

The German U-boats in WWI



Three German U-boats, pictured after having surrendered.

The First World War

The First World War was a colossal global conflict between the Allied Powers, including Britain, and the Central Powers, including Germany. It began on 28 July 1914 and ended with an armistice agreement at 11am on 11 November 1918. The war claimed around 20 million lives worldwide.

Military doctrine in the early twentieth century emphasized the importance of achieving a decisive, crushing victory on the battlefield or at sea, disabling the enemy in a single blow. However, as it became increasingly apparent that neither side would succumb to such tactics, military leaders had to search for other routes to victory. Restricting the enemy's supply of food and resources was one such strategy, but to do so required control of the seas.

The eighteenth-century British patriotic song 'Rule, Britannia!' contains an infamous line declaring that 'Britannia rules the waves'. In 1914 this was not far from the truth. The Royal Navy was far larger and more technologically advanced than any of its competitors, whilst **Britain also controlled almost three-quarters of global merchant shipping**.

Throughout the war Britain's surface navy maintained a blockade on Germany, putting significant strain on its supply lines and leading to repeated complaints to the international community.

At the Battle of Jutland in May-June 1916 the British and German fleets met in a deadly but ultimately indecisive engagement off the coast of Denmark. The British blockade continued. As an alternative to the 'decisive victory' doctrine, **German attention increasingly turned to the use of submarine warfare to gradually corrode Britain's fighting capacity**.

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Submarine Warfare

The first documented underwater vessel intended for combat was the *Turtle*, an almost spherical vessel built in 1775 by an American for use against the British. Its single occupant would navigate it to the side of an enemy ship, attach a time-bomb and then retreat. The idea was not widely adopted.

By the twentieth century submarines had taken on a more recognizable boat-like shape (see bottom of page). Their destructive power derived from underwater projectiles called torpedoes or from laying mines. These submarines could dive deeper and travel further than any of their predecessors, making them, for the first time, effective weapons of war.

In 1914 there were 400 submarines in operation around the world. Of these, 77 were used by the Royal Navy and 29 by the German navy. **The Germans called their submarines 'Unterseeboots,' or U-boats.** These were some of the most advanced submarines in the world. The U96-U98 series, launched in 1918, could dive in 66 seconds. Their diesel engines delivered 2,300 horse-power.

Many leading figures in both countries detested the sneaking, under-handed nature of submarines, especially if used against defenceless merchant vessels. Admiral Sir Arthur Wilson commented in 1901 that submarines were **'unfair and damned un-English'**. Similarly, Winston Churchill declared shortly before the First World War: 'I do not believe this would ever be done by a civilised power.' Accordingly, submarines were initially restricted to supporting the surface fleets.

The Royal Navy nevertheless went on to use submarines extensively against the trade routes of the Central Powers. Britain's dominance over merchant shipping, however, meant there were always more British than German targets. This is largely why submarine warfare has become synonymous with the German war effort whilst comparable British tactics are less well-remembered.

