

The Many Lives of the Lusitania Medal

Anne Bentley 00:05

You've got men queued up, buying passage on the Lusitania, from the booking office of the Cunard Line, and the employee staffing this is a skeleton. And in the crowd behind these men at the far left, there is one gentleman reading a newspaper, which has a warning written on it and behind him is the German ambassador with his finger raised in warning and wearing a top hat. We're warning you and you ignored you ignored the warning and the text on that says, "Business above all."

Katy Morris 00:50

[Intro music fades in] This is Katy Morris.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:55

This is Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai.

Katy Morris 00:57

And this is The Object of History, the podcast of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:02

Since 1791, the MHS has sought to collect, preserve, and communicate the building blocks of history. Each episode examines an object, document or set of items from the society's millions of manuscript pieces and artifacts. We take you on a behind the scenes tour of our stacks to explore the incredible stories held within our collections.

Katy Morris 01:23

In this episode, we are examining several medals produced when a German U-boat torpedoed a civilian British ocean liner during the First World War. The medals became the center of a propaganda campaign that spanned the Atlantic. Originally created by a German artist, the medals

quickly became tools for the Allied propaganda machine, and a nightmare for the German government.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:49

With Peter Drummey, Chief Historian and Stephen T. Riley Librarian, and military historian, David Silbey, we shall revisit the circumstances around the sinking of the Lusitania and with Curator of Art and Artifacts, Anne Bentley, we shall take a look at the medals that for a moment took center stage in the propaganda war between the opposing sides in the First World War. Before we get to the medals, we asked David and Peter to help set the stage by telling us about the state of the war in 1915, just as the Lusitania set off on its final voyage.

David Silbey 02:29

By May of 1915, World War One had been going on for about eight or nine months. And it had turned from a clash between the great powers in Europe kind of clash that had happened a number of times over the past century or so that it normally ended with certain negotiated pieces and settlement. And it turned instead into this giant, all-consuming war of industrialized mass slaughter, where soldiers millions of soldiers were fighting in France and in Russia and around Europe. Barbed wire was being spread everywhere, machine guns and artillery were slaughtering people by the 10s of 1000s, if not hundreds of 1000s.

Peter Drummey 03:16

And as part of that war, the British had created what they call the Prohibited Zone, essentially, the North Sea. It's essentially a blockade not being called a blockade, whether it's legal under international law blockade or not really doesn't make any difference because they simply enforce it. And they're preventing not just German ships from moving and the state's aligned with Germany, but they're also preventing neutral ships from bringing materials to Germany to the northern German ports. And they have decided that this embargo on goods contraband goods extends much farther than the accepted policy at the time. It's more than simply military equipment and the

materials you would manufacture military equipment, it's also foodstuff. Germany is under a blockade that continues to cause more and more difficulty within Germany.

Katy Morris 04:21

In an attempt to combat this blockade and counter the dominance of the British fleet, the German navy resorted to using what were known as U-boats. We asked David to tell us more about this naval technology, which was being displayed on a large scale for the first time.

David Silbey 04:39

The U-boats, the German submarines, Unterseeboots is what the Germans called them. One of the things that was happening was that the Germans had for the first time figured out a possible way to disrupt Great Britain's naval dominance of the world by building submarines, U-boats. And these U-boats would sail out and underwater they couldn't be seen or detected very well by the British Navy. Now, the big issue is what ships do you attack? The Germans started off by attacking British Navy ships, battleships, cruisers, but it actually turns out, it's fairly difficult to attack a warship. They're protected by other warships. They're very alert. They do have damage control and other methods of preventing their sinking. And so, the Germans sort of started to think about going after ships of commerce, cargo ships, freighters. Ships that brought into Britain, the supplies that it needed to survive and thrive. The problem they ran into was that there were certain very strict rules about how to attack civilian ships. The rules for attacking civilian ship, a freighter or passenger ship or something like that was the enemy ship had to give time for the civilians to evacuate the ship. So essentially, you had to pull up to the civilian ship, warn them you were about to sink them, give them a sufficient amount of time to evacuate and only then could you sink it. And that makes a certain amount of sense when you're talking about surface warships. When we're talking about submarines, it's ridiculous. Submarines are effective because they're concealed because they can't be seen underwater. And so, to surface is a really bad idea. And then to surface and wait while other ships might be rushing to the defense of this civilian ship is a terrible idea. And so, the Germans were presented with this real issue, which is that they see that there's a possibility that this kind of submarine warfare would be effective, but the kind they're allowed to do restricted submarine

