistance the submarine submerged on traveling on the surface.

From the intercepts Room 40 received, there was more concern about another ship, the HMS Orion, one of Britain's largest and most powerful battleships. The Orion was ordered to delay its departure from Devonport because of the submarine threat. Notices were issued that new routes were opened to all vessels – both merchant and military. This announcement was not passed onto Cunard or the Lusitania. U.S. ambassador in London, Walter Page, felt that America would eventually be pulled into the war and that an attack on a British liner with lots of American passengers would be the catalyst.

The U-20 sailed through clear skies and beautiful weather on Monday morning. Having seen no targets and no enemy vessels, the U-20 stayed on the surface the entire day until evening. They spotted a Danish ship but felt it was a ruse and that it was actually an English transport. Schwieger ordered a deep dive and ordered the torpedo launch when the Danish ship was at a distance of 300 meters. But the torpedo didn't launch – it was a misfire.

After several days of gloomy weather, the passengers enjoyed the good weather and sunshine on Monday. Games were played on the decks and concerts in the evening. On May 4, the Orion was given permission to leave Devonport. It left that night under the cover of darkness and was given a specific route to follow. Four destroyers were assigned to escort the Orion until it reached deep water. Its progress was closely monitored by the Admiralty. There were reports of submarine sightings and new attacks.





Room 40 heard nothing new from the U-20. He was still heading to the Irish Sea and Liverpool.

By Tuesday evening, the U-20 caught sight of the Irish coast. Schwieger had been unable to find an acceptable target during the day. He spotted a large steamship heading in U-20's direction. Schwieger ordered a deep dive and prepared for attack. The steamer steered off course and the attack was aborted. Schwieger was frustrated. Due to escalated sightings and incidents, the U.S. Embassy in Berlin recommended that the government warn American ships not to traverse the waters in the war zone. President Wilson was in love and his mind was elsewhere. On the evening of May 4, he had his driver pick Edith up for dinner. Wilson proposed to Edith that night. Edith's cautious nature compelled her to initially turn him down. She told her cousin she needed time to know her own heart. Wilson was distressed by the rejection.

Wilson had grown frustrated with Britain who had issued a contraband order that enraged Wilson because it would deny the sovereign rights of peaceful nations. American exporters and shippers deluged the State Department with complaints about confiscated and detained cargo. It was becoming harder and harder for America to stay out of the chaos in Europe. Britain, an ally, was becoming difficult to deal with and Germany was becoming more and more aggressive.

## Analysis

The author provides some passages that point to the calm before the storm. The atmosphere cleared and U-20 was able to travel faster. If the U-boat could have maintained this higher speed, it would have reached its destination without encountering the Lusitania. Captain Turner found the voyage unremarkable. There were no problems with the ship or passengers. He believed that once the ship neared Ireland, that the danger of attack would have passed. He received some dispatches from the Admiralty on procedures to follow should the ship be attacked by a U-boat. Later, a dispute would arise about just what information Turner actually received.

Room 40 was more concerned about the HMS Orion, one of the British Navy's most powerful battleships. Its departure was delayed and it was assigned four destroyers to escort it out to the high seas. A new route was opened up to all vessels – commercial and naval. This announcement was not shared with the Lusitania. It would have given the ship the option of taking an alternative route that would have provided a safer passage. The author hints at conspiracy. Insiders felt that if an ocean liner with Americans aboard were attack it would have been the catalyst that would compel America to declare war on Germany

President Wilson's personal life had a strong hold on his daily life. He had another distraction – he was in love and his focus was not on the war. Even though things were escalating, he did not want American troops fighting in Europe. Although America and



Britain were allies, Wilson was annoyed with some new maritime regulations established by Great Britain that greatly impeded American shipping and export businesses. Wilson was enraptured with his new love; disgusted with German tactics; and, annoyed by British regulations.

## Vocabulary

archipelago, emissary, prescient, provocation, impetuous, candor, antipathy, imperious, ludicrous, lascivious



## Part II: Pages 186 - 217

### Summary

The Cunard Daily Bulletin kept passengers updated on war news but only in generalities. It did not give the details of the miserable battle fought in the trenches in France in the Dardanelles. It was almost certain death for soldiers to step out of the trenches but they were also attacked in the trenches. The wounded had to wait for hours for help. There was a vicious assault by the Turks on land and off shore at Helles. With the hell that was raging in Europe, everything was books, cigars and fine foods on the Lusitania.

On May 5, Cunard provided the customs office with a complete manifest of the Lusitania's cargo. There was a variety of personal and priceless items on the list. Paintings worth \$4 million were on board that would be valued at \$92 million in modern times. There were large quantities of highly flammable aluminum and bronze powders and more than 1,200 cases of shrapnel-filled artillery shells bound for the British Army. Also on board was 170 tons of Remington rifle ammunition.

On the morning of Wednesday May 5, the U-20 faced dense fog. He maintained a southerly route and a slow speed. At 8:25 in the morning, it was clear enough to bring the submarine to the surface although splotches of fog still surrounded them. The vessel accelerated to cruising speed. The U-20 reached the southern coast of Ireland and headed toward Liverpool. Although they were in a shipping lane, they saw no other vessels until they spotted a large sail boat. They held fire but Schwieger ordered the four-man crew to abandon ship and turn over the ship's registry and cargo manifest to the U-20. The gun crew on the U-20 sunk the sail boat as the crew rowed away.

Room 40 was receiving reports of the movements and activities of U-20. They determined that Schwieger's submarine was traversing Britain's main sea lanes. The Admiralty was well aware that the Lusitania was heading for those same waters. The four destroyers that had escorted the Orion were nearby and available for assignment but no attempt was made to use them to protect the Lusitania.

Thursday morning, May 6, the U-20 was making its way through St. George's Channel along the southwestern coast of Ireland. Continuing fog forced the submarine to travel submerged most of the time. During a stretch when the boat surfaced, a steamship was spotted that flew no flag. The U-20 pursued the ship in the fog and eventually fired on it and sank it. Later the U-20 struck the Centurion with a torpedo. The crew fled in lifeboats. The Centurion was struck with another torpedo to make sure it would sink.

Captain Turner and his staff toured the ship making sure the lifeboats were all positioned correctly. He ordered for all doors and portholes to be closed. That Thursday afternoon, the Lusitania was moving at 21 knots an hour and was just 465 miles west of Ireland.



Despite having orders to head to Liverpool, Schwieger made the decision to abandon them. It was his decision to make since he had lost communication with his superiors. With the lingering fog, he knew it would be dangerous to make a run down St. George's Channel and into the Irish Sea especially via surface travel. Additionally, the U-20 only had three torpedoes left and his diminishing fuel was a persistent problem. He would continue attacking ships but not near Liverpool.

At 7:50 that evening, the ship picked up a message from the Admiralty's office: "Submarines active off South Cost of Ireland." Other warnings about routes to take and areas to avoid were also sent to the ship. The message about the submarines was vague and imprecise. The passengers entertained themselves with poetry readings and singing. They would end the singing sessions with both, "God Save the King," and "My Country 'Tis of Thee." In response to the warnings, Turner ordered the ship's running lights be turned off and that portholes be curtained to prevent light from escaping. Portholes were always a concern to ship captains – they let light out and water in. Passengers practiced how to put life jackets on properly.

President Wilson was distressed because of Edith Galt's rejection. He decided that he could not let go of Edith. He told her he accepted friendship with the hope of more. It would kill him to end their relationship. Edith was beginning to waver but she was dismayed by how open and public her life would be with Wilson.

On Friday, Mary 7, U-20 resurfaced after being submerged for the night. The fog was intermittently thick. As he would comment later, the fog lessened the chances of the U-20 being able to make successful strikes.

## Analysis

The Cunard Company, owner of the Lusitania, updated the passengers with a daily bulletin, although they soft-pedaled how badly things were going. On the boat, kids were playing and roaming all over the boat, adults were reading and visiting and looking forward to arriving in Liverpool.

Room 40 was closely monitoring the movements of U-20 and knew that it was traveling in Britain's main sea channels. The author points out the role of British intelligence and how Room 40 was primarily focused on U-20. The inference is clear: had the British passed on their concern about that U-boat to the Lusitania, could things have turned out much differently? The only reason that Room 40 would have monitored the movements of U-20 was because they perceived him to be a real threat. Why British Intelligence didn't pass this concern along to a commercial liner with 2,000+ people on board is one of the mysteries that surrounded the disaster.

The weather remained a factor. Schwieger decided to abandon his orders to travel to Liverpool because of the thick fog. Instead he traveled around the British waters looking for targets and found several before the Lusitania emerged on the horizon.



President Wilson had another emotional set back when Edith rejected his proposal of marriage. He was more determined than ever to win her love – another distraction that dominated the President's thoughts.

## Vocabulary

fusillade, parapet, opacity, phalanx, prudent, striations, debunk, prerogative, regalia, codicil, perturbed



## Part III: Pages 218 - 245

### Summary

A number of passengers woke early and climbed to the top deck to watch the sun come up. They spotted a British destroyer port side. It was a welcomed sight for the passengers who believed the ship was there to protect them. At 6:00 am the Lusitania slowed to 15 knots due to heavy fog and activated the foghorn; crewmen were assigned to provide extra lookout duty. The fog was a defense against submarines that had less visibility than any other ship on the seas. The fog cleared and the men in the crow's nest got the first glimpse of Ireland's coastline.

