

The Medallion That Fueled a War

MEDALS

A German medal satirizing the 1915 sinking of the British ship *Lusitania* backfired and ultimately helped launch the United States into World War I.

THE BRITISH LINER *Lusitania* left Pier 54 in New York City on May 1, 1915, to return to England. Onboard were more than 1,962 passengers and crew, as well as controversial cargo. (Some speculated the ship carried munitions or even troops.) At the time, World War I was raging in Europe. Prior to the ship's departure, Germany issued a warning notice in a number of American newspapers, reminding neutral countries that the waters surrounding Great Britain and Ireland were declared war zones and therefore extremely dangerous.

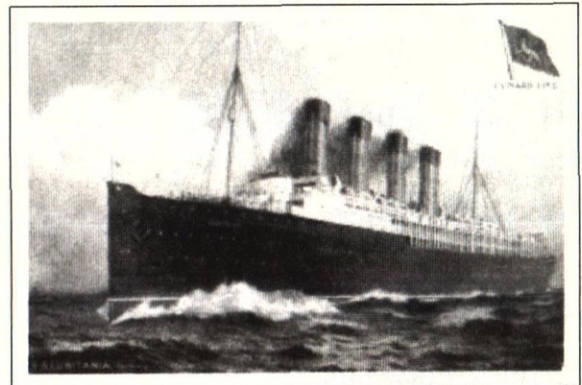
On May 7, 1915, the *Lusitania* was struck by a single torpedo fired from a German submarine off the coast of Ireland. The luxury liner sank to the ocean floor in 18 minutes, leaving 1,201 dead. Shortly after the attack, German medalist Karl Goetz created the *Lusitania* medallion. His satirical work launched a wave of outrage in the United States and ultimately became one of the factors that cost Germany the war.

by Sean T. Aldrich
J 191712

A vintage post card depicts the pride of the Cunard Shipping Line—the stately *Lusitania*—speeding across the Atlantic Ocean.

R.M.S. *Lusitania*

BRITAIN HAD CONTROLLED the seas since 1805, when Lord Nelson defeated the French and Spanish forces at the Battle of Trafalgar. By 1903, however, Germany was challenging her naval supremacy. Alarmed, the British government lent the Cunard Shipping Line £2,600,00 (\$13,000,000) to reinforce its fleet. With the aid of these funds, Cunard manufactured the *Lusitania* and her sister ship, the *Mauretania*. The two new liners were state-of-the-art vessels, capable of converting into armed merchant cruisers supporting 12, quick-firing, 6-inch guns in time of war.



NOTICE!

TRAVELLERS intending to embark on the Atlantic voyage are reminded that a state of war exists between Germany and her allies and Great Britain and her allies; that the zone of war includes the waters adjacent to the British Isles; that, in accordance with formal notice given by the Imperial German Government, vessels flying the flag of Great Britain, or of any of her allies, are liable to destruction in those waters and that travellers sailing in the war zone on ships of Great Britain or her allies do so at their own risk.

IMPERIAL GERMAN EMBASSY
WASHINGTON, D. C., APRIL 22, 1915.

After press coverage of the *Lusitania* flying the U.S. flag to make it safely through hostile waters, the Germans tracked the vessel. In April 1915, the German Embassy issued warnings to American travelers in U.S. newspapers.



The well-respected Captain William Turner (shown here on the deck of the *Lusitania*) had been with the Cunard Line since 1878.

AFTER LOSING FIVE U-boats to [British Q-ship] decoys, Germany returned to a policy of unrestricted submarine warfare.

The *Lusitania* was launched in June 1906 and put into service in September 1907. At 785 feet and 31,550 gross tons, with seven passenger decks, the *Lusitania* was the largest vessel afloat at the time. The ship's innovative, quadruple-screw propulsion unit was driven by direct-steam turbines, allowing her to reach a speed of 25 knots. In October 1907, she captured the "Blue Riband" Atlantic speed record from the German liner *Deutschland*.

Preliminary Events

AT THE OUTSET of World War I, Germany's Kaiser Wilhelm II took the Sussex Pledge, in essence, swearing that German submarines would not attack merchant ships or passenger liners within Allied waters without giving fair warning to the ship's crew and passengers. In a humanitarian effort to prevent civilian casualties, passengers supposedly would be given enough time to evacuate.

However, as hostilities progressed, the British navy began to use decoy vessels called "Q-ships," designed to look like tramp steamers. When a German U-boat approached, the Q-ship would reveal its guns and sink the submarine. After losing five U-boats to these decoys, Germany returned to a policy of unrestricted submarine warfare.

In line with their country's revised strategy, German agents and embassy officials met in New York City in April 1915 to discuss possible international repercussions of the loss of neutral United States citizens in wartime naval actions. Since the peak travel season was near, the plan was to publish warnings in 40 American newspapers that British vessels were "liable to destruction" in war zones. Since the ad could not be printed immediately in all the papers, the notice was posted on May 1 (the day of the *Lusitania*'s departure) next to the doomed ship's schedule.

