

The Kaiser's U-Boat Assault on America: Germany's Great War Gamble in the First World War by Hans Joachim Koerver

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This new book by Hans Joachim Koerver is a welcome new addition to histories of the first U-boat war. This is the author's fifth book to examine aspects of this period. His first three were edited reprints of key Room40/NID documents housed at the National Archives, Kew. This included publication for the first time of the important two volume history of the German Navy penned by Frank Birch and William F. Clark just after WW1.

His fourth book, 2018's *War of Numbers 1914-1916: The Kaiser's Navy Gone Rogue* was an extremely refreshing and long overdue revised history of the opening years of the first U-boat war 1914-1916. Now out of print, it commands eye-watering prices second hand. Its promised follow-on volume, which takes the reader up to April 1917 has now arrived in the guise of this new book. But, fortunately for readers new to Koerver's work, it does in fact also contain *War of Numbers*. So this new book starts in 1914, with the first 24 (of 38) chapters being an updated *War of Numbers* and the rest of the book serving as the second follow-on volume. This makes for one seamless read; consistent throughout.

While the book at all times keeps an eye on Germany's wavering relationship with America, it is also a broader history of the U-boat war to April 1917 as seen from a contemporary standpoint. The most important theme running through this book is that the German Navy, considering itself above politics and the rule of law ultimately brought Germany to ruin. Under the hand of Tirpitz it simply operated as a state within a state, determined to prosecute the U-boat war with utter ruthlessness and terror.

Koerver shows that the passenger liners were deliberately targeted, with their movement timetables being sent to U-boats at sea. Some U-boat commanders were quite willing to sink them, the *Lusitania* being but one of a number of wilful calumnies; to which the Chancellor had to somehow make redress to America. This was of no consequence to Tirpitz, who even after he was dismissed was still ordering unrestricted attacks in the Spring of 1916 on shipping by the Flanders Flotilla U-boats, described as his private fleet.

When, on occasion brought to heel by a weak and vacillating Kaiser, the German Navy either reacted petulantly by removing its pieces from the board, as it did with the fleet-based U-boats in 1916, or simply ignored orders. Koerver likens the behaviour of the navy (and army) as that of a medieval order of knights, answerable only to itself. For them, war with America became desirable, because it forced Germany into a fight to the death, circumventing Germany's Chancellor, Bethmann Hollweg's attempts at peace.

Using a wide range of archival sources from America, Britain and Germany, the road to war with America is mapped out in detail, with each diplomatic incident and initiative investigated. The accumulated consequences of attacks on and sinking of ships such as *Asturias*, *Falaba*, *Lusitania*, *Arabic* and *Sussex* are described. Unsurprisingly too is the Zimmerman telegram. At the diplomatic level Koerver has drawn deeply from Arthur S. Link's biography of Woodrow Wilson and from the diaries of Kurt Riezler and Admiral Müller. Alongside these, the new document collection of German Navy papers compiled Gerhard Granier is described by Koerver as a "treasure trove".

At the tactical level of U-boats at sea and ship sunk, there remains a published deficit, especially of the unrestricted attack on shipping in 1917-18. The historical section of the Royal Navy never completed its *Home Waters* monographs for 1917-18, primarily because of the outbreak of war in 1939. As late as 1960 it was regretting that it had not completed this task. Ironically, this at least has protected it from future criticisms of partiality. But as Koerver points out, the same cannot be said of the official German history of the *Merchant War with Uboats* by Arno Spindler. He shows that alongside the minutiae of U-boat patrols and ships sunk, Spindler was covering up criminality at sea, citing several examples, such as the neutral Dutch passenger ship *Tubantia*, anchored and illuminated, sunk by *UB-13*, which Spindler casually refers to as an “unknown steamer”.

If Spindler achieved anything, he did at least reconcile the number of ships actually listed as lost by the Allies to U-boat operations. Ironically, as Koerver points out, this put paid to the gross overstatements of U-boat successes by the Tirpitz school, and was undoubtedly the reason for the three decade delay from the publication in 1933 of volumes 1-3 and the publication in 1964 of volume 4 (completed in 1941) and later volume 5, which revealed the German Navy’s deliberate overstating of successes during the final unrestricted phase of the war. Three decades longer in which Tripitzian mythology took root.

As the author readily acknowledges, the highly propagandised nature of the first U-boat war, especially in Britain and Germany means that much historical fact has been difficult for both countries to accept, even a century after events. The author describes how the grim reading of the destruction of Britain’s merchant shipping in 1917 was airbrushed from “official” British history (he is referring Longman’s *Naval Operations*) due to its “gloomy reading” and supposed exposure of Britain’s strategic Achilles heel. Britain much preferred the whitewash presented in *The World Crisis*, where “Churchill, speaking for the British elite, was deliberately revising history”.

In Germany, where histories of this period are even more uncommon (the author rightly bemoans the “scandalous” absence of a biography of Bethmann Hollweg), Koerver demonstrates that Tirpitzian propaganda still has its deep roots. For example in 2015 no less than the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* was still describing the *Lusitania* as a “secret auxiliary cruiser and munitions transport”.

This is a study area poorly served by historians. It has long been my contention that until a full, detailed and unvarnished history of the first U-boat war is published in English this bleak period in history will be continually both tacitly and unintentionally misunderstood. Koerver has done much to uncover new material and equally to showcase the deficit that remains to which he makes considerable redress. He is understood to be preparing a final volume and I look forward to its publication. This book is recommended to members with an interest in WW1 without qualification. It is in fact, essential reading.

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