



2023 History Essay Contest

Homeschool High School Winner

How the Sinking of the Lusitania Affected the First World War

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The sinking of the British passenger ship, the *Lusitania*, by a German submarine in 1915 was not only a dramatic maritime tragedy, but also the turning point for America's eventual entrance into World War I. At that time, the war had been ravishing Europe for almost a year, but the American people were hesitant to enter into what was considered a 'European conflict' (Corbett et al. 610). President Woodrow Wilson mirrored the sentiments of many Americans when he declared to Congress in 1914 that "every man who really loves America will act and speak in the true spirit of neutrality, which is the spirit of impartiality and fairness and friendliness to all concerned" (qtd. in Corbett et al. 610). But the war was escalating, and neutrality was becoming an increasingly difficult position to maintain. The sinking of the *Lusitania* would prove to be the catalyst that ensured that American involvement in the war was inevitable.

Despite her neutral stance, America was still being affected by the war, especially by the naval blockades in Europe. Great Britain's attempt to starve out Germany by blockading its ports had stifled American trade (Corbett et al. 610). In response, Germany deployed their new and formidable naval weapon: the *unterseeboot* or "undersea boat" (Corbett et al. 609). These U-boats, as they were called, were built to roam British waters, targeting not only British vessels but also American merchant ships on their way to Britain (Corbett et al. 609). U-boats were dangerously effective, using torpedoes to inflict crippling damage upon ships with no warning (Corbett et al. 609). Americans were alarmed that any ships headed for Britain were in danger, even those that were unarmed. These naval tensions came to a head with the sinking of the *Lusitania*.

Setting sail from New York on May 1st, 1915, the *Lusitania* was a luxury British passenger ship with 159 Americans on board (Rosenberg). Only a few days before the *Lusitania* left harbor, the German Embassy had issued a warning in American newspapers that stated, "Vessels flying the flag of Great Britain, or any of her allies, are liable to destruction in those waters [adjacent to the British Isles]" ("Newspaper Warning"). It further warned that those "sailing in the war zone . . . do so at their own risk" ("Newspaper Warning"). Because the *Lusitania* faced such danger, the British Admiralty gave it a warning as well. To prevent detection by German U-boats, they asked the captain of the *Lusitania*, William Turner, to zig-zag the ship, changing its course every few minutes (Britannia). But these guidelines were never followed. The *Lusitania* ran into fog off the southern coast of Ireland, and Captain Turner thought it best to keep the ship on a straight trajectory, which unfortunately made its path predictable (Rosenberg). Tragically, at this time, the German U-Boat *U-20* sighted the *Lusitania*

and at 1:40 p.m. fired a torpedo that exploded on the starboard side of the ship (Rosenberg). Shortly after the torpedo hit, an even larger explosion followed. It is uncertain what was the cause of this explosion, but the damage it gave the ship sealed its fate (Britannia; Rosenberg). Within 20 minutes, the 32,000-ton ship sank beneath the water, taking 1,313 of its 1,949 passengers down with it (History; Rosenberg). Though the sinking itself lasted only a few minutes, the effects of the sinking were only beginning.

Word of the attack spread quickly, and Americans were horrified by the death toll, which included 128 American lives (Britannia). The sinking changed public opinion towards the war. Support for England grew, and anger with German intensified. Many Americans felt that the attack on the *Lusitania* and the loss of American lives justified entrance into the war. President Wilson felt pressure from the public and politicians for a declaration of war, but he still wanted the country to remain neutral (McDermott). When Germany sank another British liner, the *Arabic*, Wilson issued a warning to Germany to restrict their submarine warfare or else risk American entrance into the war (McDermott). Germany apologized and promised in the future that U-boats would surface, identify the targeted ship, and allow all civilians to evacuate before they attacked (Corbett et al. 611). War with Germany was averted for the moment but not for long. In 1917, Germany decided to resume their unrestricted submarine warfare, in the hope of bringing about a quick German victory and once more began attacking unarmed American ships and ships with American passengers aboard (Corbett et al. 611). Throughout early 1917, Germany sank a number of American ships, convincing America that neutrality was impossible (History). On April 6th, the United States declared war on Germany, stating

unrestricted submarine warfare as one of the factors in its decision to enter the war (Corbett et al. 611; Britannia).

The sinking of the *Lusitania* played a significant role in America's entry into World War I, which in turn changed the course of the war. American intervention came just in time for the exhausted Allies. In 1917, Britain and France had suffered overwhelming losses on the Western Front and had hardly any reinforcements left to hold the line (Wawro). Meanwhile, the German army had triumphed in the East and was sending more troops to the West (Wawro). After America's declaration of war, thousands of "doughboys" arrived and revived the Allies waning strength, pierced the German line, and brought about an Allied victory at the close of 1918 (Wawro).

The sinking of the *Lusitania* was an important historical event; it was the turning point in America's involvement in World War I, as well as a turning point in the war itself. It was the spark that led to American intervention, and without it America might not have entered the war when it did. Moreover, if America had not entered World War I, the war would most likely not have ended when or how it did. Thus, the sinking of the *Lusitania* was a historical tragedy that not only affected America's role in World War I but altered the course of the war itself.

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