The intelligence that Room 40 received confirmed that there was only one U-boat – U-20 – in the waters off Country Cork. Cunard chairman Alfred Booth pleaded with Navy officials to provide security for his flagship and to alert Captain Turner about the perils he faced. At 11:30 the Lusitania received a message about the submarine activity in the southern part of the Irish Channel. The message did not mention the attacks on the other ships and their losses.

The decks were filled with happy passengers who were talking, playing, reading and anticipating their arrival in Liverpool the next day. Many had dressed up in their finest ware on this their last full day on board the Lusitania. The ship received a confusing message that made them believe that they had passed the threat and were out of danger. Upon surfacing, Schwieger rotated his periscope in a 360 degree sweep in an effort to spot a large vessel that he and the crew heard pass over them. He couldn't spot the ship but saw something on the horizon that made him forget about it.

When Schwieger first spotted the ship way off in the distance it was so large he thought it was two ships. Then he saw that it was a grand steamer coming right at them. The U-20 dived and hoped to get a shot at it. Schwieger became dismayed when the huge craft changed course. Even though it was slipping away, he decided to follow it.

On the bridge, Captain Turner faced an unusual dilemma. If the dispatches he received were correct, there were submarines ahead and behind them. If he increased his speed too much he'd arrive too early and would have to circle around and thus become an easy target for attack. At the current speed, the Lusitania would arrive in George's Channel at night in the fog that would further imperil them. Turner ordered the helmsman to make a turn to starboard to align the ship with the Irish coast so they could get their bearings.

The turn redirected the Lusitania so that it was again heading directly for the U-20. Schwieger plotted a course that would place the U-20 at a perfect 90-degree angle in front of the ship. For the next 25 minutes, the two vessels were literally gliding directly at each other. Schwieger was surprised that the ship was unescorted and that it was in these waters at all. The torpedo was set to run at a depth of three meters or ten feet. At



2:10 p.m. Schwieger gave the order to fire. The torpedo burst out of its bay and quickly reached a speed of 44 miles an hour. It would take only 35 seconds to reach its target.

Just before 2:00 p.m. crewmen were gathered in the baggage room on F Deck in the bow. It was shift change time so there were scores of crewmen. On the bridge, the captain ordered the helmsman to stay the course. Lookouts were on high alert. At 1:50 the watchers spotted an object that looked like a buoy. It was reported to the bridge. By 2:00 p.m., the second class citizens were half-way through their meals. Children were playing jump rope on the deck. Seaman Leslie Morton spotted what looked like a huge bubble breaking the surface. He reached for his megaphone.

Captain Turner left the bridge for his quarters below. At 1:30 he was given a new message again about U-boat activity. At 2:00 p.m. Quartermaster Johnson returned to the bridge after a break to hear the cry, "Here is a torpedo coming," coming from Leslie Morton. A passenger thought he saw the tail of a large fish. A woman questioned whether it was a torpedo. The trail of fading disturbance in the water behind the torpedo was called the "dead wake."

The smooth sea allowed many passengers to see the torpedo heading at them. Had there been more warning, Captain Turner could have possibly moved the ship to lessen the damage or even avoid being hit at all.

## Analysis

Another delay in the movement of the Lusitania occurred on the morning of the attack. The dense fog compelled Captain Turner to slow to 15 knots. Many passengers climbed to the top deck to watch the sun came up. The seaman in the crow's nest caught first sight of the Irish coastline.

The Cunard chairman sensed the danger his ship was in from the reports he received and from the news. He pleaded with the Admiralty to provide security for the Lusitania. He wanted the captain to know about the recent attacks by U-boats in the area. The Lusitania was contacted but told only that U-boats were active in the Irish Channel but did not provide the accounts of actual attacks.

Timing was another issue for Captain Taylor. If he increased his speed to flee the dangerous waters, he would arrive early in Liverpool. He would not be allowed to dock and would have to sail the waters around Liverpool at a slow speed until he could dock making the ship an even more vulnerable target.

Schwieger had been ill-positioned to attack several passing ships but then he saw the Lusitania coming. It was so big he thought there were two ships coming at him. Schwieger was positioned perfectly when he ordered the torpedo to be launched at the Lusitania. It took only 35 seconds from launch to target. The captain, passengers and crew saw the torpedo coming. There was nothing anyone could do about it.



## Vocabulary

penchant, mosaic, foolhardy, torrent, vista, trepanning, contravened, paradoxically, ruefully, vitriolic, transfixed





## Part IV: Pages 246 - 282

### Summary

For a split second after the torpedo passed from view below the deck and nothing happened at first, there was the thought that it was a misfire. But that thought vanished when 350 pounds of explosives detonated in the hull, ten feet below the waterline, releasing heat of 9,000 degrees F. The solid fuel had been turned to gas and tremendous pressure was building. A geyser of seawater and parts of the ship shot up to twice the height of the ship. The hull had sustained a hole 40 feet wide and 15 feet high below the waterline. Water from the geyser drenched the passengers on the decks. Thousands of rivets well beyond the hole came loose. Portholes and doors were compromised.

The huge hole in the hull coupled with the forward speed of 18 knots caused the Lusitania to take on seawater at 100 tons per second. In an instant water flooded the cross-bunker and Boiler Room No. 1. The longitudinal bunkers that ran parallel with the hull also took on water. The water caused an imbalance that caused the ship to list toward its starboard. The bow began to sink, the stern to rise and the hull to twist.

Captain Turner had been standing on the A Deck when he heard the lookout yell, "Torpedo!" Turner was helpless; all he could do was watch the torpedo approach.

Captain Taylor ordered the engines to be at "full astern." Backing up was the only way to bring the ship to a stop so that lifeboats could be launched. Johnston, the helmsman, tried his best to steady the ship but it was not responding. The lifeboats were lowered but could not be boarded and launched until the ship stopped. The ship was heading away from the coast and taking on tons of water. Many passengers had trouble getting their jackets on correctly due to the lack of training and adequate instructions.

Captain Turner said that the ship was all right in an effort to avoid mass panic. But it was obvious that things were not all right. There were cheers when word spread that the captain had said the ship wouldn't sink. It confirmed the general feeling that a torpedo could not sink the Lusitania. There were several shipbuilders on board who also believed the ship wouldn't sink and that it had stabilized at 15 degrees. They assumed that the bulkheads and watertight doors would stop further flooding in the hull. But the ship began to list even more.

Messages reached the Admiralty at 2:15 pm. indicating that the Lusitania had been attacked by a U-boat and was sinking. All available tugs and small craft were sent to rescue passengers. Certain that the ship was sinking, Lauriat rushed to his cabin and grabbed the original Christmas Carol. He left the Thackeray drawings behind. He jumped onto Lifeboat No. 7 but could not untether the lifeboat. He saw that the boat was dangerously close to being sucked under and jumped into the water. He urged the others in the boat to do the same but they refused. Minutes later they were swept under



in an instant – men, women and children and Dickens. Seeing that the ship was splintering and collapsing, Seaman Leslie Morton jumped into the water. He looked back and saw Captain Turner in full dress uniform still standing on the bridge as the Lusitania began its final dive.

On Friday, May 7, 1915, at 2:26 p.m. the Lusitania sent an SOS by telegram. Only six of the ship's twenty-two conventional lifeboats got away before the boat sank. Eighteen minutes after being hit with the torpedo, the ship disappeared in the sea, making an eerie sound and bringing bodies and debris down with it. At 2:33 p.m. a message was sent to the Admiralty that the Lusitania had sunk. At 4:00 p.m., U.S. Ambassador Walter H. Page learned about the tragedy. Colonel House predicted that America would be at war with Germany within a month.

President Wilson received the first report at 1 p.m. He too was initially told that there were no casualties. That evening he received a cable from Consul Frost indicating that many passengers had lost their lives. He was stir crazy and left the White House to walk in the pouring down rain. When he returned to the White House, word came that as many as 1,000 people had perished in the sinking of the Lusitania. He knew that many were probably Americans.

## Analysis

The author describes the impact of the torpedo and the phenomenal damage it caused in just minutes. From the moment of impact until it sank, only 18 minutes had elapsed. The ship that was too big to sink, sank in record time. Captain Turner was the most seasoned commander with Cunard – he was their commodore. He had faced many challenges and problems over his many years as an ocean liner captain. After being struck, the author describes the steps the captain took to save the ship. He knew that backing the ship up was the only way to stop it so that the lifeboats could be lowered. But there was no hope. The ship was out of control; every system on the ocean liner was not functioning.

The Admiralty was notified of the disaster and dispatched all available vessels to the scene to rescue survivors. In the mean time, people were struggling with lifejackets and lifeboats. The passengers had been given no instructions on emergency procedures which probably made a horrible situation even worse. Parents were frantically trying to find their children. Many gave up on the lifeboats and jumped into the water. There were deaths from hypothermia especially among the young. It took three hours before any rescue vessels showed up. Debris from the explosions that sank the ship and dead bodies were floating among the shivering survivors.

President Wilson was notified of the disaster. The old adage that first reports are usually wrong held true in this case. He was initially told that no passengers were lost. Later when a more accurate report came in he learned that as many as 1,000 had perished. Wilson was devastated. He knew that there were probably Americans among the dead.



The same question was on everyone's lips: would America finally be forced into the war?

