

# The German U-boat Surrender



## Introduction

The First World War was a major global conflict between the Allied Powers, which included Britain, and the Central Powers, which included Germany. It began on 28 July 1914 and ended at 11am on 11 November 1918 with Germany's surrender. Approximately 20 million people around the world died as a result of the war.

Many advanced new weapons were used which permanently changed the face of warfare. At sea, one such weapon was the **submarine**, a type of boat which descends below the surface of the water to stalk its targets. In Germany these boats were called 'Unterseeboots,' or U-boats.

A condition of Germany's surrender in 1918 was that their navy would be handed over to Britain and her allies. Starting on 21 November 1918, 168 German U-boats arrived in Harwich to be dismantled and sold off. The passage between them as they lined up became known as 'U-boat Avenue,' a giant metal corridor which left a permanent impression on the residents of Harwich.



*Three German U-boats, pictured after having surrendered.*

### KEY FACTS: Submarines

- ◆ The first known underwater vessel intended for combat was built in America in 1775. Germany's first U-boat was launched in 1906.
- ◆ Submarines would lay mines or fire underwater projectiles called torpedoes.
- ◆ U-boats could only descend a short distance below the water's surface. When submerged they were generally a lot slower than their targets, so stealth was key.

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## Food and the U-boats

The U-boats were used to sink merchant ships carrying food and other goods before they could reach Britain. Being a crewmember aboard one of these ships became a perilous occupation since they were usually defenceless. At times the U-boats were even allowed to attack ships belonging to neutral nations.

Taken together, **12.8 million tons of Allied and neutral shipping was sunk by U-boats, of which 7.76 million tons was British.** For Britain, a country that was heavily dependant on foreign food, mass starvation was a serious threat.

Such substantial losses of imported food and goods forced the British government to impose **rationing** in 1917. Staples like meat and bread were subject to rationing coupons given to each family. The idea of 'total war,' affecting every single individual to some degree, was becoming a reality.

British propaganda portrayed the U-boats in demonic terms. They were called 'ruthless pests' and 'the greatest menace that ever faced our Empire'. Posters were issued by the government encouraging people to 'Defeat the U-boat' by consuming less food.

To protect its shipping, Britain began using **convoys** in 1917. Merchant vessels were gathered into large groups which were guarded by Royal Navy ships. The convoys would take unpredictable routes so that U-boats had trouble finding them.

In the final years of the war the amount of shipping lost to U-boats plummeted, largely due to the convoys. Whereas U-boats sank 700,000 tons of shipping in the month of June 1917, by October 1918 this had fallen to 119,000 tons.



British First World War propaganda poster. A U-boat is being rammed in the background.

### KEY FACTS: Rationing:

- ◆ Rationing is a system of distributing food based on strict limits. Instead of buying food freely at the shops, families were given coupons restricting them to set amounts of each type of food.
- ◆ Food items like meat, bread, sugar, butter and cheese were rationed during the First World War.
- ◆ People were also asked to use many non-rationed food items 'with care'. Fruit, vegetables and fish could be used freely.

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## Surrender

Although Germany was never entirely 'defeated' on land or at sea, the German government judged that the war was a lost cause and signed the armistice agreement that came into effect on 11 November 1918. The entire German fleet was to be handed over to the Allies, but the surface fleet was scuttled (deliberately sunk) by its crews before this could be done.

The U-boat fleet, on the other hand, was successfully handed over. Harwich was chosen as a destination because it is a deep-water port and able to accommodate such a large-scale operation.



*German U-boat crew aboard their vessel during the surrender process.*

The surrendered boats began arriving into Harwich on 21 November 1918. British crews took over from their German counterparts 20 miles from port, with the Royal Navy's flag hoisted above the Imperial German Navy's flag. This process continued into the new year, with deconstruction lasting until April 1919.

The delicate operation was conducted calmly, and not a single German sailor set foot on British soil.

However, many officers and sailors in the German navy were deeply offended by having to surrender their ships to the enemy, blaming politicians in their country for giving up rather than fighting to the end. These feelings of humiliation contributed to the rise of the National Socialist (Nazi) Party in Germany during the 1920s and 1930s.

*'The fog cleared away in the forenoon and those who were fortunate enough to have the first view of the approaching fleet were much impressed ... No sirens, whistles, or hooters were permitted ... It was a **silent entry into captivity.**'*

- The Scotsman newspaper, reporting on the scenes in Harwich in November 1918.



## Aftermath

One important consequence of the First World War was **the normalization of submarine warfare**. Submarines have now been a prominent feature of war for over 100 years. Nazi Germany again deployed a massive fleet of U-boats during the Second World War (1939-1945), and later on in the twentieth century submarines began carrying nuclear warheads. The Royal Navy still maintains a submarine fleet and launched its latest nuclear-powered submarine, *HMS Audacious*, in 2017.

Meanwhile, the U-boats had another lasting legacy: they showed that being an island did not guarantee security to Britain. A BBC documentary broadcast in 1964 declared that Britain 'had lost something that no Continental nation had ever possessed: a century's old sense of immunity'. This lesson would be driven home with even greater force during the Second World War.



Watercolour painting depicting 'U-boat Avenue' off the coast of Harwich, by Donald Maxwell in 1918.

### Resources:

- ◆ For an accessible and illustrated introduction to the U-boats of the First World War, see the BBC's resource at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/guides/zq3q2hv>
- ◆ For general information on U-boats during both the First and Second World Wars, see: <https://uboat.net/>
- ◆ Photographs, paintings and documents relating to the surrender can be found on the Imperial War Museum website: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/the-u-boat-campaign-that-almost-broke-britain>