warfare is not necessarily going to be that useful, and it's likely to lead to a lot of U-boats being sunk. And so, they're very tempted from the beginning to go into what's called unrestricted submarine warfare where all bets are all rules are off. We're not going to obey anything. We're gonna sink without warning. We're not going to give the civilians time to evacuate. And in the middle of this, the Lusitania is interestingly one of the few passenger liners that's actually still running a commercial service between Britain and the United States. And it was a dangerous thing to do. But the Cunard Line, which owned the Lusitania, was determined to keep going, and so they were still selling tickets.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 07:34

We turned to Peter to learn more about the Lusitania before it set sail on its final voyage.

Peter Drummey 07:40

The Lusitania was launched in 1907. So, it's a modern ship. We're talking about a ship that when you pass through it, it had marble fireplaces and wood paneled rooms and elevators, and we don't think much about saying electricity and plumbing or flush toilets and things like that. So, the Lusitania was like a very elegant hotel built on top of a steel furnace. It's coal burning, but it has a relatively new technology that is turbines replacing mechanical engines so that it has a tested top speed of more than 25 knots, slightly more than 25 knots approaching 30 miles an hour, which is extraordinary for a ship at that time. It's 775 feet long. It is rated at about 33 or 34,000 tons. It's just enormous, but also very narrow and sleek. And it had made by 1915, I think about 100 round trip crossings of the Atlantic, so it'd been in busy service. The war had changed things. This is a ship that would carry about 2000 passengers in different categories. First class, very elite, socially elite, very well-paying passengers, a second class, which would be premium by other ships standards, and then allowing for a third class essentially, to bear part of this immigrant traffic to the United States to take about 1000 immigrants. In May 1915, it's going from the United States from New York to England. It's going to Liverpool, which faces the Irish Sea rather than the traditional steamer ports because of the war crisis and war zone. It's carrying less passengers because of the war but it's also has a slightly reduced crew because it burns so much coal, 1000s of tons of coal in a single crossing

that it's has one of its boiler rooms shut off. That is, it's slightly slower than its maximum speed. It's still faster than almost all the ships on the ocean at that time.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 10:08

So, there's a war going on in Europe, people know about this. They're reading newspapers. They know what's going on. The Germans, warn people, that they're going to attack civilian vessels, who in the middle of a pandemic....I'm sorry...is in the middle of a war wants to travel internationally.

David Silbey 10:26

It's a great question and the Germans did indeed warn the world that they were doing this. They actually declared the seas around the British Isles to be a war zone, and that any ship coming into that war zone would be attacked by the German navy. Now, they didn't say that they would do it from an underwater position by violating the rules. But they did give this warning. And then even more specifically, in one of those fantastic coincidences of history, fantastic, but horrible, they decided to take ads out in the New York newspapers to warn people about this war zone, this is going to be a war zone, you're going to be vulnerable if you travel. And one of those ads ended up in one of the New York papers right next to an ad advertising the sailing of the Lusitania. So, on one hand, there's an ad for a passenger ship sailing to Britain and but on the other hand, there's this warning that if you go, we're going to kill you from the Germans. And they didn't actually intended to do it that way. They didn't set that up as a as a response, but it ended up that way. And so, it was this sort of horrifying conjunction. But you know, you sort of slipped in mentioned pandemic, but that's an interesting comparison to the question of why people continue to travel, which is that even in the worst kind of catastrophes, ongoing wars, ongoing outbreaks of disease is business still goes on, and people still travel, people still move around, even at the risk of their own lives. And this, this was the case there. Passenger bookings were definitely down just like airplane flying were down in 2020. But people kept going. And so, to do business, to visit family, they were often willing to take very serious risks. So, the Lusitania sets off, and it goes fairly uneventfully all the way across until it reaches the area of the war zone.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 12:16

Let's go to the day of this event. Briefly walk us through what happens to the Lusitania.