## Vocabulary

interval, indulge, tactile, cerulean, kindred, bulkhead, differential



## Part IV: Pages 283 - 313

### Summary

Many who had lifejackets on still struggled to keep their heads above water. Children were often the victim of hypothermia. In the 55 degree water it was amazing how cold the lower body would get almost immediately. Dwight Harris had to push the dead bodies of men, women and children aside to get to an overturned lifeboat. He saved a little boy who was calling for his father. Cries for help were the most awful for Harris to bear. Margaret Mackworth had descended with the ship but was able to surface and grab a board. Lauriat and Gauntlett were able to get hold of a collapsible lifeboat. They had a struggle keeping people off of it until they properly raised its sides and seats. They found oars floating nearby and were able to navigate through the field of debris and dead bodies and rescue a few survivors.

Even though the attack occurred just off the coast of Ireland there was no sign of a rescue effort. Survivors drifted on lifeboats and various flotsams for more than three hours. Finally an armada of vessels small and large made their way to the wreckage. Once a lifeboat was off-loaded, the seamen would row the boat through the area looking for more survivors. The boats recovered corpses as well as rescued the living. The survivors were transferred to large vessels and taken to Queenstown. The little boy who Harris had rescued found his parents, brother and sister all still alive. Theodate awoke to find herself by fire in a small stove on board one of the larger vessels. She had no recollection of the sinking. There was no sign of her friend, Edward, or her maid, Emily.

Later, a woman claiming to be Schwieger's fiancé claimed that he had been destroyed by the attack on the Lusitania. While everyone else in Germany was jubilant about the sinking of the British ocean liner, Schwieger was morose and silent. After the assault, he headed back to Germany. He wanted to leave it all behind him. Schwieger's log books do not reflect what the woman claimed. In fact he wrote about assaulting another vessel shortly after the Lusitania but the torpedo missed its target. He returned home after that. This excursion had been his most successful ever having sunk 42,331 tons of vessels.

Captain Turner's lifejacket lifted him from the bridge but he was pulled under by the hull. He resurfaced into the debris field of survivors, flotsam and dead bodies. He'd gone down with the ship but had resurfaced and wanted to survive. He swam toward a lifeboat along with Inspector Pierpoint who also survived the sinking. Margaret Mackworth woke up on a rescue vessel. Many of those saved became almost giddy. The rescue, for many, was a strange juxtaposition of joy and tragedy.

The rescue ships reached Queenstown after dark. Military personnel and private citizens had gathered and applauded when the survivors came ashore. Medics were present to tend to the injured. Margaret lost her husband but her father had survived and was waiting for her when she came ashore. Dwight Harris landed with the



engagement ring and other jewelry which he had secured around his neck. Theodate was examined by a doctor aboard her rescue ship and then escorted to a hotel. She sent her mother a one word telegram, "Saved." Captain Turner bought some clothes the next day. A passenger spotted him telling that he should be ashamed of himself.

However, the most tragic of those left behind were those whose loved ones had never be found. The bodies of Alice and Elbert Hubbard were never found. The Luck family – Charlotte and her two young sons – vanished without a trace. Alfred Vanderbilt was never found in spite of the fact that a \$5,000 reward was offered for his remains. Heartbreak followed the disaster as did many questions that were never answered. Families had hopes that loved ones never found would one day show up alive. Surviving passengers and the families exchanged many letters sharing and seeking information about those who were lost. Survivors did their best to console the grieving.

## Analysis

The author describes the struggle for life and those who survived and those who did not among the passengers introduced at the beginning of the book. The author had provided back stories of some of the passengers to make them relatable to the reader. Their tragic endings became those of people the reader knew at some level. The author provides the names and stories of these people because they weren't just numbers lost at sea – they were real people with real lives who had hope for the future.

Schwieger apparently chose not to launch another torpedo after observing the people struggling to save their lives. Later, Schwieger's fiancé told a reporter that the incident haunted Schwieger the rest of his life. However, there was no evidence to support that claim. Schwieger's log book indicated no regrets. His crew was jubilant and Schwieger became a hero in Germany. During that excursion he reported that the U-20 had sunk over 42,000 tons of vessels. The fiancé's comments may have been trying to shield him from global criticism for the death of so many innocents.

Captain Turner went down with the ship but was expelled by the force of the water pulling the ship down. He was devastated but knew he had done everything he could to save the passengers and crew and ship.

## Vocabulary

hypothermia, placidly, chivalry, juxtaposed, dispassionate, aplomb, effacement, austere, peripatetic, peripheral



## Part V: Pages 314 - 343

### Summary

The Admiralty decided to place the blame for the Lusitania disaster on Captain Turner. John J. Horgan, the coroner in Kinsale, Ireland, launched an inquest. Horgan praised the captain for his courage after hearing his testimony and placed the blame where it belonged – on the emperor of Germany and the U-boat's officers and crew.

Room 40 intercepted messages from U-20 on its way back to Germany boasting of its victory. Another message from Schwieger surprised everyone. He wrote that the U-20 had only launched one torpedo against the grand ship. Military and experts around the globe was certain that two torpedoes had struck the ship.

The Admiralty failed to confess how much it knew about the movements of U-20. It also did not describe the lengths it went to in protecting the HMS Orion and other military vessels and did nothing to protect the Lusitania. It also did not have to answer for why the Lusitania wasn't diverted to a new northern channel that had just opened up and was considered much safer.

Experts felt that the Admiralty had been negligent. Cunard lawyers were surprised that the Lusitania had no protection. Cunard blamed the Admiralty hoping to fend off dozens of American liability claims. President Wilson was anguished over the sinking of the Lusitania and had revenge in his heart but did not want to bring America into the war. Most of the country supported his stance. German reaction to the tragedy was jubilation. They viewed it as an important victory in the war.

Wilson complained that Germany had violated the "sacred principles of justice and humanity." His words were the opening salvo in a two-year debate and disagreement between the two countries. President Wilson won reelection in 1916 but was being ridiculed for his weak response to the Germans.

Throughout the fall of 1916, Schwieger was on a rampage, sinking one ship after the other. He was treated like a hero by the Germans. Some naval commanders believed that if the U-boats were set loose unrestricted the war could be over in six months.

The plan was set to be launched on February 1, 1917. The Germans were not concerned if the increase in unrestricted warfare led by the U-boats drew the Americans in. The Germans felt they could defeat anyone with their aggressive tactics. The U.S. State Department was notified the day before the assault was to begin. Wilson was outraged. It gave him no time to respond. The messages between the two nations were intercepted by the British. Room 40 intercepted a message from Germany's foreign secretary Arthur Zimmermann to the Mexican government offering them an alliance if American was drawn into the war by the new submarine campaign. Germany would help Mexico seize the lands that they claimed were part of Mexico – Texas, New Mexico



and Arizona. Naval intelligence director William Hall saw this turn of events as a way to finally get America in the war.

Hall saw to it that the Zimmermann telegram got into American hands. On February 24, 1917, U.S. Ambassador Page was given a translated copy of the telegram. That same day another passenger liner was sunk by U-boat torpedoes. Among the dead were a mother and daughter who Edith Wilson knew. Wilson had the telegram leaked to the press on March 1, 1917. It was the headline in all the nation's newspapers. On March 18, U-boats sunk three more American ships. The American public and press called for war.

On March 20, 1917, Wilson met with his cabinet and asked for each of his secretaries views on the war. He convened a special session of Congress on April 2. In his speech he described the behavior of the Germans and the assaults upon American vessels. Germany had already declared war on the United States. "The world must be made safe for democracy," he told the members of Congress. Starting with just one senator applauding Wilson, the Congress ultimately erupted in chaos and roars of support for war. Four days later both house of Congress approved a resolution for war.

America joined the allied effort just in time. Germany's new unrestricted warfare program was proving to be a great success. British naval experts believed that had America not entered the war that Britain would have been defeated by November 1917. The U.S. Navy sent a squadron of six destroyers from Boston on April 24. On May 4, it arrived off the coast of Ireland; each destroyer bore a large American flag. The former colonists were returning to defend the motherland. On May 8th, the destroyers began maneuvers just a day past the two-year anniversary of the Lusitania disaster.

## Analysis

Cunard lawyers tried to blame Captain Turner for the incident. It was an act of war but they were probably grasping at straws trying to take the blame off their client who was being sued by many passengers and families of survivors. But the judge in a hearing absolved Turner and placed the blame on the Germans.

The Admiralty never came clean with how much they knew about the movements of U-20 and how much important information that they withheld from the Lusitania. Why there was no escorts or protection for the ship is one of the mysteries that surrounded the incident. Was there a conspiracy to rile up America so that it would join the war effort?

The incident made the Germans more aggressive. Taking down the Lusitania was a symbolic victory – it had been one of Britain's most magnificent ships. The Kaiser envied the British navy and its ocean liners. Sinking the ship demonstrated Germany's superiority on the high seas.

Still it was two years before America entered the war. Although Wilson was leaning toward war a telegram put him over the line. Room 40 intercepted a telegram from the German foreign officer to the Mexican government. If Mexico formed an alliance with



Germany, they would seize New Mexico, Arizona and Texas and return them to Mexico. When Wilson read this dispatch, there was no longer any doubt. Danger was on America's doorstep. America was going to war.

## Vocabulary

engender, animosity, ambivalent, cataclysm, pugnacious, sagacity, salvo, paradoxical, repugnance, exemplary, ostensibly





# Important People

## Woodrow Wilson

Woodrow Wilson was the President of the United States during World War I. He had isolationist tendencies and did not want his country to become involved in the war that was raging in Europe. The British had been lobbying for American involvement for years but Wilson was steadfast. His country supported him; Americans did not want to go to war.

