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Francis M. Carroll. *Athenia Torpedoed: The U-boat Attack that Ignited the Battle of the Atlantic.* Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2012. 218 pp. + 24 pp. of plates. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-59114-148-8.

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Coping with Disaster: The Sinking of the Passenger Liner Athenia on 3 September 1939 and the Human Dimensions of the War at Sea

At 11:15 am on Sunday, September 3, 1939, prime minister Neville Chamberlain announced to the British public that the nation was at war with Germany. Less than nine hours later, an explosion tore through the port side of the British passenger liner *Athenia*. The explosion disabled the ship's generators, plunging the interior of the ship into darkness. Passengers and crew took to the lifeboats, with the *Athenia* sinking beneath the waves the next morning. The ship was filled to capacity, as the British government had requisitioned a number of large transatlantic passenger ships for military purposes as tensions mounted during the preceding weeks. The *Athenia* had departed Glasgow, Scotland, on September 1, and after embarking additional passengers in Belfast and Liverpool, was northwest of Ireland en route to Canada when attacked.

In contrast to the *Titanic* and the *Lusitania*, the *Athenia* had an adequate number of lifeboats and life preservers. Its captain and crew had conducted drills on the procedures to be followed in the event the ship had to be abandoned, and had swung out the lifeboats as an extra precaution after they received radio notification that a state of war existed between the United Kingdom and Germany. As a result, over 90 percent of the ship's complement of passengers and crew succeeded in abandoning the ship, to be picked up by Royal Navy destroyers, the freighter *City of Flint*, and a Swedish yacht. Nonetheless, more than one hundred civilian passengers perished as a result of the torpedo attack, either killed by the impact of the weapon or lost in the darkness and unable to reach the safety of the lifeboats.

The incident immediately provoked a storm of indignation, as Britain charged that Germany was again resorting to the practice of indiscriminate, unrestricted naval war. The Huns, according to the British, were back at it again, picking up where they had left off in the First World War and showing that they had no intent of honoring the "Submarine Protocol" they had signed in 1936. The German Foreign Ministry, relying on information provided to it by the German navy, claimed that no U-boats were operating in the area, with Goebbels's propaganda ministerium circulating the story that Churchill and the Admiralty had cold-bloodedly set off explosives in the ship into order to create another *Lusitania* incident designed to draw the United States into the war. While dozens of eyewitnesses aboard the *Athenia* reported seeing the wake of a torpedo and the silhouette of a U-boat prior to and shortly after the explosion at sea, a portion of the American public was susceptible to the German information campaign. Only after Germany's defeat did the details of the matter come to light; while the *Führer* had been keen to avoid incidents at sea that might alienate the United States and neutrals at the outset of the war, an overzealous German U-boat captain had misidentified the *Athenia* as an armed merchant cruiser and attacked the vessel despite orders to avoid sinking passenger ships. Rather than accept responsibility for the incident once it received information that one of its U-boats had indeed sunk the *Athenia*, the German government ordered the captain and crew of the boat to keep the matter secret. Long after it knew otherwise, the German government continued to insist that the Admiralty had engineered the *Athenia*'s destruction in order to precipitate an American intervention. Only after the war at the Nuremberg Trials did the facts of the matter emerge with full clarity.

In *Athenia Torpedoed*, Francis Carroll sets out to examine the "U-Boat attack that ignited the Battle of the Atlantic." Carroll, a professor emeritus at the University of Manitoba whose previous publications centered on Anglo-Irish-American and Anglo-Canadian-American relations, found the story fascinating, as it in-

volved four English-speaking countries with very different outlooks on the Nazi threat, neutrality, and the unfolding war at sea. Carroll draws upon documents from multiple archives in Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Ireland; memoirs and personal papers; interviews and correspondence with survivors; and an extensive reading of newspaper accounts and the secondary literature pertaining to shipping lines, World War II, and the Battle of the Atlantic.