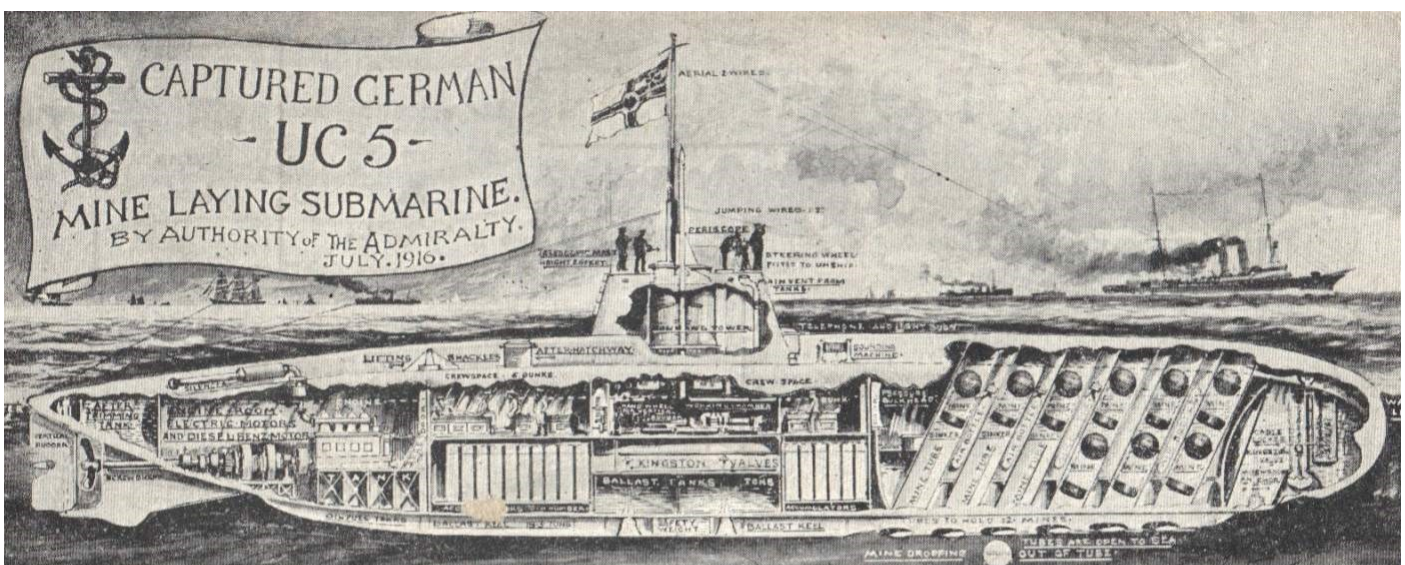


Diagram of a German minelaying submarine captured by the British.

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'Ruthless pests'

After initial explorations into submarine warfare in 1914-15, Germany rapidly increased the size of its U-boat fleet until it numbered 346 vessels. Britain's Atlantic trade routes became perilous corridors, haunted by hidden predators playing what Rudyard Kipling called 'grisly blindfold games'.

At several stages the German authorities sanctioned **'unrestricted' submarine warfare**, meaning U-boats could attack neutral shipping and ignore humanitarian conventions protecting the safety of the merchant crews. U-boat captains were gradually allowed to undertake longer, more ambitious, more dangerous missions to achieve maximum disruption. **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 a country that was heavily dependant on foreign food, mass starvation caused by the U-boats 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 allocated to each family. The notion of 'total war,' affecting every single individual to some degree, was becoming a reality.

Because they inflicted indiscriminate pain, British propaganda portrayed the U-boats in vitriolic, even demonic terms. They were called 'ruthless pests' and 'the greatest menace that ever faced our Empire'. Admiral John Fisher felt that a 'Satanic' attitude was required to meet such an existential threat.

In time Britain did develop more effective ways of dealing with the U-boats, principally the use of armed convoys to protect Allied shipping lines. Convoys would take unpredictable routes, making them difficult to find.

The amount of shipping lost each month fell drastically. 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.

'The British Empire and the German submarine cannot co-exist ... one or the other must shortly be destroyed.'

- Admiral John Fisher, 1916

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Surrender

Although the U-boats were a crucial weapon in the German armoury, they also inadvertently helped bring about Germany's surrender in 1918. In May 1915 the 'unrestricted' submarine warfare campaign resulted in **the sinking of the British civilian liner *Lusitania* by the submarine U20**, killing 1,195 passengers including many Americans. The incident caused the diplomatic rift between Germany and the United States to widen. Shortly after Germany resumed its unrestricted campaign **in February 1917, the United States entered the war on the side of the Allies.**

The addition of American resources and soldiers into the Allied war effort tipped the balance decisively against Germany. Although the Germans were never entirely 'defeated' on land or at sea, the political leadership 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.



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

The U-boat fleet, on the other hand, was successfully acquired and began arriving into Harwich on 21 November 1918. British crews took over the boats 20 miles from port, with the white ensign hoisted above the German flag. This process continued into the new year, with deconstruction lasting until April 1919. **In total, 168 U-boats were anchored off Felixstowe in 'U-boat Avenue'.**

This surrender was conducted with minimal fanfare. The *Scotsman* newspaper reported:

*'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.**'*



Aftermath

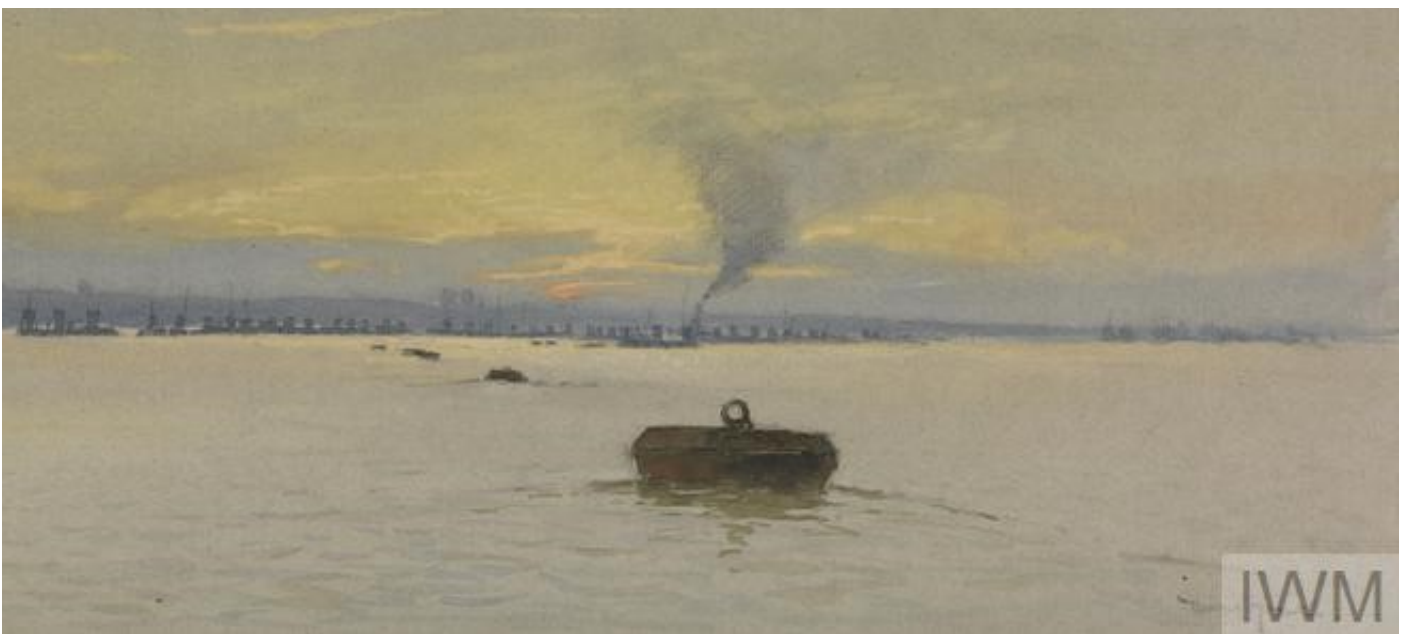
One important consequence of the First World War was **the normalization of submarine warfare**. Submarines would henceforth be a prominent, often pivotal feature of war and remain so today. The Royal Navy launched its latest nuclear-powered submarine, *HMS Audacious*, in 2017.

Another consequence of the U-boats was that they forced Britain to recognize that being an island did not guarantee safety. A BBC documentary broadcast in 1964 noted that Britain 'had lost something that no Continental nation had ever possessed: a century's old sense of immunity'.

Meanwhile, the nature of Germany's capitulation caused a deep resentment to fester in the German military. Many leaders and soldiers alike felt betrayed by the politicians despite their own resilience on the frontlines. One U-boat captain, Martin Niemöller, declared at the time:

'I have neither sought nor concluded this Armistice. As far as I am concerned, the people who promised our submarines to England can take them over. I will not do it.'

Niemöller promptly quit the navy. In interwar Germany, the emergent National Socialist (Nazi) movement played on a feeling of betrayal aimed at the supposedly spineless politicians who signed the armistice. Niemöller was initially among the many Germans enticed by the Nazi promise to restore Germany to its former glory. **The armistice became a major symbolic catalyst for the Second World War in 1939-45, when Germany would again deploy a massive U-boat fleet.**



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



Further Reading

Online

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>

National Farmers' Union document exploring food supplies in Britain during the First World War: <https://www.nfuonline.com/assets/33538>

Books

Iain Ballantyne, *The Deadly Trade: A History of Submarine Warfare from Archimedes to the Present*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2018).

R. H. Gibson and Maurice Prendergast, *The German Submarine War 1914-1918*, (London: Naval & Military Press, 2003).

Holger H. Herwig, *"Luxury" Fleet: The Imperial German Navy 1888-1918*, (Abington: Routledge, 1980).

Richard Hough, *The Great War at Sea 1914-1918*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

For collections of first-hand accounts, see:

Lowell Thomas, *Raiders of the Deep*, (Penzance: Periscope Publishing, 2002).

Julian Thompson, *The Imperial War Museum Book of The War at Sea 1914-1918*, (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 2005).