Wilson was a stoic man who detested the isolation that his job as president forced upon him. He longed to be able to walk free without concern and without an entourage or team of bodyguards. He insisted on driving his prized Pierce-Arrow short distances much to the chagrin of his staff. His lover, best friend and closest confidant and advisor was his beloved wife, Ellen. In January 1914 Ellen died after a long battle with Bright's disease. Wilson was distraught. The one true joy in his life was gone. He fell into a deep depression that distracted him from problems that faced the country and the world. Calls from European allies for America to commit to the war fell on deaf and disinterested ears.

Later that year in August, Wilson's cousin introduced him to Edith Bolling Galt. She was a widow and 16 years his junior. She was a conservative woman concerned with appearances and propriety. He became smitten with her almost immediately and invited her over frequently for dinner and other gatherings. She would always make sure she had a chaperone when she was with him. Now Wilson was not only distracted by his grief and depression, he was distracted by love. He fell hard for Edith and wanted to marry her. But she thought it was improper to marry after only knowing each other such a short time and turned him down. Depression struck him again and while he was able to function in his responsibilities he was paying less and less attention to the war. Had he allowed himself to focus on it too long, his rage over the cruelty of the Germans may have led him into the fracas long before he finally made the commitment.

The sinking of the Lusitania was one of the factors that led Wilson to ask Congress for a Declaration of War. After this maritime disaster, the Germans became more aggressive and began to wage frequent attacks on American vessels. What put Wilson over the line was the Zimmerman telegram that had been intercepted by British Intelligence. The German foreign secretary, Arthur Zimmerman, had sent a dispatch to the Mexican government asking for their alliance with Germany. In return, Germany pledged to help Mexico seize Texas, Arizona and New Mexico which they claimed was part of Mexico. With such an imminent threat to America's homefront, Wilson had no option other than to declare war.



## Captain Walther Schwieger

On May 1, 1915, as the passengers and crew of the Lusitania prepared for launching in New York Harbor, the German submarine Unterseeboot-20 made its way to the British Isles. Captain Walther Schwieger stood atop the conning tower as the u-boat moved stealthily toward with sea leaving hardly a wake behind it. When submerged, the captain stood within the vessel's thick carbon-steel walls and directed attacks using his primary periscope. Schwieger was just thirty-two years old but was considered one of the German Navy's top commanders.

Germany feared that Britain was on the verge of invading Germany from the North Sea. Schwieger had orders to watch for ships that appeared to be cargo ships or other transports but might be carrying invading forces. Schwieger became the commander of the U-20 in December 1914. He quickly gained notoriety for his ruthless attacks on enemy craft, including a missed attempt on a hospital ship.

Personally, Schweiger was known as kind, pleasant and good-natured and his U-boat was a "jolly boat." He and his crew celebrated Christmas Day in 1914 as the U-20 rested on the bottom of the sea. At one time the ship had six dogs one of which was a black dachshund that was rescued from the water after an attack on a Portuguese ship.

Schwieger wrote in his log that day, May 7th, that the torpedo impacted the Lusitania at 2:10 p.m. on the starboard side near the bridge. There was an initial explosion followed by a second explosion that was probably from impact with a boiler or fuel. The U-20's pilot, Lanz, could identify every vessel on the seas. He looked through the periscope and said, "My God, it's the Lusitania."

Schwieger later recalled to a friend how rapidly the Lusitania had sunk. There had been great panic and overcrowded lifeboats ripped from their positions and just dropped into the water. Some had jumped into the water and swam to overturned boats. He could not have saved many had he returned there. He said he could have never fired a second torpedo into these poor souls trying to save their lives. The crew was joyful – they had taken out the Lusitania which was a symbol of British naval superiority.

Schwieger's fiancé told a reporter that Schwieger was haunted by the sinking of the Lusitania. The images of the people struggling for their lives stayed with him forever. However, that report does not match accounts from other friends and crew members nor does it match what Schwieger wrote in his daily log. It's yet another mystery about the incident that will never be resolved.

## Captain William Thomas Turner

There were many tasks to complete in preparation of a new launch. By May 1915 Captain William Thomas Turner was the most experienced ship captain at Cunard. He was the commodore of the line. He was fearless and had faced every challenge and problem that was imaginable aboard an ocean liner. His worst experience was when a



rogue wave, a series of waves accumulating atop one another, hit his ship in one large impact. The ship sustained injury to the bridge and wheelhouse, actually tearing the wheel loose. The Lusitania began to list and fall off its perpendicular posture – a very dangerous situation. The crew quickly reattached the wheel and regained control of the ship. But the damage went beyond the bridge; internal bulkheads were bent, doors were broken and lifeboats were splintered. No one sustained serious injury.

Turner's biggest worry had always been traversing thick fog. In those days before radar, it was impossible to see an approaching ship. The ship's foghorn was employed furiously during those times. In the previous May, the Empress of Ireland hit a freighter in thick fog and sank in fourteen minutes. Over a thousand lives were lost.

As part of the preparation for their May 1st launch, Turner and key crew members conducted a thorough and in-depth inspection of the ship. They checked everything from the functioning of the ship's many systems to the cleanliness of the rooms and lavatories and made sure there was an adequate supply of food. It was company policy and Captain Turner's goal to see that passengers be treated with the utmost respect and that any complaints be taken serious. Their top priority was the safety of the passengers. Turner had a good record and had been cited for only minor errors in a few collisions that ships under his command had been involved in.

During the first six days of the Lusitania's final voyage, Turner received no urgent messages about dangers ahead or diversionary routes that should be taken. On May 7th, the ship arrived off the coast of Ireland and everything seemed fine. Then everything changed suddenly when the U-boat struck the hull of the ship with a torpedo.

Many survivors recall seeing Captain Turner standing on the bridge dressed in full uniform and wearing a life jacket as the Lusitania sank. He went down with the ship. But the water expelled him and his jacket kept him afloat. He had fulfilled all his duties and though devastated by the turn of events he decided he wanted to live and be rescued.

Turner was severely depressed over the incident. Some passengers openly blamed him for the tragedy. Cunard lawyers also tried to place responsibility on Turner undoubtedly to save their client money in liability claims. In a hearing, Turner was questioned by the Admiralty's lead barrister, Sir Edward Carson. He treated the captain like he was a murderer. Turner defended his positioning in the waters nearing the Irish coast. He had actually changed course and zigzagged his route to some degree in what amounted to a diversionary tactic. At the end of the hearing the judge Lord Mersey, absolved Captain Turner of any blame. Mersey laid the blame entirely on the Germans and especially the U-boat commander. Turner was relieved but bitter over how the Admiralty had tried to railroad him. Turner did not lose his job.

## Winston Churchill

The Great War which began in August 1914 seemed to have come out of nowhere. That summer there were many friendly visits between European monarchs and leaders.



Winston Churchill, a 40-year-old naval commander, was on vacation at the beach; there was no hint of trouble brewing. Britain feared that German submarines would attack a passenger ship and kill all those aboard. However, Churchill didn't believe the Germans would violate such a basic rule of the sea. However, he conceded that British warships were fair game.

The war seemed haphazard with the western forces advancing then retreating. On May 1st, the Germans mounted a series of attacks on Ypres and employed poison gas for the second time. The British were pushed back by these assaults. The British regained their territory but at great loss; the British lost 16,000 dead and wounded and the Germans 5,000. It was a bloody stalemate with no victory or defeat. Churchill ordered a massive assault by air and sea against Turkey in hopes of coordinating their efforts with the Russians from the east. But their goals were not realized. By May 1, the Turks had slaughtered more than 50,000 men, women and children. The head of the Armenian church asked Wilson for help but to no avail.

On Wednesday May 5, Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty, under heavy security left London for Paris. He would be collaborating with the Italian and French on developing a strategy using the Italian Navy. Second in command Jacky Fisher was left in charge of the Admiralty. Churchill and the much older Fisher were nothing alike and when they were together there was tension in the air. Some thought Fisher had lost his mind. Fisher had been energetic and brilliant in his younger days but now he was 74 and done. Churchill took him on as his deputy for precisely that reason; he would not pose a challenge to Churchill's authority. While Churchill was in Paris, he had his wife, Clementine, look after him. Fisher made a baseless charge to Clementine that Churchill was frolicking with a mistress in Paris instead of holding strategy meetings. Clementine became angry and ordered Fisher out of her sight. The incident seemed to do him in. He abruptly stopped the voluminous dispatches that he had been making to Churchill. Fisher gave up and the Admiralty was basically inattentive to the war that was taking place under its nose.

The Lusitania was heading for Britain with no escort and no instructions for diversionary tactics. Things may have been different had Churchill been on duty instead of the fading Fisher. However, Churchill had expressed the hope of "embroiling the United states with Germany."

After the fact when fingers of blame were being pointed, Churchill was less than honest about what the British knew and how it could have prevented the disaster. A small circle of the British military upper command including Churchill knew that Room 40 had kept important information from Captain Turner. Churchill's lame attempt to blame a policy that prohibited protection for commercial vessels was immediately dismissed since a new provision for escorting merchant ships had been instituted the year before.

When the U.S. Congress finally approved a declaration of war, Churchill was overjoyed but felt it was long overdue. He believed that it would have been a very different war had America intervened in May 1915 after the Lusitania disaster.



## Ellen Axson Wilson

Ellen Axson Wilson was the beloved wife of U.S. President Woodrow Wilson. She was his lover, best friend and closest confidant and advisor. She fell ill with Bright's disease and died on August 11, 1914. The President was devastated and beside himself in grief. He hated the isolation of the White House and looked forward to the times he could escape it. He longed for the warmth and love that fate had taken from him. Wilson fell into a deep depression and suffered from a loneliness that distracted his attention from the events of the chaotic world that were heading to global conflict. While the prospect of war loomed over Europe and England looked to America for support, Wilson's policy was one of complete neutrality. After the death of Ellen he was even more entrenched in that stance.