The Final Trip

THE *LUSITANIA* BEGAN her fateful journey from New York to Liverpool on May 1. Five days later, Captain William Turner received two warnings about German submarine action off the coast of Ireland. The second of the two messages contained orders from the British Admiralty to avoid headlands, pass harbors at full speed and steer a mid-channel course. In addition, it was standard procedure for ships to sail in a zigzag pattern when traveling through dangerous waters. Captain Turner chose not to take these precau-

AT 2:10 P.M., the torpedo struck the great ship between the first and second funnels. Immediately after the first explosion, a second was heard . . .

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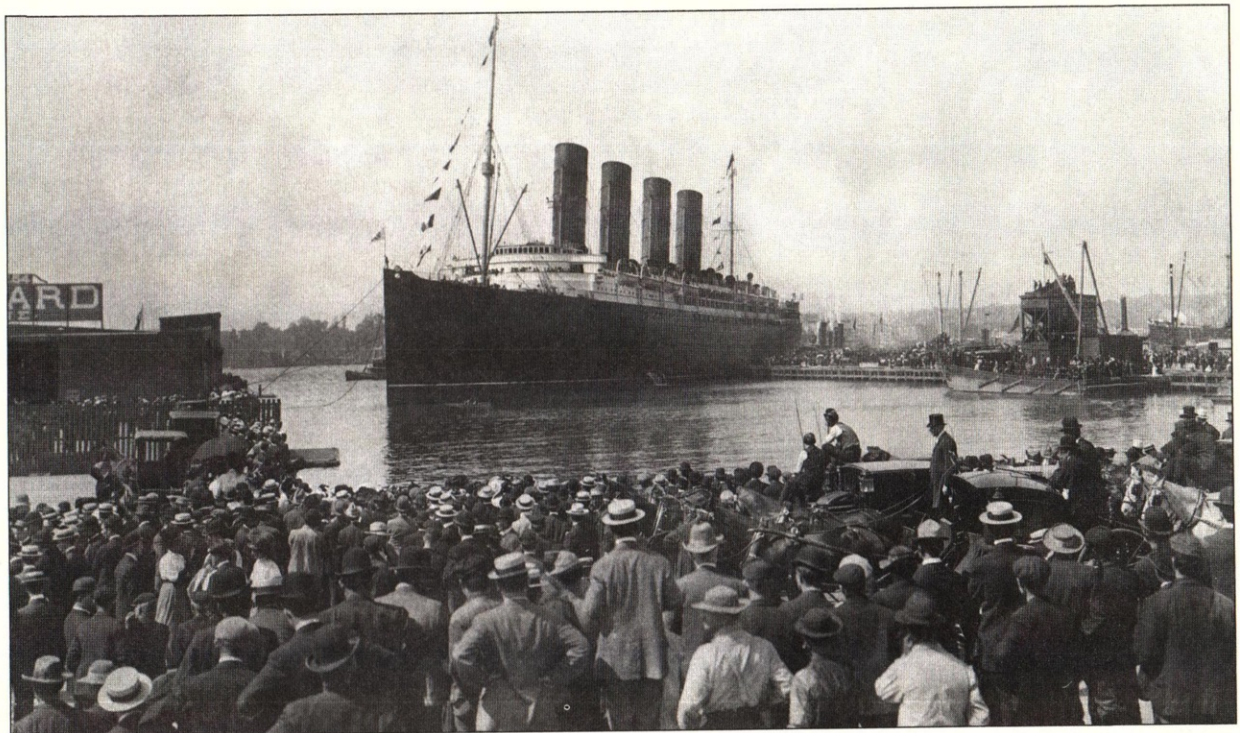
tions, and he even reduced speed because he wanted to enter the Mersey River in Liverpool at high tide. However, he did order all lifeboats swung out, bulkhead doors closed, lookouts doubled and steam pressure kept high to provide speed in case of emergency.

Early in the afternoon on May 7, Captain Turner spotted the Irish coast. Unsure of his exact location, he ordered the ship to head toward land so he could fix his position. At 1:40 p.m., he recognized the Old Head of Kinsale and continued on his regular course. The change in direction allowed Captain Walther Schwieger of the German submarine *U-20* to get a fix on the vessel, and he fired a single torpedo from approximately 700 yards away. At 2:10 p.m., the torpedo struck the great ship between the first and second funnels. Immediately after the first explosion, a second was heard and thought to be another torpedo. It later was confirmed to be an internal explosion (possibly coal dust or ammunition).

Although the *Lusitania* immediately listed starboard, the vessel's momentum carried her another two to three miles while some lifeboats

Cunard's luxury ocean liner *Lusitania* is shown below on May 1, 1915, leaving on her last voyage from New York.

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Captain Walther Schwieger gave the order for the German submarine U-20 to fire on the *Lusitania*.