The book's strengths lie in three areas. First and foremost, the book restores the human face to a tragedy that often receives only a brief mention in many books about the Battle of the Atlantic Instead of simply noting that 311 of the ship's passengers were American, one reads of a group of eighteen University of Texas college girls who had been touring Europe during the summer of 1939, and were attempting to return home as the war clouds gathered. The group was booked to return to the United States on board the *California* on August 26th, but as the California had been requisitioned, the young women had to scramble to find berths elsewhere. Fifteen found spots aboard the *Athenia*, and three aboard the *City of Flinn*, which later participated in rescuing the *Athenia*'s survivors. Rather than reading that 112 passengers and crew were "lost" when the *Athenia* went down, one reads of Mrs. Rachel Lamont and her 10-year-old son clambering over a dying woman whose severed leg was floating near the remains of a collapsed stairway. The unspecified Americans, Canadians, Britons, and Europeans aboard the *Athenia* are transformed from numbers and statistics into individuals with whom one can empathize: families returning to Canada after visiting grandparents in the United Kingdom; teachers and professors returning to their schools and universities after a summer leave in Europe; and businessmen looking forward to new job postings overseas. The grim reality of war becomes more real than is the case when one encounters the tables and graphs typically appended to military histories of the Battle of the Atlantic.

A second strength of the book is its portrayal of the second order challenges associated with the war at sea. Accounts of rescue operations and anti-submarine warfare abound. Far more infrequent are depictions of the multiple questions that confronted the British government, municipal officials, and consular officers following the rescue of survivors from the *Athenia*. Where were the bedraggled survivors to be housed after they disembarked from rescue ships? Who would pay for quarters, food, and transportation? How were survivors who had lost their passports, wallets, and all documentation to be reunited with other family members, and how were they to get back to homes and families in Canada and the United States? Carroll does a fine job unpacking these issues. One of the delightful nuggets in the book is a description of how the U.S. ambassador to Great Britain, Joseph Kennedy, sent his twenty-two-year-old son "Jack" to Glasgow to meet with survivors, assess their needs, and express the ambassador's thanks to the city for all the assistance it had provided to American survivors of the *Athenia*. Connor's book delves into those dimensions of the war at sea that often are glossed over in favor of analyses of battle operations, military hardware, and cryptographic breakthroughs. These mundane matters of housing and feeding survivors, providing them with clothes and money, and notifying next-of-kin of their fate are clearly laid out. The book transforms the sinking of the *Athenia* from an incident at sea into a human tragedy that confronted communities from Glasgow to Galway, and from Halifax to hundreds of hometowns in Canada and the United States.

A third contribution of the book lies in its ability to convey the depths and degree of American neutralist sentiment at the start of the Second World War. Most readers interested in the period are familiar with the Neutrality Acts and FDR's calculated effort to steer the United States away from strict neutralism toward a policy that favored Great Britain. Yet the public aversion to intervention at the outset of the war becomes tangible and apparent in *Athenia Torpedoed*. Former president Herbert Hoover, writing privately to the editor of the *Army and Navy Journal*, captured the mood of a significant portion of the American public: "The whole thing looks suspicious to me.... I cannot believe even the clumsy Germans would do such a thing" (p. 128). Almost a month after the *Athenia* was sunk, some 40 percent of the American public remained unconvinced that the Germans had sunk the ship. One of the American passengers aboard the *Athenia*, a certain Gustav A. Anderson, claimed publicly that the vessel had been carrying guns and had been dispatched by British destroyers. He "remained in the news for some weeks, giving lectures on his experiences on the *Athenia*" (p. 129). The British went to great lengths to dispel Anderson's account, yet the effort needed to counter German propaganda shows that many in the United States were determined that their country not be drawn into another war because of an incident at sea. The U.S. press covered the sinking of the *Athenia* in vivid detail, but a portion of the American public remained convinced that the appropriate response was to mitigate the possibility of conflict by strengthening rather than weakening the Neutrality Acts.

In some regards, the book's strengths are also its

weaknesses. Carroll's determination to provide a human face to the *Athenia* disaster and his extensive use of memoirs and interviews results in an account so rich with deck-plate details that at times higher-level political dimensions recede into the background. Sometimes less is more, yet the author seems loath to abandon any voice from the past on the editing floor. As with all microhistories, Carroll's focus on history from below puts more emphasis on shipmates than statesmen, more on passengers than presidents and prime ministers. Those looking for lengthy analyses of Canada's decision for war, Irish neutrality, and U.S. policy toward Germany during the first year of the war will find these major policy issues discussed more in passing than in detail. *Athenia Torpedoed* focuses mainly on the human dimensions of the *Athenia* disaster and at this level the book excels.

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