## Henriette Caillaux

Although Europe was on the precipice of war in 1914, there were more interesting events that captured the imagination of the European people. In Paris, the people were fascinated by the murder trial of Henriette Caillaux, wife of the former prime minister Joseph Caillaux. Henriette had been charged with the killing of the editor of *Le Figaro*, a French newspaper. It had published a letter between Henriette and her husband when he was married to his first wife, proof that they were having an adulterous affair. She bought a gun and confronted the editor in his office and shot him six times. She was acquitted because her actions represented a crime of passion.

## Edith Bolling Galt

The very lonely and vulnerable U.S. president was still in mourning for his wife, Ellen, when a cousin introduced him to Edith Bolling Galt who had lost her husband. President Wilson was immediately taken with the young widow who was 16 years his junior. Edith was a very conservative and proper woman who was always concerned about appearances. The President frequently had Edith over for dinner and for other gatherings but she always came with a chaperone. Wilson fell hard for Edith but she was resistant to his charms which further distressed the already depressed man. She initially rejected his proposal of marriage feeling that knowing each other only a year wasn't a proper enough length of time for such a commitment.

Wilson was devastated but her resistance to him only made him more determined to gain her love. He was relentless in his pursuit of Edith Galt and she ultimately caved to his wishes. They were married in December 1915. The normally serious and stiff president was said to have sung, "Oh, You Beautiful Doll," to her. She took on the same role as Ellen had before her; she became his closest adviser and confidant. The several years that Wilson suffered from depression and from emotional distress were the years leading up to the war. He was distracted to some degree from his responsibilities during this time especially from events taking place in Europe that were the beginnings of a world conflict.



## Charles Lauriat, Jr.

Charles Lauriat, Jr., was a Boston bookseller and collector of rare books and other priceless artifacts. Since 1894, he had been the president of the Charles E. Lauriat Company, the country's best-known bookstore which had been founded by his father. He took many transatlantic buying trips to London during the course of his career and was booked on the Lusitania for its May 1, 1915, voyage. He brought with him a first-edition copy of Dickens' "A Christmas Carol" that was signed by the author and original drawings by the writer William Makepeace Thackeray. When the ship was struck with a torpedo all he could grab was the Dickens book. Lauriat survived the disaster but lost the Dickens book when his lifeboat was washed undersea.

## John Phillip Holland

Although many inventors contributed to the development of the submarine, John Philip Holland is most often credited for transforming it into a viable military vessel. Holland was an Irishman who emigrated to America and began designing submarines with a goal of helping Ireland defeat the British navy. Holland was the first architect to incorporate electric engines for undersea travel and gasoline motors for surface travel.

## William Reginald Hall

Captain William Reginald Hall was the director of British naval intelligence. He was one of only a handful of government officials who knew about Room 40 but did not have direct command over it. Hall was a former warship commander and was named director of naval intelligence in 1914. When he heard that the Germans were mixing it up with the Americans, he was not dismayed. He hoped that the Germans would succeed where the British had failed. Hall believed that German aggression could bring the Americans into the war; British pleading hadn't worked.

## Theodate Pope

Theodate Pope, a 48-year-old woman from Farmington, Connecticut, was a passenger in the first-class section of the Lusitania. She was an eccentric woman who had been named Effie at birth but took her grandmother's name, Theodate, when she was 19. She was from a wealthy family but had no interest in coming out as a debutante or in getting married. She became a suffragist and joined the Socialist Party for a time. She delved into the spiritual world and was a self-taught architect. She wound up in the water after the Lusitania sunk. She floated on the water, unconscious. When she was rescued she was first thought to be dead but surprised everyone by "waking up." She claimed she didn't remember a thing about the attack. It was a traumatic experience for her because she lost her traveling companion and maid who had accompanied her on the trip.





## Alfred Vanderbilt

Alfred Vanderbilt was the most famous and wealthiest person on the ill-fated Lusitania. A reporter asked him if he was worried about the German warning about the danger in traveling in the war zone. Vanderbilt just laughed it off. Vanderbilt was from one of the wealthiest families in the country and was the primary heir to the family fortune. He was charming and stylish and had a way with women – his money didn't hurt either. He was traveling with his valet and booked one of the ship's parlor suits paying \$1,001.50 for both tickets – in today's prices – \$22,000. Alfred Vanderbilt and his man servant perished in the sinking. Neither body was ever recovered.

## Leslie and Cliff Morton

Leslie and Cliff Morton booked passage on the Lusitania's final voyage. They were British brothers who worked as seamen but were returning to London to see their family. The Chief Officer asked them if they wanted a job on the crew – their passage would be free. They jumped at the chance. The boys were separated after the attack on the Lusitania. Leslie was viewing the bodies in the makeshift mortuary in Queenstown looking for his brother when he bumped into him. Cliff was looking for him, too. They had both survived.

## Arthur Zimmerman

Arthur Zimmerman was the German Foreign Secretary during World War I. He sent a telegram to the Mexican government with an offer they couldn't refuse. If the Mexicans would form an alliance with the Germans, Germany would seize Texas, Arizona and New Mexico and return it to Mexico. The telegram was intercepted by British intelligence and forwarded to President Wilson. The president had been leaning toward war in the days leading up to this revelation. After reading the telegram and recognizing that a real and palpable danger to the homeland existed, Wilson had no hesitation. He went to Congress asking for a declaration of war against Germany. America was going to war.

## Colonel Edward House

On the morning of the attack, Colonel House, President Wilson's emissary in London, met with Sir Edward Grey, Britain's foreign secretary. They discussed the submarine situation and both agreed in the probability that an ocean liner would one day be attacked and sink. Such an incident, House wrote, would bring America into the war. The King, who House visited later that day, was more direct. He asked how America would react if the Lusitania were sunk.



## Consul Wesley Frost

Consul Wesley Frost who was assigned to the American Consulate in Queenstown, Ireland, was working on a report when at 2:30 p.m. his vice-consul delivered the news that the Lusitania had been attacked. His office overlooked the harbor where it seemed that every vessel, large and small, was leaving it. He telegraphed the news to U.S. ambassador Page in London. The Juno was the largest and fastest rescue ship that had been dispatched. The Admiralty revoked the order and ordered that the Juno return to the harbor. The order was based on the Navy's policy that a British vessel not be placed in jeopardy to rescue survivors of another attack.





## Objects/Places

### The Cunard Steamship Company of Liverpool, England

The Cunard Steamship Company of Liverpool, England, was the owner of the ocean liner, the Lusitania. The Cunard Bulletin devoted an article in its weekly newsletter to, of all people, Kaiser Wilhelm who sent a telegram to the Lusitania's builders that read, "Please deliver me without delay a dozen – baker's measure – Lusitanias." The German leader undoubtedly didn't understand that it took years to build such a boat. Cunard named the ship after ancient warlike people who were difficult to conquer. Perhaps Cunard wanted to send a message to the Germans who had been a threat to Britain and Europe for a decade not to mess with the Lusitania.

After the sinking of the Lusitania, Cunard lawyers attempted to blame Captain William Turner, the ship's captain for the disaster. They tried to portray him as taking risks, being negligent and not adhering to company directions. Cunard was rebuffed by a hearing judge who placed the blame on the right party – Germany and U-boat 20 – and absolved the captain of any responsibility. As a result, Cunard did not fire the captain and retained him as one of their revolving ship commanders.

### The Black Gang

The Lusitania burned fuel twenty-four hours a day whether it was on the move or not. Even when idled and docked, it consumed 140 tons a day. When it was at sea, its appetite for coal grew even larger. Coal was the power source for every system on the huge steamship. Three-hundred stokers, trimmers and firemen working 100 per shift were needed to keep the ship fueled. The men shoveled 1,000 tons of coal per day into the ship's 192 furnaces to keep the 25 boilers heated and able to generate steam adequate enough to spin the engine turbines. This crew was referred to as "the black gang" because after a shift every inch of their bodies, clothes and all, were coated in black coal dust.

### The Great War

Prior to the opening salvos of World War I, a bitter war had raged in Europe for decades, the main foes being Great Britain and Germany. While the Germans tussled with the French on land in trench warfare but really made no great gains, it was on the high seas that Germany wanted to make its mark. For decades the Germans had been green with envy over the celebrated British Navy, the best in the world, and its fleet of spectacular warships. Germany wanted to surpass the British and establish a navy that would outdo them. While Germany had world dominance on its mind, it began its quest by focusing on the country that was its most formidable opponent and that represented



the biggest obstacle in attaining its goals. World War I began in 1914 and lasted much longer than anyone imagined. The war escalated when Germany became more aggressive on the high seas and boldly adopted a no-restrictions wartime strategy that finally, in 1917, dragged America into the conflict.

## Submarines

Prior to 1914, both Germany and Great Britain had been developing warfare submarines for years. While their advancements were thought to be on an even par, Great Britain used only a limited number of subs during World War I. The Brits who commanded the best navy in the world decided not to rely on the submarine because they felt the program was not advanced enough.

Germany either was more advanced than it was perceived to be or didn't mind taking risks with its own men and used submarines on a regular and frequent basis during the war. Placing their sailors in danger was apparently deemed worthwhile if it would gain them an advantage over Great Britain. The U-boat was a key element in World War I and was Germany's most effective weapon in its herculean struggle with Great Britain.

