

Analyzing Primary Sources Activity

The logo for 'networks' features the word 'networks' in a bold, lowercase sans-serif font. A stylized graphic of intersecting lines forms a starburst or network pattern behind the letter 'o'.

World War I and Its Aftermath, 1914–1920

News of World War I

Background

American public opinion about World War I was largely driven by the media. In particular, after the sinking of the *Lusitania* in 1915, the coverage helped solidify anti-German sentiment in the United States.

In early 1915, the German government warned the United States that the waters surrounding the British Isles were considered war zones and enemy merchant ships would be attacked without warning. In the days before the *Lusitania* was set to depart from New York, one such warning appeared in the *New York Times* and in other newspapers around the United States.

The Germans, believing that the British were using passenger liners to carry arms and ammunition, had begun to attack merchant and passenger ships in early 1915. The culmination of these attacks came on May 7, 1915, when the German U-20 submarine sank the British passenger ship *Lusitania* off the coast of Ireland, killing nearly 1,200 passengers, including 128 Americans.

The attack on the *Lusitania* was a turning point for many Americans, who saw the sinking as a ruthless attack on innocent passengers. As well as reinforcing anti-German propaganda, news accounts of the sinking of the *Lusitania* brought the war home for the first time for many Americans—and put a more vicious face on total warfare, where no target is off limits.

Directions: Below are three articles that appeared in the *New York Times* just before and after the sinking of the *Lusitania*. Read each article, and then answer the questions that follow.

The following advertisement was received last night by The Times and other newspapers throughout the country. . . .

Notice! Travelers intending to embark on the Atlantic voyage are reminded that a state of war exists between Germany and her allies and Great Britain and her allies that the zone of war includes the waters adjacent to the British Isles: that, in accordance with formal notice given by the Imperial German Government, vessels flying the flag of Great Britain, or any of her allies, are liable to destruction in those waters and that travelers sailing in the war zone on ships of Great Britain or her allies do so at their own risk.

Imperial German Embassy, Washington, D.C., April 22, 1915

—the *New York Times*, May 1, 1915

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Activity *Cont.*

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The feeling among officials and others appeared to be that the Germans would not go to the extreme of sinking a passenger vessel with women and children and many American citizens aboard. Even the advertisement inserted in American newspapers last Saturday by the Germany Embassy, warning Americans not to take passage for Europe in the ships of Germany's enemies, did not cause any alarm here with particular reference to the *Lusitania* . . .

—the *New York Times*, May 8, 1915

In a statement issued here today Gifford Pinchot, who recently returned from Europe, said: "What strikes me most on getting back from Europe is that the deliberate murder of men, women, and children on the *Lusitania* has brought the war home to the United States. I do not believe that our people have realized until now what this war is, or what it means to us. The right of men to rule them themselves is at stake. Our countrymen on the *Lusitania* were killed because an autocratic military empire is trying to seize the domination of the world at the expense of the self-governing nations."

—the *New York Times*, May 20, 1915

Critical Thinking

1. After reading the article excerpts, name two ways in which the sinking of the *Lusitania* revealed changes to modern warfare.
2. Why did people ignore the warning that ran in newspapers in the days leading up to the *Lusitania* voyage?
3. How did the sinking of the *Lusitania* change the way Pinchot thought of the war?
4. In today's world, if a warning ran such as the one in the first article, would you heed it? Why or why not?
5. Which of the three news articles stirs up the most anti-German sentiment? What kind of language does it use to shape public opinion?