THE SHIP SANK bow first in less than 20 minutes, with the loss of 785 registered passengers (including 128 Americans), 413 crew members and 3 stowaways.

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were launched. The ship sank bow first in less than 20 minutes, with the loss of 785 registered passengers (including 128 Americans), 413 crew members and 3 stowaways. A number of highly celebrated United States citizens died that day, including multimillionaire Alfred Vanderbilt.

The Aftermath

AS A RESULT of the attack on the *Lusitania*, anti-German sentiment mushroomed. Mobs stormed businesses in Britain owned by individuals with German-sounding surnames. Although the United States had warned Germany of potential consequences for any loss of American lives, it did not enter the war until April 6, 1917. However, the sinking of the *Lusitania* immediately swung much of the world's sympathies in line with the Allies. When American doughboys first marched into action in World War I, their battle cry was "Remember the *Lusitania*!"

Great Britain steadfastly denied German claims that the *Lusitania* was carrying munitions or Canadian troops. However, in the 1950s, a portion of the ship's manifest was released to the public. It stated that the great ship held 2,400 cases of Remington rifle cartridges, as well as materials for the production of shrapnel shells.

The Lusitania Medallion

DESPITE THE TREMENDOUS death-toll of noncombatants caused by the sinking of the *Lusitania*, German medalist Karl Goetz (1875-1950) produced a medallion to convey a strong political message. Goetz

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Karl Goetz's controversial *Lusitania* medallion was one of 633 he created during his career. Goetz belonged to several professional organizations, including the Munich Artists Society, the Numismatic Society, the Ancients Club of Munich and the Austrian Association for Numismatics of Vienna.

DENNIS MERCIER



Medallion That Fueled a War *continued from page 1310*

intended to support the German navy while criticizing Cunard Shipping for its decision to carry passengers into a war zone.

Goetz was known for his biting medallion commentaries. He created 633 pieces in his lifetime and received three awards—the State Medal in Silver at Nuremberg (1906), the State Medal at Ghent (1913) and the Silver State Medal of the World Exposition (1951), the latter posthumously. Goetz suffered a stroke in the late 1940s, resulting in paralysis.

His *Lusitania* medallion is an iron-coated piece, 56.5mm in diameter, with a thickness between 2 and 3mm. The obverse depicts the *Lusitania's*

bow beginning its downward plunge into raging waters while her stern, laden with weaponry, rises out of the water. Her four funnels send clouds of smoke into the air. KEINE BANNWARE ("No Contraband Goods") is written across the top, while DER GROSS-DAMPFER/=LUSITANIA=/ DURCH EIN DEUTSCHES/TAUCH-BOOT VERSENKT / 5 MAI 1915 ("The Liner *Lusitania* Sunk by a German Submarine 5 May 1915") is written in five lines below the image.

On the reverse, "Death," depicted as a skeleton, sells tickets to a crowd of passengers on behalf of the Cunard Line. At the left, a man reads a newspaper with the headline U/BOOT/GEFA[HR] ("U-Boat Danger"). Next to him, a bearded figure wearing a top hat (representing Count Johann Heinrich Von Bern-

stoff, German ambassador to the United States) raises his finger to warn the crowd. These two characters symbolize the notices German officials placed in American newspapers stating the peril civilians faced by traveling on British vessels. GESCHAFT UBER ALLES, written above the passengers waiting in line, translates "Business above All."

British Propaganda

WHEN GOETZ CREATED his original *Lusitania* medallion, he mistakenly inscribed the date May 5 (instead of May 7) on the piece's obverse; he obtained his misinformation from a newspaper. The British government used this error to imply that the sinking of the *Lusitania* was planned prior to her departure from New York City. (There is some evi-



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dence that German submarines were tracking the liner.) The British explained that the date on the propaganda piece was incorrect because unforeseen circumstances prevented the U-boat from executing its mission on the appointed day.

British Intelligence was happy to further mislead the public about the status of Goetz's medallion. It blurred the traditional distinction between "medal," which is an official award for some act of gallantry or special service, and "medallion," regarded in the late 19th century as an unofficial work of art produced for sale and profit. The British government issued approximately 300,000 copies of the *Lusitania* medallion and distributed them to the public along with propaganda literature. This strategy served the purpose of

strengthening public opinion against the German cause.

KARL GOETZ PRODUCED more *Lusitania* medallions (with the correct date). He also created another piece to explain the satirical intent of the first. Despite his efforts, the public-relations damage to the German cause was irreversible. America ultimately entered the war, and the German blockade of the British Isles crumbled. The Allies won the war three years after the *Lusitania* medallion was issued, and Germany was forced to give its premier liner, the *Imperator*, to Cunard Shipping to replace its lost ship.

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Eighteen-year-old Sean Aldrich has been collecting United States and world coins for five years. A resident of Douglas, Massachusetts, the home-schooled, high-school senior also enjoys horseback riding, and collecting historic artifacts and documents.



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