Submarine warfare was not a new tactic in World War I. The first successful sinking of an enemy vessel by a submarine was the Confederate navy's H. L. Hunley which sank the Union navy's frigate, the Housatonic, during the American Civil War.

## Aboukir Disaster

In September 1914, three British cruisers, HMS Aboukir, Houge and Cressy were on patrol in the North Sea. The Aboukir was torpedoed and began to sink. Crews from the Houge and Cressy rushed to the scene to rescue survivors. Torpedoes struck both the rescue boats. All three ships sank and 1,459 British sailors perished. The incident caused a new policy to be established by the British Admiralty that forbade a British ship to go to the aid of victims of the torpedoing of another British vessel due to the risk of losing another ship and more men.

## The Black Soul

U-20 attacked the Centurion with two torpedo assaults. Commander Schwieger smiled when he heard the hiss of air that was released as water filled the ship's hull. It was a satisfying moment for U-boat commanders. At this point, like a dying person the wounded ship often attempted to rally and gave one last exhalation as their boiler rooms were drowning. The final sign of a ship's death was the release of a black cloud of smoke that was known to U-boat officers as "the black soul." When the black soul appeared it was a sign that the ship had lost its battle to survive and its soul departed in the black cloud of smoke and soot.



## Rest Cure

Theodate Pope suffered from depression at times and had been treated with Dr. Silas Mitchell's "Rest Cure" that required literally no movement by the patient – even turning over in bed was accomplished by an attendant. This forced inactivity could last for up to two months. The patient could not read, write or sew. They could only clean their teeth. Mitchell viewed women as very fragile believing that they did better with fewer tasks on their minds. Needless to say Mitchell's cure was debunked and faded into the ash pit of the ridiculous.

## Hypothermia

There were many children on board the Lusitania on its final voyage. Many of the children thrown into the water and separated from parents could not save themselves and quickly drowned. However, for those who survived longer in the water there was another killer – hypothermia. The water surrounding the sinking Lusitania was 55 degrees. It was not frigid as the water around the Titanic was but it was cold enough to lower core temperatures to a dangerous level and did so quickly. Even if the body temperature was lowered only three or four degrees, if sustained long enough would cause death. Those who were most vulnerable to hypothermia were children, especially infants, thin people, old people and women. The cold would cause the heart rate to slow and death soon followed.

## The Zimmerman Telegram

The last straw for President Woodrow Wilson was the telegram sent by the German Foreign Secretary Arthur Zimmermann to the Mexican government. Zimmerman proposed an alliance between the Germans and Mexicans. If the Mexicans agreed to this arrangement – presumably the Germans wanted easy access to the U.S. – the Germans pledged to seize Texas, Arizona and New Mexico and allow Mexico to reclaim the land. With German aggression against American interests on the increase, Wilson had been leaning more and more toward declaring war. When he read the telegram that the British had intercepted, there was no further equivocation on his part. The enemy could soon be on the nation's doorstep. America would go to war.

## Queenstown, Ireland

After the rescue and recovery operation had been completed, the dead bodies were stored in three temporary morgues. As time passed and temperatures warmed, the bodies began to decompose quite rapidly. The company decided to have a mass burial which was set to begin on May 10th. Many mourners appeared at the services; the shops in town all shut down for the day. Ships flew their flags at half-mast. A funeral procession bearing three of the coffins was led through town by clerics while a military band played the funeral march. Citizens and soldiers lined the entire pathway to the



burial sites. A record was kept of where each numbered body lay so that they could be easily located if claimed by family members. Soldiers who had dug the graves filled them up after the dead were laid to rest. Some family members were disturbed that their loved ones were interred so far away. But the people of Queenstown had only good intentions and took care of the victims as best they could.



# Themes

## The Magnificent Ship

The Lusitania, “the magnificent ship” was referred to as beauty on a monumental scale. The hull was black and the bridge stood seven stories above the wharf . The Lusitania was a sleek, opulent and speedy ocean liner that was operated strictly for the transatlantic passage of private citizens and for the transport of commercial cargo. Although the British Admiralty had insisted upon the ship being designed with some naval specifications in case it needed to be commandeered by the Navy that need never arose. The Lusitania disaster became an important event in the escalation of World War I and its sinking was pivotal in drawing America into the war, a war in which the U.S. president had for years been adamant that the U.S. maintain its neutrality.

The Cunard company was the owner of the Lusitania and when incorporated into its stable of ocean liners in 1906, there was no intention or even a passing notion that the graceful and seemingly unsinkable British steamship would play a role in world history. But destiny stepped in when on May 1, 1915, the Lusitania would launch its final trek across the Atlantic from New York Harbor to Liverpool, England.

In spite of the war in Europe which had raged on longer than anyone believed it would, there was no hesitation in the launching of the Lusitania on May 1st. There was no sign of worry from the over 1,200 people who booked passage on the trip or trepidation in the hearts of the 800 crew members who were scheduled for the voyage. By 1915 after its maiden voyage in 1907 the Lusitania had not been responsible for a single passenger death. The ship had the finest lifeboats and the most advanced life jackets and there were always an supply that was adequate for the passengers on board. The New York Times pointed out that when fully loaded with passengers, crew and cargo, the gigantic ship displaced over 44,000 tons. But the weight didn't hold the Lusitania back – it travelled at a phenomenal 25 knots an hour. At the time, it was the fastest civilian vessel on the high seas. Only warships or destroyers could out run it. In today's words, the ship would be considered cutting edge and at the top of its game. A passenger in 1907 from Rhode Island expressed in the terms of those day what many thought: “The Lusitania is in itself a perfect epitome of all that man knows or has discovered or invented up to this moment of time.”

Cunard had a custom of dubbing its ships with names from antiquity even names of ancient lands. The company chose “Lusitania” for their magnificent steamship after a Roman province on the Iberian Peninsula in which the inhabitants were warlike and difficult to conquer. The description portends an invincible nature of the ship – it would stand its ground and not be beaten. The name was shortened in popular use to “Lucy.” History would debate whether it was Lusitania or Lucy who met her fate on May 7, 1915.



## British Intelligence

The activities of German U-boats, especially those of U-20, were closely monitored from London on the fifth floor of what was known as the Old Building by a secret operation called Room 40. The unit was called Room 40 because that was the room number on their office. Only “the Mystery” staff itself and a small circle of senior officials knew of its existence and purpose. One such official was First Lord Churchill. The staff in Room 40 received coded dispatches and enciphered German messages that had been intercepted by wireless stations on Britain’s coast. Their job was to translate the messages into English which had been made easier by the confiscation of German codebooks during a British assault on a German vessel.

The mission of Room 40 was to get into the German mind. The staff consisted of some Naval officers but the majority of its members were mathematicians and others adept at deciphering codes. The decoded material was turned over to their superiors including Captain William Reginald Hall, director of naval intelligence. It was believed that the work done in Room 40 gave Britain an edge.

Room 40 was focused on gaining British superiority at sea. The staff was also tasked with combating the increasing threat to British commerce from U-boats. The British knew about every movement of the German Navy and sometimes in advance of the events. Some intel was never used so that Germany wouldn’t catch on that Britain knew its every move. Secrecy frequently trumped the passing of even important intel. The staff was made to record in a daily log even the most seemingly innocent transmission. They grumbled but ultimately their due diligence paid off – they picked up patterns, changes and generally began to think like the Germans and know the personalities of the U-boat commanders. Walther Schwieger, U-20’s commander, was viewed as good-natured and pleasant. The staff learned the habits of the commanders, nicknames used by the crew and what their goals and missions were.

Room 40 learned that a U-boat had ventured into the Irish Sea – the water body that separates Ireland from England. The superior officers did not sit on this information; it was immediately dispatched to the home fleet. Approaching Cunard liners were diverted until an escort arrived. An alarming transmission from Schwieger mentioned the Lusitania by name and described its route. The German Navy considered the “magnificent ship” fair game. At the end of April, Room 40 intercepted messages revealing that four to six U-boats, including U-20, were active. It was an unusually large number of submarines to be in the North Sea at the same time and was worrisome.

Long since these events took place, military and intelligence experts believed that had Room 40 shared more details from the messages they intercepted with the Lusitania captain, that the disaster may have been prevented.



## Ocean Liners at War

It was not well known but the Lusitania was designed to meet a level of British naval requirements. Many battles were waged at sea. And the countries at war, particularly Great Britain, were anxious to augment their existing navy with the power, speed and size of the great ocean liners.

In addition to the military angle, there was a heated competition between various nations to have the fastest, largest and most powerful commercial ocean liners. The Lusitania was built in 1903 for speed and at a time in the lofty world of ocean liners when Britain feared it was losing to the Americans in attaining its goal to be at the top of the passenger ship industry. The wealthy American, J. P. Morgan, was aggressively buying up shipping lines in an attempt to attain a monopoly. Germany had built the fastest ocean liner having crossed the Atlantic in the shortest length of time. Although ostensibly these huge, powerful ships were being built for passengers, there was silent understanding by all parties that, if designed properly, they could be quickly transformed into warships – which was the impetus for the warring nations to build these gargantuan ships.

Britain feared they were losing out in both commercial and naval shipbuilding. The Cunard Ocean Liner company was having its financial difficulties and was looking for funding. The two entities found they needed each other and cut a deal.

