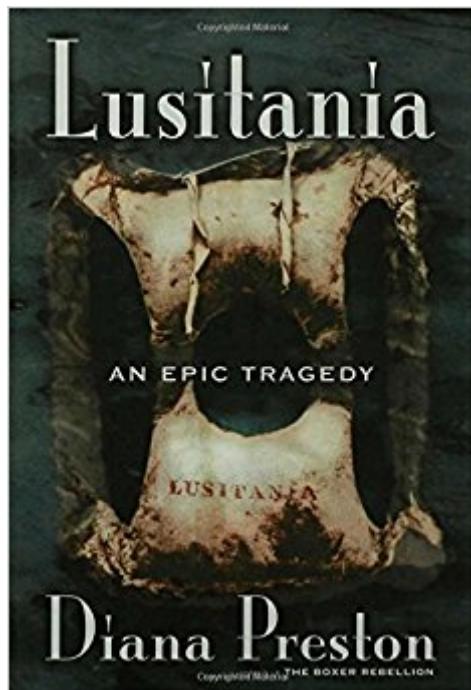


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Lusitania: An Epic Tragedy



Synopsis

On May 7, 1915, toward the end of her 101st eastbound crossing, from New York to Liverpool, England, R.M.S. Lusitania-- pride of the Cunard Line and one of the greatest ocean liners afloat-- became the target of a terrifying new weapon and a casualty of a terrible new kind of war. Sunk off the southern coast of Ireland by a torpedo fired from the German submarine U-20, she exploded and sank in eighteen minutes, taking with her some twelve hundred people, more than half of the passengers and crew. Cold-blooded, deliberate, and unprecedented in the annals of war, the sinking of the Lusitania shocked the world. It also jolted the United States out of its neutrality-- 128 Americans were among the dead-- and hastened the nation's entry into World War I. In her riveting account of this enormous and controversial tragedy, Diana Preston recalls both a pivotal moment in history and a remarkable human drama. The story of the Lusitania is a window on the maritime world of the early twentieth century: the heyday of the luxury liner, the first days of the modern submarine, and the climax of the decades-long German-British rivalry for supremacy of the Atlantic. It is a critical chapter in the progress of World War I and in the political biographies of Woodrow Wilson, William Jennings Bryan, Kaiser Wilhelm II, and First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill. Above all, it is the story of the passengers and crew on that fateful voyage-- a story of terror and cowardice, of self-sacrifice and heroism, of death and miraculous survival. With a historian's insight and a novelist's gift for characterization and detail, Preston re-creates the events surrounding the Lusitania's last voyage, from the behind-the-scenes politics in each country and the German spying in New York, to the extraordinary scene as the ship sank and the survivors awaited rescue, to the controversial inquests in Britain and the United States into how the ship came to be hit and why she sank so quickly. Captain William Turner, steadfast and trustworthy but overconfident, believed that "a torpedo can't get the Lusitania-- she runs too fast." The passenger list included the rich and powerful (American millionaire Alfred Vanderbilt, theater producer Charles Frohman, Boston bookseller Charles Lauriat) as well as newlyweds and nursemaids, galley cooks and stokers, Quakers and cardsharps, ship's detectives and German stowaways. Preston weaves their voices throughout her compelling narrative, giving it a powerful immediacy. Drawing on a vast array of sources-- including interviews with survivors, letters and memoirs, recently released American and Admiralty archives, and previously untranslated German documents-- Diana Preston has resolved the controversies surrounding the Lusitania and written the definitive account of this pivotal event in western history.

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Customer Reviews

This was the time honored tradition that governed war at sea. Britain and Germany were at war since August 4, 1914, when WWI commenced. Nevertheless warship captains were in the habit of signalling or firing warning shots, allowing crew and passengers of merchantmen to disembark before consigning ship and cargo to the watery depths. Rewards were for tonnage sunk not the numbers of persons sent to "Davey Jones' Locker". This wouldn't apply to the RMS Lusitania anyway. At 785 feet and displacing nearly 40,000 tons with a capacity of carrying 2,000 passengers and 850 crew, she was no mere merchantman but a luxury passenger liner advertised as the "Queen of the Seas". She sailed with impunity, without escort, and according to a well publicized and regular schedule. This was no doubt the mindset of Captain William Turner as he got the Lusitania underway on the morning of May 1, 1915 for the return voyage from New York to Liverpool; the ship's 202nd Atlantic crossing. Turner would also be comforted in knowing that the ship had thirty-four electrically controlled watertight doors which made her "virtually unsinkable" (the same words used to describe a certain ship involved in an earlier titanic catastrophe at sea). Lusitania was popularly known as the "Greyhound of the Sea" due to a top speed in excess of 25 knots and this seemed to have given Turner great confidence as he declared "a torpedo can't get the Lusitania - she runs too fast." This gripping account by Diana Preston shows the false bravado of that statement and the truth of LUSITANIA being instead known as "An Epic Tragedy". On May 7 in broad daylight the ship was torpedoed and sunk by German submarine U-20 within sight of the coast of Ireland.

Ever since the Lusitania was lost to a single German torpedo on May 7, 1915, there has been a steady stream of books about the disaster in which 120 of the 1961 on board died (128 of them Americans). There was immense outrage in the US and elsewhere over the deaths of innocent passengers, done in by the "illegal" and "barbarous" German submarine weapon which struck unseen and without warning in violation of the accepted international law of the day. Outrage in the US was immense and remained a factor in the American entry into the World War I in 1917. A number of supposed mysteries and controversies surrounded the sinking and fueled the books for many years. These included whether Lusitania was secretly carrying contraband munitions that were the cause of the large secondary explosion that immediately followed the torpedo hit, and whether the Royal Navy had armed the Lusitania, making her a naval vessel not subject to rules of engagement for civilian ships. What caused the ship to sink so fast and why lifeboats and rafts (present in ample numbers) proved difficult or impossible to launch was also in question. So was why the ship was steering a straight course at far below her top speed in waters where submarines had been reported. The human stories always present in large maritime disasters were engrossing and so was the question of possible cover up by the separate British and American inquiries into the disaster. A modern consensus today exists concerning the answers to most of these mysteries and controversies, and few (if any) today feel any outrage over unrestricted submarine warfare. Everyone with a significant submarine force practiced such warfare in WW II, and that war also featured "total war" against civilian populations as well.

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