The Sinking of the *Lusitania*

The *Lusitania* sailed on May 1st 1915 from New York bound for Liverpool, England. As it left New York, the dock was crowded with news reporters as New York newspapers had carried an advertisement in them paid for by the German Embassy that any ship sailing into the “European War Zone” was a potential target for German submarines. Some newspapers printed the warning directly next to advertisements for travel on the *Lusitania*.

Despite any warnings, passengers packed onto the *Lusitania* was packed. The ship was billed as the “fastest and largest steamer now in the Atlantic service” and people generally believed that the *Lusitania* had the power to outrace any ship above or below the water. Many of the passengers came to the simple conclusion that a luxury liner like the *Lusitania* simply was not a legitimate target for Germans because it had no military value.

However the *Lusitania*’s captain, William Turner, had reason to be on high alert. Captain Turner had received repeated warnings of active u-boats on his intended course and a German u-boat had recently sunk three British ships in the waters through which the *Lusitania* was about to sail. Yet on May 7, 1915 as the *Lusitania* entered the most dangerous part of its passage, Captain Turner actually slowed down, apparently worried about patchy fog. In fact, Turner ignored many of the British Navy’s key instructions for evading German submarines. For example, he sailed too close to shore, where u-boats loved to lurk. Also, he sailed at less than top speed, and did not zigzag elude enemy ships that may have been tracking the *Lusitania*.

Whether Turner’s behavior can be justified, it doomed his ship.

When U-20, a German u-boat, under the command of Kapitänleutnant Walther Schwieber found the *Lusitania* in its sights just south of Queenstown, Ireland, it was able to kill it with a single torpedo, penetrating the hull just below the waterline. The initial explosion set off a violent secondary blast. The *Lusitania* took just eighteen minutes to sink. Its speed and the angle of its sinking made it extremely difficult for passengers to launch any lifeboats. 1,198 of the 1,959 people onboard perished, including 128 Americans.

The loss of the *Lusitania* led to cries of outrage in the United States and helped create a climate that would later allow America to join the war. Amidst this the anger and accusations, however, some questions remained unanswered:

- Why did the ship take only 18 minutes to sink? The log of U20 stated clearly that the submarine fired only one torpedo and Kapitänleutnant Schwieber stated this was the case. In his log, Schwieber noted “Shot hits starboard side right behind bridge. An unusually heavy detonation follows with a strong explosion cloud...”

- Why was a second explosion seen if no second torpedo was fired? This second explosion presumably sped up the whole process of the *Lusitania* sinking.
• What caused this second explosion? Was the passenger ship Lusitania, illegally transporting weapons and ammunitions to help the British war effort? If so, did this material ignite and explode?

• With such a well-known ship crossing the Atlantic, and after warnings from the Germans and the British Navy, why were there no British naval boats in the vicinity to protect the Lusitania?

Questions:

1. Why did many people believe that the Lusitania would be safe as it raveled through the war zone?

2. What mistakes did Captain Turner make while sailing the Lusitania?

3. The Lusitania sank in a mere 18 minutes. In comparison, the Titanic, which sank three years earlier, took close to 3 hours to sink. What might have accounted for the Lusitania sinking so quickly? What might have caused the second explosion on board the ship?

4. How might the sinking of the Lusitania affect American neutrality and Americans’ feelings about involvement in the war?