The British Admiralty agreed to lend Cunard nearly \$2 billion at a low interest rate to build two huge ocean liners – the Lusitania and the Mauretania. Cunard had to agree to certain expectations. The Lusitania had to have a cruising speed of 24.5 knots. Both ships had to be easily adaptable to warships if the need arose. Also the builders had to include in their design mounts where a dozen large guns could be housed. The hull of the Lusitania had to be on a par with battleship standards.

When the war began the Lusitania was commandeered for a brief time but was deemed ineffective as an armed cruiser because of the huge amount of coal that it consumed. It would be far too expensive for the navy to expend the funds necessary to keep it moving. The navy kept the Mauretania but quickly returned the Lusitania to Cunard. Guns were never installed in the ship. It was a formidable ship on the high scenes – a passenger ship with the hull of a battleship. The Lusitania never saw active duty and became the flagship for its country but ironically was destroyed in a war zone by the enemy.

## U-Boats

After an increase in U-boat attacks, Wilson began devoting more thought to the war and the horrors brought on by the German U-boats. The Germans were delighted with the success of their submarines. It would make the Kaiser's dream come true of the German Navy surpassing the strength and power of the celebrated British Navy. U-boat captains were completely in charge of their vessels. They could submerge at any time





but the submarines could travel at faster speeds on the surface. U-boats traveled underwater as little as possible because of the slowed rate of speed. Once out of range of wireless contact, the U-boat was the only vessel in the German Navy that was isolated and without communication capability. The submarine captain alone had full control of his U-boat. He had to make command decisions based only on the narrow view he was able to glimpse from his periscope.

The U-boat was at its most vulnerable when in descent. The faster the descent the less exposed it was to attack. One bullet in its flank could stop the dive and leave the U-boat on the surface without defense. A skilled crew knew how to balance the intake of sea water necessary for descent. This process became trickier as the ship lost weight from the launching of torpedoes. Even the consumption of water and food by the crew impacted the descent. Weather, high waves and buoyancy were also factors. A rapid and too steep descent would result in a rough landing leaving the vessel lodged in the seabed at a sharp angle. Commanders and their experienced crew knew how to salvage their ship from such catastrophes. Descending and ascending required a coordinated effort from an experienced crew. The danger of leaks always loomed.

President Wilson was growing increasingly angered by Germany's tactics on the high seas. He responded on February 10, 1915, with a letter to the Germans denouncing them for their plans to attack neutral ships. He warned them that America would hold Germany responsible for any such attack on an American vessel or on a vessel carrying American passengers or crew. Germany was rattled by Wilson's reaction. Some German leaders feared they would drive America into the war. But the U-boat enthusiasts were more determined than ever to bring down the British Navy and were undeterred by the American president's protests. Kaiser Wilhelm gave his U-boat commanders wide berth in their maneuvers. He left it up to them to determine if a ship should be attacked even though it might be the decision of a young U-boat commander that would wake the sleeping giant across the Atlantic.

The air in the U-boat reeked with men who never bathed and shared one small lavatory that could only be flushed when the vessel was on the surface or in shallow water. There was also an overwhelming odor of diesel fuel that encompassed the interior. The system that injected oxygen into the boat created a humid, swamp-like atmosphere. Conditions worsened with lengthy underwater excursions. Drowning from water intake and suffocation were the two most serious perils that faced the crews of U-boats.

On one occasion, the U-20 sank after taking on damage from an underwater collision with a huge steel net that served as a submarine trap. The net had not been detected and a portion snapped off at impact sending the U-boat rapidly toward the ocean bottom. Trapped temporarily by the piece of netting, Schweiger and crew could hear the whirring propellers of a destroyer above them. It was the most feared enemy vessel of a U-boat commander. Schweiger commanded the crew to reverse engines enabling the U-20 to ascend. Upon resurfacing Schweiger ordered a zigzag course to evade the destroyer.





When the submerged U-boat glided through the water it was blind and depended solely on sea charts. There was always concern about hitting a rock and sunken ship. German Chancellor Bethmann was frustrated with the trench war that was not going well. Not a fan of the U-boats, he thought they may make the situation worse because of the great number of neutral ships they had sunk. He thought the U-boat captains had way too much freedom in the command of their ships. He demanded that the top navy command saw to it that U-boats ceased attacking neutrals. That order was never carried out and was one of the factors that led to America declaring war on Germany and ultimately to Germany's defeat.

## Rescue and Recovery

When the armada of vessels small and large reached the disaster scene some three hours after the Lusitania sank, those still alive were rescued and the dead bodies that could be found were recovered. There were 764 survivors of the Lusitania's 1,959 passengers and crew. The bodies of more than 600 passengers were never found. There were 123 Americans among the lost. Families learned of the losses of their loved ones by telegram. With the many passengers, alive and dead, there was confusion and some were reported to be dead when actually alive. But more frequently those reported to be alive proved to be dead. Cunard exchanged many telegrams with Queensland authorities. Responses were slow in coming. Three makeshift morgues were created in Queenstown for the dead. Brothers Leslie and Cliff Morton were looking for each other among the bodies in the morgues when they ran into each other.

The "important" bodies – those who had been in first class – were embalmed at the expense of the U.S. government with America's local consul Wesley Frost authorizing the program. Bodies of second and third class passengers were sealed in lead and ready to be transported. All the dead were photographed in coffins for positive identifications. The bodies are all numbered and all have a story to tell. The most disturbing image was Body 156 and slightly chubby three-year-old girl with the look of pure fury on her face. Frost had great difficulty with the sight of so many dead children.

Recovery efforts lasted until June when Cunard requested that it stop. Bodies washed ashore all summer long. Those who discovered the grotesque remains treated them with respect reserved for the dead. One man was found 75 days after the disaster. The exact causes of death were uncertain for most of the dead. However, the causes of death ranged from being struck with a heavy object, falling, drowning, exposure, hypothermia and shock. Not one member of the Crompton family survived. Of the two parents and six children only the youngest child's body was found.



# Styles

## Structure

“Dead Wake” by Erik Larson is a non-fiction work and is separated into five main parts: Part I: Bloody Monkeys; Part II Jump Rope and Caviar; Part III Dead Wake; Part IV: The Black Soul; and, Part V: The Sea of Secrets.

The story is laid out in a basically chronological order beginning on May 1st, when the Lusitania was departing New York Harbor for Liverpool, England. Unknown to anyone, it would be the last voyage of the Lusitania and over half the people on board would perish. There are flashbacks to issues leading up to the day of departure. The author provides back stories for some of the passengers and crew. He describes the background and nature of the two naval captains involved in the Lusitania disaster – the ocean liner’s captain and the captain who commanded the U-boat that sank “the magnificent ship.”

Larson also describes the geo-political atmosphere that existed leading up to the disaster and provides some theories on why the disaster happened and possibly how it could have been prevented. In the aftermath of the sinking – which happened only 18 minutes after being struck – the rescue and recovery attempts by the seamen of Queenstown, Ireland, were the focus. The town applauded the survivors who stepped off the rescue boats and held a funeral service to honor the dead.

The book also includes maps of Great Britain and Ireland. The author lists the resources he used for the book and acknowledges those who contributed to the work.

## Perspective

“Dead Wake” by Erik Larson is the non-fiction story of the sinking of the Lusitania, a British passenger ocean liner, in 1915 during the early years of the European war which would ultimately evolve into World War I. Erik Larson has been a staff writer for Time Magazine and for the Wall Street Journal. He is also the author of “In the Garden of the Beasts,” a book about the first and only American ambassador to Nazi Germany and his and his family’s experience living in Nazi Germany during the lead up to World War II. He has written a number of other non-fiction works. It is obvious from his works that Larson has an ardent interest in military and world history.

Larson cites many source references that he used in writing, “Dead Wake.” Since the Lusitania disaster happened a century ago, there are probably no survivors who can tell the story of the tragedy first-hand. Larson writes from a fact-based perspective about the incident and the conditions and events that led up to it. He tells the back story of some of the passengers and crew who were on the ship. He tells the stories of the Lusitania’s captain, the U-boat commander who ordered the assault on the ship, a depressed and distracted US president and an eager and duplicitous British Admiralty.



He describes the complicated geo-political atmosphere that surrounded the incident. Larson juxtaposes the American policy of neutrality in the early stages of the war against the goals of the British Admiralty, led by a young Winston Churchill that was eager to bring the Americans into the conflict.

There has been much debate and speculation over the last century about the sinking of the Lusitania. Some felt that the “magnificent ship” was purposely left unprotected by the Admiralty to draw America into the war. A secret unit working under British intelligence called simply Room 40 withheld important information from the captain of the Lusitania, information that might have averted the tragedy. Oddly, there was no escort for the ship when it entered waters that were considered part of the war zone. The Germans who had been increasingly aggressive leading up to the sinking of the grand ocean liner, became even more so after. They wanted to engage the Americans seemingly as much as the British did. The only country not interested in involving America in the war was America itself.

The story is told from the voice of history. The mystique that surrounded the tragedy remains and is not resolved in “Dead Wake” although every aspect of the incident is thoroughly covered. If there is a bias at all in the book, it is in favor of the British and American alliance, although it was a relationship that had been tainted by dishonesty and secrecy on the part of the Brits. No one will ever know all the answers to the questions that arose with the Lusitania disaster but it is endlessly fascinating to explore the possibilities.

## Tone

“Dead Wake” by Erik Larson is a non-fiction book about the sinking of the Lusitania by a German U-boat in 1915 during World War I. Larson has worked as a writer for Time Magazine and for the Wall Street Journal. He has also written a number of other non-fiction books. Most notably, he authored the book, “In the Garden of the Beasts,” which is a story about the only American ambassador to Nazi Germany. The ambassador and his family lived in Berlin in 1933 and saw the rise of the Third Reich and the reality of who the Nazis really were.