David Silbey 12:23

As they're passing to the south of the south of the Irish coast about 11 miles, they come across a German U-boat, U-20, captained by a commander by the name of Walther Schwieger, who in one of those sort of great moments for a U-boat commander sort of looks up through his periscope and there's this giant ship crossing in front of him. And he had been essentially, at this point given orders by the German command to fire from undersea that is not surface and warn the thing. If there was any risk at all, and this is on May 7 of 1915. It's in the sort of mid-afternoon, and he fires a single torpedo at the Lusitania. It strikes close to the front of the ship. There's a second explosion a few minutes later, and the ship sinks fairly rapidly, trapping most of the passengers. About 1200 out of 1900 passengers and crew died during the sinking. Even in May, the waters south of the Irish coast are not warm. And so, hypothermia and sort of coldness sets in relatively quickly. And in addition, the Lusitania listed on its side that is began to turn sideways and sink so quickly that it was very difficult to get what lifeboats there were often I think, about six out of the 48 life rafts were actually launched into the water and that wasn't nearly enough.

Katy Morris 13:56

How long does it take for that ship to go down?

David Silbey 14:00

Yeah, that's a good question. So, it sank really quickly. There's a couple of ways ships can sink. One of them is they can just go down straight up. That's often the slowest way to go down. It takes a long time for all the compartments to fill with water. It lets people escape out the top of the ship. The second way, the second main way in the more dangerous way is by capsizing which is when the ship turns over on its side and goes down sort of headfirst to put it that way. When the torpedo hit the Lusitania, it only hit on one side. That seems like an obvious statement, but I'm gonna go ahead and make it anyway. It only hit on one side. And that meant the water that was rushing into the

Lusitania was only filling one side. So suddenly, the ships being pulled to one side by the weight of that water. And so very quickly, and it's and it's within about 10 to 12 minutes of first getting hit the Lusitania is listing or leaning to one side very heavily and that that's really problematic because it makes it very difficult to launch lifeboats. It makes it very difficult even to move around the ship. I mean, imagine you're suddenly in the ship where one wall has become the floor, and the floor is now sort of tilting away from you. And it's happening so fast that most people had no time to really react. And so, within about, I think it's about 18 to 20 minutes, the ship has almost completely heeled over, turned on its side, and people are still trying to escape. But now it's just getting impossible, you know, you're running, you're trying to move upside down or what feels like upside down, you're climbing on the side of the hull. You've got a jump in the water, in which the propeller may still be rotating. And so, it sort of went down enormously quickly and that's one of the reasons why so many people died is because a lot of them just didn't get off the ship in the first place. It's not that they died in the water, although a lot of them did. It's that they never made it off the ship. And the Germans are very triumphant. This is sort of held up as a great victory. It's held up as a sign that the Germans can stop British ships from getting back and forth. It's sort of this moment, at least at first of look at how powerful our military is.

Katy Morris 16:22

As Germany celebrated the sinking of the Lusitania, a private German artist Karl Goetz, produced a medal depicting the event with a slightly different message, one that criticized the Allies for operating the Lusitania during wartime. To learn more, we spoke with MHS, curator, Anne Bentley.

Anne Bentley 16:42

The medals that we're looking at today are part of Karl Goetz's World War One medal output. His satirical, ironical medals that mostly lampoon the Allied Forces, the Allied governments and their actions or inactions as they relate to German progress in the war and his feelings, his personal feelings about that because his medals were very personal. They were not part of the German propaganda machine, although they fed into it very nicely. The artist Karl Goetz was very prolific. He made over 600 medals in his lifetime. His medallic output was wide and varied and then World

War One came along, and he turned his focus on to the Allied enemies of Germany, and he was a commentator in metal in iron to be precise, because these were all cast iron. Very few were made of cast bronze because bronze and copper were needed for the war effort. So, these are mostly cast iron.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 17:52

Do we have a sense whether he dabbled in political issues?

