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Review of The Lusitania by Colin Simpson

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book review


Reviewed by Jeffrey Rogers Hummel

"War is the health of the state" reads one libertarian button, and that statement contains more than simply a modicum of truth. Every war in which the U.S. government has engaged, without exception, has been a categorical disaster for liberty. Fortunately, prior to 1860, U.S. wars were only temporary setbacks in the general, overall trend towards increasing freedom and decreasing state power. It was not until the War Between the States that this trend was reversed and America started its retreat from the goal of liberty and its descent into statism. More than any other event the Civil War, with its introduction of conscription and income taxation, with Lincoln's widespread suppression of civil liberties in the North, and with the first really intimate contact between America's nascent industries and government, can be identified as the turning point in American history. Every war since has merely accelerated the growth of state power. But if the War Between the States was the turning point, World War I, as Murray Rothbard has pointed out, was merely accelerated the growth of state power.

Simpson touches upon topics that range from the design and construction of the Lusitania to the operations of British intelligence in the United States. His most relevant conclusions, however, can be briefly summarized as follows: (a) the Lusitania was an auxiliary of the British navy; (b) it carried munitions and contraband; (c) it was armed; (d) negligence on the part of the British Admiralty was partially responsible for its loss, and that negligence was probably deliberate and premeditated; and (5) Captain Turner, the Lusitania's master, was the innocent victim of a British Government attempt to frame him as responsible for the disaster.

The first of these points is not new and has long been known by historians. The Lusitania was built by Cunard Company with subsidies from the British Government, according to government specifications, and was subject to transfer for government wartime use. With the opening of World War I, the ship fell under Admiralty instructions authorizing the subterfuge of flying the U.S. flag and requiring an attempt to ram any German submarine which, in accordance with the Cruiser Rules, had surfaced. The Cruiser Rules required warships to warn unarmed merchant vessels prior to sinking or capturing and were the basis of the British and U.S. position that the British surface blockade of Germany was legal and moral, while the German submarine blockade of England was illegal and wicked.

The second point, concerning the nature of the Lusitania's cargo, has also been known, at least since October 1935 when Thomas Bailey revealed in an article appearing in the American Historical Review that the Lusitania's final manifest indicated she was carrying over 4,000 cases of rifle cartridges. Simpson, however, goes much deeper, examining closely the huge British purchasing operation run in the United States through Cunard and J. P. Morgan, with the countenance of the collector of the Port of New York, Dudley Field Malone. He reveals that the Lusitania was also carrying 1,248 cases of 3-inch shrapnel shells and other shipments variously labelled as furs, butter, and cheese, but undoubtedly munitions.

Simpson also presents evidence that it was carrying large quantities of pyroxylene (gun cotton), a substance that causes an explosion upon contact with sea water, although the evidence is not totally conclusive, mostly because the crucial private papers of Captains Hall and Gaunt of Naval Intelligence have still not been declassified by the British government.

Part of the importance of establishing the nature of the cargo stems from the fact that the Lusitania sank in 18 minutes, one of the reasons for the huge loss of life. German torpedoes were notoriously unreliable. The submarine which attacked it, the U-20, had earlier failed to sink the steamer Candidate with a torpedo and had to use the deck gun. The same day the U-20 fired two torpedoes, one at point blank range, into the Candidate's sister ship, the Centurian, and she took one hour and 20 minutes to go under, with no loss of life. Most survivors of the Lusitania remembered two explosions, and popular and official opinion in Britain and the United States attributed that to a second and possibly a third torpedo. That explanation was discredited, however, when the diary of Captain Schwieger,
A final matter deserves treatment under the question of contraband. The Germans charged that the liner was being used to transport troops, but that charge has never been given much credence. Simpson notes that along with a last minute transfer from the Queen Margaret to the Lusitania of 2,000 cases of ammunition never appearing on the final manifest, there was also a contingent of soldiers from the 6th Winnipeg Rifles dressed in civilian clothes.

More important than munitions is the question of whether or not the Lusitania was armed. It has been known that it was designed to carry 12 six-inch quick-firing guns, giving her a more lethal broadside than even Bacchante class cruisers. Two British publications which were standard issue on all German submarines, Jane's Fighting Ships 1914 and The Naval Annual 1914, listed the Lusitania as armed. The fact that the Admiralty never employed it as a cruiser as originally envisaged, however, has been cited as proof that the guns were never mounted. Simpson, by inspecting the Cunard records, discovered that between May 21 and July 21, 1913, the liner was drydocked for modifications, including the addition of 12 gun rings hidden below trap doors on the deck. After the war began, between August 8 and September 17, 1914, the ship was again detained, and the Admiralty closed off a large portion of the shelter (C) deck and installed the actual guns.