Larson is obviously deeply interested in world history and especially in the great wars of the twentieth century and the lead ups to them. Larson has done extensive research in the writing of “Dead Wake” and the reader will readily see that he has taken care to thoroughly cover every aspect of it. He writes with an unbiased tone and provides the facts as he found them. This removal of self-interest from his writing is testament to his career as an outstanding reporter and writer for the news media.

Writing the book was an exercise in discovery for Larson. He explains that through his research he learned that he had always been wrong about how America became entangled in World War I. Like most people, he thought that America declared war immediately after the sinking of the Lusitania but learned that it was two years later.

Although the Lusitania disaster was a factor in America declaring war on Germany, it was one of many reasons.

Larson found that the Lusitania was an important story that had vanished from the world's consciousness and never got the attention it deserved. He has righted that wrong. He writes this missing piece of history with great respect for those lost in the incident and for the magnificent ship that was a casualty of war.

## Quotes

The Lusitania is in itself a perfect epitome of all that man knows or has discovered or invented up to this moment of time.

-- Passenger (Part I paragraph Page 12)

**Importance:** An anonymous passenger from Rhode Island made the comment to the Cunard Daily Bulletin. His remark captured how advanced and admired the Lusitania was in its hey-day.

The United states is remote, unconquerable, huge, without hostile neighbors or any neighbors at all of anything like her own strength, and lives exemption an almost unvexed tranquility from the contentions and animosities and the ceaseless pressure and counter-pressure that distract the close-packed older world.

-- Sydney Brooks (Part I paragraph Page 32)

**Importance:** Sydney Brooks, a British journalist, opined why the U.S. had no interest in entering the European war in 1914. He should have waited a while and he'd seen that the U.S. was not the isolationist nation that he believed it to be.

The crew of the Lusitania is in a very depressed mood and hopes this will be the last Atlantic crossing during the war.' The report noted as well that the crew was incomplete. 'It is difficult to service the machines adequately. Fear of the U-boats is too strong.

-- German Naval Attaché (Part I paragraph Page 81-82)

**Importance:** A German spy filed this report. The Germans showed great interest in the Lusitania. Perhaps it was due to Kaiser Wilhelm's obsession with British ships, particularly the Lusitania who the German leader wanted to replicate; he ordered that twelve ships be built just like it. The spy was accurate in his assessment of the crew. It was the wartime crew which was lacking when compared to the ocean liner's regular crew which made it more vulnerable.

It is difficult, if not impossible, for us here in the United States to appreciate in all its fullness the great European War. We have come to read almost with indifference of vast military operations, of battle lines extending for hundreds of miles, of the thousands of dying men, of the millions suffering all manner of privation of the wide-spread waste and destruction.... We read the headlines in the newspapers and let it go at that.

-- Robert Lansing (Part I paragraph Page 120)

**Importance:** The Undersecretary of State Robert Lansing described the distance that America had put between the European War and its own shores. President Wilson was an isolationist who was initially determined to stay out of the war.

The reference to the Lusitania was obvious enough but personally it never entered my mind for a moment that the Germans would actually perpetrate an attack upon her. The culpability of such an act seemed too blatant and raw for an intelligent people to take



upon themselves.

-- Wesley Frost (Part II paragraph Page 154)

**Importance:** American consul Wesley Frost who was stationed in Ireland read the warning issued by the German Embassy that all ships flying under the British flag were basically fair game. Frost, like everyone else who read the warning, didn't believe the Lusitania would be attacked even though there was a direct reference to it.

The scene was tragically macabre: the image of desolation, the flames spared nothing. As for our young men, a few minutes ago, so alert, so self-confident, all now [lay] dead on the bare deck, blackened burnt skeletons, twisted in all directions, no trace of any clothing, the fire having devoured all.

-- Rear Admiral Émile Guépratte (Part II paragraph Page 182)

**Importance:** The French officer expressed his horror when surveying the damage on the French battleship Suffren after a shelling that ignited a fire deep within its hull.

For our part, we want the traffic – the more the better; and if some of it gets into trouble, better still.

-- Winston Churchill (Part II paragraph Page 190)

**Importance:** Churchill had hoped that neutral traffic – especially American ships – coming through the war zone in British waters would become involved in a confrontation with the Germans. Churchill wanted America involved in the war so that the balance would be shifted irrevocably in Britain's favor.

Brooks was entranced. He saw the body of the torpedo moving well ahead of the wake, through water he described as being 'a beautiful green.' The torpedo was covered with a silvery phosphorescence, you might term it, which was caused by the air escaping from the motors.' He said, 'It was a beautiful sight.

-- Narrator (Part III paragraph Page 237)

**Importance:** Passenger James Brooks was mesmerized by the grace and beauty of the German torpedo as it raced toward the Lusitania. He found it beautiful before it struck but undoubtedly found it deadly a few moments later.

There was no time 'to waste in either horror or sympathy,' Morton wrote. He looked for his brother, amid mounting confusion, 'many people losing their hold on the deck and slipping down and over the side, and a gradual crescendo of noise building up as the hundreds and hundreds of people began to realize that, not only was she going down very fast but in all probability too fast for them all to get away.

-- Seaman Leslie Morton (Part IV paragraph Page 265)

**Importance:** Seaman Leslie Morton captures the last moments before the Lusitania sank and brought hundreds with it. Passengers had held onto the belief that the Lusitania was too big to sink from a torpedo attack but at the moment described above all hope was gone.



Third Officer Bestic, still aboard, felt the ship make a 'peculiar lurching movement' and looked down the deck. 'An all-swallowing wave, not unlike a surf comber on a beach, was rushing up the boat deck, enveloping passengers, boats, and everything that lay in its path,' he wrote. A mass wail rose from those it engulfed. 'All the despair, terror and anguish of hundreds of souls passing into eternity composed that awful cry.

-- Third Officer Bestic (Part IV paragraph Page 266)

**Importance:** A surviving officer describes the final wave that engulfed the ship and its remaining passengers. The people all knew they were dying and dying together. The collective and mournful wail that they emitted represented the anguish of all those lost on the Lusitania.

It was a strange moment for a sea captain. Twenty minutes earlier Turner had stood on the bridge in command of one of the greatest ocean liners ever known. Now, still in uniform, he floated in the place where his ship had been, in a calm sea under a brilliant blue sky, no deck, cabin, or hull in sight, not even the ship's tall masts.

-- Author (Part IV paragraph Page 287)

**Importance:** Captain Turner had gone down with the Lusitania but destiny had plucked him back up to the surface. In a matter of minutes, the captain plunged from a place of honor and glory into a sea of people fighting for their lives, debris and corpses.

On Monday, May 10, the coroner's jury issued its finding: that the submarine's officers and crew and the emperor of Germany had committed 'willful and wholesale murder.

-- Author (Part V paragraph Page 307)

**Importance:** The British Admiralty initially planned to blame Captain Turner, the Lusitania's commander, for the disaster. However, the Irish coroner who had conducted autopsies launched his own inquiry. The above statement reflects where the blame actually belonged in the sinking of the Lusitania that killed more than a thousand people.

If I pondered over those tragic items that daily appear in the newspapers about the Lusitania, I should see red in everything and I am afraid that when I am called upon to act with reference to this situation I could not be just to anyone. I dare not act unjustly and cannot indulge my own passionate feelings.

-- President Wilson (Part V paragraph Page 318)

**Importance:** President Wilson who had stayed out of the war had few comments after the Lusitania disaster. He felt revenge in his heart but he wanted to temper that with good judgment. He did not want to involve his country in the European war.



# Topics for Discussion

## Topic 1

How did the Lusitania get its name and what was its nickname? What request did Kaiser Wilhelm make to his shipbuilders that related to the Lusitania?

## Topic 2

What is the tactic known as the ruse de guerre which the British Navy employed during the lead up to World War I? How did it put American vessels at risk?

## Topic 3

What was the Aboukir disaster and what policy did the British government establish because of the incident? How did that policy later play a role in the Lusitania disaster?

## Topic 4

What was Room 40 and who knew about it? Why did the British Admiralty want to keep its existence a secret? How did this secrecy play into the Lusitania tragedy?

## Topic 5

Who issued the announcement warning Lusitania passengers to change their plans and not travel through waters that were within the parameters of the war zone? Why did most passengers ignore the warning? After the Lusitania, the Germans increased their attacks on American ships even though America remained neutral. Why did the Germans try to anger the Americans with their increased attacks on American vessels in order to draw them into the war?

## Topic 6

What business did Charles Lauriat, Jr., have in London? What priceless items did he bring onto the Lusitania and what was their fate?

## Topic 7

What was the significance of the Cushing incident and why was the attack on the city of Louvain especially troubling for President Wilson? What incidents, other than the





Lusitania, could have drawn America into the war? What finally compelled Wilson to commit American troops to fight in World War I?

## Topic 8

How did President Woodrow Wilson's personal life impact his presidency and World War I? Did his depression have any impact on the Lusitania disaster? Discuss how the war could have been different if American had interceded earlier.

## Topic 9

How did timing and the weather impact the attack on the Lusitania? What other factors impacted the disaster? Discuss whether the disaster was inevitable or if it could have been prevented.

## Topic 10

What was the Zimmerman telegram? How did it fall into the hands of the British and what was its importance? Discuss whether Germany would have kept up with its end of the arrangement with Mexico.