Anne Bentley 17:57

Not really. No, I don't think he did. Because even during the war, what he said of the Lusitania was not so much to celebrate Germany's victory in downing a non-competent ship. It was more to castigate [Woodrow] Wilson and the Cunard Line for their profit before lives. They were informed that Germany considered the Lusitania, a prime target, and would shoot, would torpedo her if able, and they actually published this warning in American newspapers right opposite the Cunard Line sailing schedule, so that people who were looking for passage would be warned that they were prime targets. And it was not to say, 'We won. We sank this unsinkable ship. It was look what we had to do because of your greed and your desire to make money over saving lives.' So that's what he considered his medal to be. Not a victorious action for the for the German propaganda machine.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 19:08

Let's describe them. Can you describe the Goetz's medal?

Anne Bentley 19:11

There's a lot of artistic license taken in this. The obverse is a view of the Lusitania. She's sinking stern first, which is wrong and the sea that afternoon was calm. It was absolutely calm. There were there was no wind, there were no waves. But this has her sinking in this very violent ocean waves all over the place. And as she's tilting over and going down, you've got cannons. You've got anti-aircraft guns. You've got a biplane. You've, you've got all of these weapons of war on her deck, which is totally untrue. And you can see her four funnels, and it looks like he's got the smoke

issuing from all four funnels, which again is not true because she was only using three of her of her funnels because she wasn't using all of her boilers in an effort to save coal because she was very, very coal intensive as the fastest ship on the earth at that point. So, she was only going 21 knots, which was not her fastest. And I'm not going to butcher the German language by trying to read the legends. I'll just give you the translations above her. It says, "The British liner Lusitania sunk by German submarine 5th May 1915." So, this is a copy of the original 5th May medal.

Katy Morris 19:12

And what's on the other side?

Anne Bentley 19:18

On the other side of the medal, this is his entire argument. You've got men queued up, buying passage on the Lusitania, from the booking office of the Cunard Line, and the employee staffing this is a skeleton. And in the crowd behind these men, at the far left, there is one gentleman reading a newspaper, which has a warning written on it. So that's a reference to the warning that the Imperial German Embassy printed in the newspapers and behind him is the German ambassador, with his finger raised in warning and wearing a top hat. We're warning you and you ignored you ignored the warning. And the text on that says, "Business above all." So, this is his entire thesis here, right? The greed and indifference...

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 21:43

Recklessness.

Anne Bentley 21:44

Recklessness, exactly, brought about the downfall of this as the ship and the deaths involved are on your heads, not on ours. We warned you. You didn't listen. It's all on you.

Katy Morris 22:03

You may have noticed that U-20 torpedoed and sank the Lusitania on the 7th of May. And yet, the medal says the 5th of May. Anne, Peter and David helped us understand this date discrepancy and how the Allies would take advantage of this mistake.

Anne Bentley 22:21

Goetz based his medal on a newspaper account of the sinking and the newspaper account of the sinking said that she was torpedoed on May 5th, 1915. And instead, she actually was sunk on May 7th, 1915. Both of our Goetz's pieces are dated the 7th of May. These are his corrected medals. We don't have an original 5th May because those are extremely rare. He did not make a lot of those before he corrected the mold. So, the 5th May medal came out and an example of it was smuggled into England and the British naval command thought this is a wonderful opportunity because obviously they planned to sink the Lusitania ahead of time because they say here it is. They were going to sink it on May 5th, and they had to wait until it got into range on May 7th instead, so they decided to commission Selfridges department store to make replicas of this.

Peter Drummey 23:26

England opened a Bureau of War Propaganda essentially, when the war began, and started publicizing this drumbeat of anti-German publicity also trying to cultivate support for the Allied war effort in the United States. At the same time, it's more than one thing going on there by both trying to find people sympathetic to the Allied cause within the United States and send them information. Also, by essentially shaping stories to be given or sold to American newspapers especially to try to shape public opinion in the United States. This was like a gift. That is, if you were emphasizing German, atrocious behavior, if you were perfectly willing to exaggerate events and emphasize atrocities, this was an authentic atrocity as simply a gift, and then to find the medal had been struck, but sort of implied that it was an event planned in advance. For people creating propaganda, it was a gift. And what the British did this took a little time, but they essentially made in much greater numbers, their own copies of the Goetz Lusitania medal.