Of all Simpson's allegations, obviously the most startling is that of Admiralty complicity in the sinking. In support, Simpson reveals that Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty, commissioned a study by Commander Kenworthy of Naval Intelligence on the results of a liner being sunk with Americans on board. Two days before the Lusitania's sinking, the Juno, which had been assigned the duty of escorting the Lusitania upon her arrival off the southern coast of Ireland, was ordered to Queenstown by the Admiralty for reasons unknown. This action was taken despite the fact that the British had broken the German naval code, were consequently able to determine the approximate location of every German submarine, and knew that the Lusitania was heading on a course that would take her directly into the path of the U-20. Furthermore, Captain Turner on the Lusitania was not advised of this decision and was still expecting to rendezvous with the Juno when the torpedo struck. No official explanation for this action exists. For years the Admiralty denied it had taken place, and the Admiralty War Diary stops short just before the point at which the decision was made. As Simpson charges: "It was an incredible decision by any standards and can only be explained on two grounds: that both Churchill and Fisher were so preoccupied with the Dardanelles and their personal problems that they failed to appreciate it; or that it was the pinnacle of Churchill's higher strategy of embroiling the U-boats with a neutral power." (p. 130)

Moreover, the Juno recall has an even more incredible sequel that emerges in the account of the actual sinking. Simpson's journalistic training and talent keep the reader engrossed and horrified as he describes the confusion and mayhem aboard the Lusitania after the torpedo struck. Immediately her bow dipped into the water and she listed to the starboard. Because of her faulty design, the list made the lifeboats difficult to launch. Those on the starboard side hung too far out away from the deck; those on the port side hung inboard. Captain Turner desperately attempted to supervise the launching of
the boats from the navigation bridge, but soon the stern of the ship was looming well over his head. No. 2 lifeboat on the port side was filled with passengers when it went out of control and crashed into the bow end of the boat deck, smashing those persons in its way up against the bridge. The same fate occurred to lifeboats Nos. 4, 6, 8, and 10, creating a huge wreckage of crushed passengers and boats. The lifeboats on the starboard side fell into the water on top of each other or capsized in the turbulence caused by the liner's rapid sinking. Of her S O S, Admiral Coke, commander at Queenstown, ordered everything afloat to go to his rescue. This included the Juno, which was the first vessel to arrive in sight of the Lusitania Disaster. Juno, which the survivors, the Admiralty counteredmanded Coke's instructions and ordered it back to Queenstown. Almost another two hours elapsed before other vessels arrived on the scene.

Even more ominous than the actual sinking was the Admiralty coverup conducted through a Court of Inquiry under Lord Mersey. Captain Turner was selected as a scapegoat. Evidence was tailored to fit the case, and that which didn't fit was ignored or suppressed. Lord Mersey, to his credit, refused to be a party to the framing of Captain Turner, whom he exonerated, but he did acquiesce in the blackout of facts concerning munitions and armaments on the Lusitania. Joseph Marichal, one survivor who refused to be silenced and insisted on testifying as to munitions aboard, was viciously slandered with lies about his background circulated by the government to the papers. The Wilson administration also cooperated in the Admiralty coverup. Gustav Stahl, a German operative testifying in the United States about the Lusitania's armaments, was immediately arrested on a charge of perjury for that very statement and held in prison without trial for three months. When he finally did stand trial the only evidence against him was a written deposition from Malone, collector of the Port of New York. Nevertheless, Stahl spent several years in jail, although in 1924 he was quietly awarded $20,000 damages by the U.S. government. Dr. Ritter von Retegh, a British-Austro-Hungarian double agent who provided some evidence concerning the possibility of the cargo containing guncotton, was tried in camera and sent to Cleveland Penitentiary. His trial record is still classified secret by the Department of Justice.

The Lusitania incident stands revealed as a clear case of government treachery. Its use to bring America nearer to war deserves close study. The only criticism I have of Simpson's book is that it is too short. Three hundred pages is simply not enough space to adequately treat all of the subjects which Simpson covers. As a result, he is frustratingly consistent in his refusal to stray from the presentation of data to interpretation, even when doing so would certainly make his narrative more lucid. It is too often left to the reader to draw conclusions and piece together evidence. Nevertheless, The Lusitania is a convincing and readable book, documented by massive research. It should be studied by all those interested in the relationship between war and the state.


Jeffrey Rogers Hummel received his B.A. in history from Grove City College in 1971. After several years in the Army, he enrolled at the University of Texas at Austin, where he is doing graduate work in history. His review of Operation Keelhaul appeared in REASON'S November 1974 issue.