The Day the World Was Shocked: The Lusitania Disaster and Its Influence on the Course of World War I
By John Protasio
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Photographs, map, notes, bibliography
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Numerous scholars have addressed the controversy surrounding the sinking of Lusitania. In nearly one hundred years since a German U-boat fired a torpedo and sank the British passenger ship on May 7, 1915, historians have debated the known and presumed facts. In The Day the World Was Shocked, maritime historian John Protasio examines some of the charges and counter charges regarding the downing of the luxury liner and the loss of civilian lives.

The submarine was just one of the newly innovated weapons employed by both sides in World War I. Protasio presents the argument that Germany failed to capitalize on the recently expanded medium of mass propaganda. Unlike Great Britain, Germany discounted the advantage of public approbation. The Day the World Was Shocked juxtaposes the submarine attack on Lusitania with the British naval blockade around Germany. Both sides violated international law, and their actions resulted in a substantial loss of civilian lives. The resultant lack of sympathy and growing antipathy towards Germany drew America into the war on the side of the allies and doomed Germany’s fortunes. Protasio highlights the naivete coupled with arrogance of the era that marks the Great War as the beginning of the modern age.

The Day the World Was Shocked is an easily digestible two hundred and twelve pages. It contains photographs of several key figures in the controversy as well as a map detailing the timeline and directional course of Lusitania and U-20. The bibliography contains extensive research including scholarly publications, newspapers, formal investigations, and court proceedings. The book may discourage researchers as it lacks an index.

A foreword describing a covert submarine attempt upon a British vessel opens the book. This attack occurred in the American Revolution. It then, ambitiously, chronicles conversations and details of the passengers and crew of both Lusitania and the German submarine, U-20. Unfortunately, the narrative steers off course with numerous diversionary facts and too much quoted dialogue, much of it from secondary sources. Lack of a clear thesis leaves the reader a bit confused about where the book is heading or whom the author is trying to reach. The beginning of the book, with its anecdotal details, gives the impression Mr. Protasio intended the book for a commercial audience. The footnotes and analysis at the end of the book lead the reader to assume he is targeting a scholarly audience. The result leaves the reader of either genre looking for more substance.

It is not until the twelfth chapter that the author reveals the purpose of the book. Mr. Protasio seeks to refute some of the myths surrounding the sinking of Lusitania. After thorough analysis of the historiography, and details revealed by underwater archaeologists, he finally presents an insightful analysis from the perspective of a maritime historian of what might have occurred on the fateful day the Lusitania sank to the bottom of the sea.

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