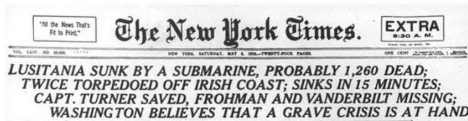


# Unforeseen Consequences: The Great War in the Atlantic

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## Change in the War at Sea

On 7 May 1915 the Cunard Line's ocean liner, *Lusitania*, sunk to the Irish Sea's bottom, yet another victim of Imperial Germany's naval strategy to sink Entente vessels without warning. The sinking of the *Lusitania* is not only the result of the implementation of Unrestricted Submarine Warfare. The *Lusitania's* sinking is the unfortunate result of a series of decisions made over the course of 1914 and 1915 before her loss. If the aforementioned decisions had not been made then the a Lusitanian-like event would have been less likely to occur.

**The conclusion:** The actions of the parties involved led to the stripping of protections afforded to non-combatant vessels, crews, and passengers. The loss of the *Lusitania* came about as a direct consequence of mutual escalation of the war at sea, the undermining of neutrality laws, and increasing disregard for international maritime agreements.

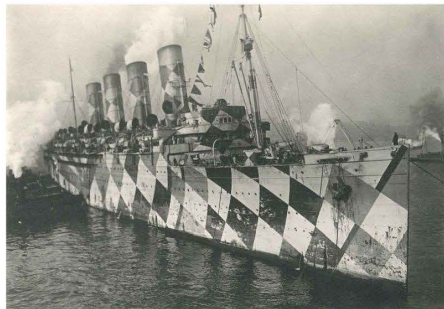
## CRUISER RULES

Germany's naval strategy, Unrestricted Submarine Warfare, was a departure from the commonly accepted rules of warfare on the high seas called Cruiser Rules.

Cruiser Rules were a set of rules and conduct developed and implemented in treaties between individual nations and in international agreements between 1850 and 1910 prior to World War I.

Cruiser Rules dictated that warships must signal and challenge a hostile nation's merchant vessels to determine if they are carrying war materials, and if so, are to be evacuated before their destruction.

Cruiser Rules's intent was to reduce the cost of war amongst civilian traffic plying the oceans during war.



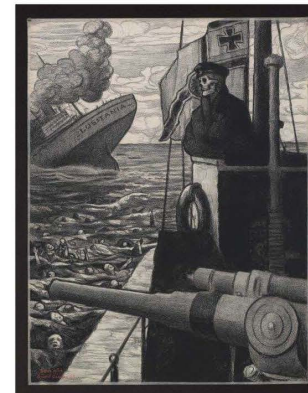
*RMS Mauretania*, *Lusitania's* sister ship. Both the *Lusitania* and the *Mauretania*, were listed as armed merchant cruisers in the 1914 edition of Jane's Fighting Ships, a military reference book released annually since 1898. The listing of the *Lusitania's* original use as an armed ship in the case of war, combined with the *Mauretania* serving as an active troopship in Gallipoli, creates a reasonable conclusion. It is likely that the *Lusitania*, and other passenger ships like her, came under threat due to their un-

## Decisions and Escalations

British dominance at sea forced the Germans to rely more and more upon their submarine fleet to effect a blockade upon the Entente. At the time, German U-Boats operated under Cruiser Rules. To combat the undersea threat and preserve merchant shipping, the British employed several controversial tactics.

- British merchant vessels flying flags from neutral nation, placing neutral shipping at risk of attack.
- Secret order given out to British merchant captains by Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty ordering them to ram U-Boats attempting to initiate Cruiser Rules.
- The employment and use of Q-ships, armed merchant vessels disguised as unarmed ships. Created a risk to all merchant vessels, neutral or otherwise, due to the U-Boat's need to second guess the nature of merchant vessels that they come across.

Kaiser Wilhelm II, the German head of state, eventually authorized the use of Unrestricted Submarine Warfare with the prompting of Admiral Henning von Holtzendorff, head of the Imperial Admiralty Staff. The German adoption of Unrestricted Submarine Warfare was in direct response to the aforementioned British strategies.



Gisbert Combaz, *Without Mercy* (Royal Library of Belgium, 1916). Anti-German propaganda produced following the sinking of the *Lusitania*. The loss of the *Lusitania* proved to be a major windfall for fanning pro-Entente and anti-German sympathies, particularly in the U.S.

## Cruelty through Necessity

The mindsets of the German U-boat captains underwent a change by 1915. Records from *U-20*, the U-boat that sank the *Lusitania*, about Captain Schwieger's previous actions show that he was willing to use Cruiser-Rules if he felt safe enough to do so or if opportunity permitted.

In the months prior, *U-20* recently avoided a ramming by a merchant vessel Schwieger attempted to challenge under Cruiser-Rules. Afterward, Schwieger became more cautious and more willing to torpedo merchant vessels without warning. Merchant ramming tactics killed four other U-Boat captains that Schwieger knew since late 1914.

It is reasonable to believe that Schwieger's run-in with an attempted ramming and the loss of colleagues to such tactics led him to sink the *Lusitania* without heeding Cruiser Rules. It is also reasonable that such a mindset became increasingly prevalent throughout the German U-Boat fleet.

## U.S. Neutrality and Politics

Although U.S. President Woodrow Wilson had declared the U.S. neutral in August 1914 and maintained an outward appearance of such, Entente sympathies in the U.S. Government was wide spread. He often butted heads with Secretary of State, William Bryan, who foresaw the increasing risks for U.S. citizens traveling the Atlantic during an ongoing war. Bryan pushed Wilson to limit or outright ban American citizens from traveling to Britain or aboard British shipping. Wilson refused, following the U.S. State Department's Counselor, Robert Lansing's advice for total accountability for any loss of American lives by German U-Boats. Lives were increasingly put at danger due to the lack of government intervention.

The port of New York city was a major source of much of the Atlantic trade leaving North America at the time. *Lusitania* would also travel to and from the port until her loss. Aerial view of the tip of Manhattan, New York, U.S. National Archives.



A Department of State ruling on 19 September 1914 authorized foreign, armed merchant vessels to enter U.S. ports so long as their armaments were defensive in nature. The German Embassy contested that the armaments typically carried by armed merchant vessels were sufficient to sink submarines and would only encourage armed merchant vessels to be more offensive against submarines.

Another chink in the U.S.'s façade of neutrality was the failure to enforce an 1882 trade law that banned the trade of war materials to belligerents involved in a foreign conflict. The 1882 trade law also prohibited the shipping of war goods on passenger ships with passengers, such as the *Lusitania*. Both laws were either outright broken or loop-holed by both sides of the conflict but were more blatantly done so by the British, helped along by growing anglophile sympathies in U.S. institutions and U.S. Atlantic-facing businesses. *Lusitania's* transportation of war goods was known by the Germans and would be justified to challenge the *Lusitania* under Cruiser Rules had they not abandoned it.