Anne Bentley 24:41

And they actually commissioned something like 250,000 replicas. The British response of British replica was definitely a propaganda effort because they took this medal with the wrong date, and they made a copy of it, and they sold it in this box that had anti-German propaganda in the lid and the whole point of which was to inflame the population against Germany. But it was also to get neutral countries like especially the United States inflamed about this.

Peter Drummey 25:14

In fact, you've got like a little box, an artistic rendering of the ship sinking, a copy of the medal, and a little informational pamphlet all together for a showing and then it said that the proceeds would go to war relief, the Red Cross or other war relief. So, they essentially got these parcels into the hands of I think, literally hundreds of 1,000s of people first in Great Britain, where this is very important, but also circulating those in the United States.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 25:45

Which is what was most remarkable about all this is that, yeah, you have the Germans creating the medal, and then the British make even more of them for a different purpose. I've never heard of anything like that before.

David Silbey 25:56

It's very bizarre, isn't it? I mean, it's really it is really quite strange. And it's sort of a stroke of genius by the British because it's an authentic German coin. They're not making anything up. They're not changing anything. They're not altering anything. This is German and even though it's a private German artists, this is kind of the way the Germans had been behaving. And so, the fact that the British sort of realized that they could do this and grabbed it is really this quite remarkably impressive feat. And yeah, so suddenly, the British are pumping out more coins than the Germans are. I do want to point out that the Germans in World War One had an impressive ability to shoot themselves in the foot, reload the gun and shoot themselves in the other foot. It was really, really remarkable.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 26:45

So, what impact do you suppose these medals had on the course of war, on British views, on American views?

David Silbey 26:52

By themselves, I don't think the medals had a massively overwhelming impact but taken in conjunction with a whole set of other things of other kinds of propaganda of other kinds of mess ups by the Germans, of other publicity campaigns by the British. All of these together really created a situation where the Americans were sort of inexorably being pulled into the war. You know, the interesting thing is that the U.S. doesn't go to war over the sinking of the Lusitania in 1915. Wilson criticizes the Germans. The Germans sort of begrudgingly apologize and then it's another two years almost before the U.S. actually gets into the war. So, neither the sinking of the Lusitanian, nor the coins have that immediate effect. But they start that process or continue that process of pushing Wilson into the conflict.

Peter Drummey 27:45

And the Germans realizing this bad publicity, withdrew the use of submarines to attack ships without warning. They drew back from that. But the sinking of the Lusitania didn't cause the United States to drop its policy of neutrality. After all, Woodrow Wilson was reelected, just barely reelected, but reelected in 1916 as the man who kept America out of war, but this shifted the sensibility of it number of Americans who go to Europe. Be it the raising funds for war relief in the United States increases that is this sensitizes people to something that seems to be happening far away. So, it's not immediate, but long term over two years effect is very substantial here in the United States.

Anne Bentley 28:37

The worldwide reaction to this medal was so strong and so anti-German that the German government forbade him from making any more and set out to collect all the ones that they could

they could get their hands on because Britain's Selfridge medal was so effective in doing what they set out to do, which was create anti-German sentiment. So, the imperial government reacted by telling Goetz he could no longer make these and to collect as many as they could find and I guess destroy them.

Katy Morris 29:12

[Outro music fades in] To view the objects in this episode, and to learn more, visit our website at www.masshist.org/podcast. You can also email us your questions and comments to podcast@Masshist.org. If you enjoyed the show, help us spread the word and share the podcast with your friends. Stay up to date with our latest episodes by subscribing on Apple, Stitcher, or wherever you listen to your podcasts. The Object of History is produced by the research department at the Massachusetts Historical Society. Music in this episode is by Dominic Giam of Ketsa Music and by Podington Bear. See our show notes for details.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 29:48

We would like to thank Peter Drummey, Chief Historian and Stephen T. Riley Librarian, Anne Bentley, Curator of Art and Artifacts at the MHS and David Silbey Adjunct Associate Professor at the Department of History of Cornell University, and Associate Director of Cornell in Washington. Professor Silbey is the author of [The British Working Class and Enthusiasm for War, 1914-1916](#), [A War of Frontier and Empire: The Philippine-American War, 1899-1902](#), and most recently, [The Boxer Rebellion and the Great Game in China: A History](#).

Katy Morris 30:27

Thanks for listening.