

U-BOAT WAR

The German U-boat (*Unterseeboot*, submarine) fleet showed its potential from the earliest months of the war. Three obsolete British cruisers (HMS *Aboukir*, *Cressy* and *Hogue*) were sunk in rapid succession by *U-9* on 22 September 1914. Such successes suggested a counter to the British blockade.

Seizure and internment of merchant ship crews was mostly out of the question. The German leadership concluded that the interminable enemy blockade had exceeded the limits prescribed by international law (they were probably right) and so in February 1915 the first unrestricted submarine warfare campaign began. All ships approaching the British Isles, regardless of nationality, could be attacked. The campaign turned out to be short-lived. Events such as the loss of the Cunard liner RMS *Lusitania* off the coast of Ireland on 7 May 1915, when more than 1,000 people died, including 128 American citizens, resulted in strong protests from the United States and played into the hands of British propagandists. In the face of international criticism and terrible publicity in neutral and Allied countries, the German leadership eventually ended unrestricted sinkings and returned to a focused campaign directed at Allied shipping. However, the abortive campaign had enjoyed some success: during 1915, 885,471 tons of shipping had been destroyed, with a further 1.23 million tons in 1916.

For the remainder of 1916, the majority of German submarines were confined to North Sea operations in conjunction with the High Seas Fleet. Those operating from Flanders and Mediterranean bases used torpedoes and mines to engage enemy warships and transports. The second unrestricted submarine warfare campaign opened on 1 February 1917. Germany's leaders, fearing a resumption of Somme-style attritional campaigns, gambled on the resumption of unrestricted U-boat warfare, combined with bombing of southern England, being enough to force Britain out of the war by sinking the merchant ships that carried food and other vital supplies across the oceans at such a rate that the country would starve. German leaders had few illusions about the likely reaction of the United States to further attacks on neutral shipping. However, it was believed that 600,000 tons of hostile shipping per month could be sunk before American manpower and resources made a serious impact. With Britain out of the war, it was hoped that it could quickly be won.

The renewed campaign was at first very successful: 520,000, 565,000 and 860,000 tons of shipping were sunk in the months of February, March and April 1917, respectively. Britain did indeed seem to be facing defeat. The introduction of the convoy system by the Admiralty in May 1917, in which groups of merchant ships sailed

escorted by warships, reduced losses dramatically. A mere 27 of 8,894 merchant ships were lost while under escort, as opposed to 356 sailing independently.²⁷ The German gamble failed to break Britain's resistance and gratuitously added a major power – the USA – to the list of its enemies, just at the time when Russia was on the point of being forced out of the war. Of course, when the United States entered the war the Allied blockade became even more effective. The renewed submarine campaign continued until the end of the war, with 310,000 tons of shipping sunk as late as August 1918.

Meanwhile, the struggle for control of the English Channel continued unabated with submarines and light surface warships based in the German-occupied ports of Ostend and Zeebrugge threatening Great Britain's direct communications with the continent. The Royal Navy responded by coastal bombardments and the laying of a mine barrage across the entrance to the English Channel, but the threat remained very real. In response, British naval forces launched coastal raids, including during the famous St George's Day attack on Zeebrugge (23 April 1918). However, the only solution to the U-boat menace proved to be the capture of the Belgian coast by the land forces that broke out of the Ypres Salient in late September 1918, compelling the Germans to abandon their positions. A British naval force occupied Ostend unopposed in early October. In the last full month of the war shipping losses to U-boats had declined to 116,000 tons.²⁸

Germany's U-boats proved to be of much greater value than the battlefleet that had done so much to poison relations with Britain prior to the war. They had sunk 12.5 million tons of enemy shipping in exchange for the combined loss of 178 vessels by the time of the Armistice. As dangerous to the Allies as the submarine campaign undoubtedly was, it was not enough to deliver victory to Germany. Great Britain and her allies were always able, despite moments of supreme crisis, to transport millions of tons of supplies and thousands upon thousands of men around the globe with sustainable losses.

G. Sheffield, *A Short History of the First World War*, Oneworld 2014.