Review of The Lusitania by Colin Simpson

JEFFREY ROGERS HUMMEL, San Jose State University

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 taxation, with Lincoln's widespread suspension 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 in his excellent essay, "War Collectivism in World War I," (in A New History of Leviathan) was the "modus, the precedent, and the inspiration for state corporate-capitalism for the remainder of the twentieth century."

Because "war is the health of the state," because governments, when they wage war on foreign powers, always concurrently wage war on their own citizens, we should be acutely interested in the work of the revisionist historians who seek to discredit and expose official explanations that "justify" participating in war. Until now, the most thorough revisionist account of the United States' entry into World War I has been Charles Gallay Tansill's America Goes to War, but the recent publication of Colin Simpson's The Lusitania has greatly supplemented that previous work. The Lusitania, of course, was a British liner which on May 7, 1915, was torpedoed by a German submarine. Non-combatants numbering 1,201, including 126 Americans, lost their lives. At the time, the sinking of an unarmed passenger liner without any warning was viewed in this country as a shocking case of German bestiality, and this greatly assisted the Wilson administration in its efforts to propel the United States into the war. Tansill and other revisionists have pointed out that Americans should have known that a certain degree of risk was entailed in traveling on belligerent vessels, especially since the German Embassy had published a warning in New York newspapers just prior to the Lusitania's embarkation. However, Simpson has contributed a well-researched and scholarly investigation that uncovers government perfidy even unsuspected by Tansill.

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; (2) it carried munitions and contraband; (3) it was armed; and (4) 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 capsuring 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 pyroxyline (guncotton), a substance that causes an explosion upon contact with seawater, 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,
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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 48 lifeboats, only six ended up carrying survivors, and those soon became overloaded. The sea was filled with debris and dead and living bodies. In answer to the Lusitania's SOS, Admiral Coke, commander at Queenstown, ordered everything afloat to . When he finally did stand trial the only evidence against him was a written deposition 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 seven years in jail, although in 1924 he was quietly awarded $20,000 damages by the U.S. government. Dr. Ritter von Rettogh, 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.

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LUCIFER'S LEXICON
by L. A. Rollins

proverb, n. A saying that condenses the wisdom of experience into a half-truth. Half a truth is, I suppose, better than no truth at all. Following are some comparatively worthy proverbs: 1. Presents make the heart grow fonder. 2. People who live in glass houses shouldn't get stoned. 3. Two heads are better than none. 4. One man's meat is another man's sacred cow. 5. The carrot is mightier than the stick.

tender, adj. Readily yielding to blade or teeth: said of food, such as the tender hearts of Christian missionaries or the tenderfeet of the Donner party.

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