

Political Cartoons—the U-boat War

By the winter of 1914-1915 it became clear to both the Allies and the Central Powers that the war they were engaged in was not going to end with a few quick land campaigns. Germany was aware that it simply could not compete with Britain's surface navy. In February 1915 the Kaiser proclaimed that merchant ships bound for England could be destroyed without warning. Like it or not, a neutral country like the United States would have difficulty conducting trade with either side. In fact, the United States was trading with both sides. British ships were stopping American ships bound for German ports, forcing them to sail to Allied ports, and confiscating their cargoes. The nature of the U-boat, however, was such that it could not escort a large merchant ship to port. Rather, U-boats, being vulnerable on the surface, had to sink their quarry or risk their own safety. Consequently a neutral merchant ship engaged by a U-boat might experience loss of crew and passenger lives as well as the cargo it was carrying. It was precisely this difference that ended up drawing the United States into war with Germany.

Look at the five political cartoons and discuss the following questions in your groups.



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SOME PROMISE!

April 1915

Cartoon # 1

BRITANNIA MUST BE MORE CAREFUL HOW SHE WAVES THE RULES

January 16, 1915

The title of this cartoon is a play on a patriotic British song, *Rule Britannia*. It pays homage to Britain's naval strength and begins, "Rule Britannia, Britannia rules the waves..." This cartoon was drawn early in the war by John T. McCutcheon, a popular American cartoonist, as a response to Britain's naval blockade of Germany. The three men from left to right are Uncle Sam, John Bull and the Kaiser representing the U.S., Great Britain, and Germany, respectively. Only the Kaiser was a real person. Notice how John Bull is portrayed; he is wearing a short coachman's hat and a vest with the Union Jack (British flag) on it. He is also the physical opposite of Uncle Sam, short and portly rather than tall and slim. We recognize the Kaiser by his mustache, spiked helmet, waving sword and cavalry boots.

1. According to the artist who drew this cartoon, what effect is England's blockade having on neutral and American shipping?
2. How does the artist make this point?
3. Is the artist opposed to or in favor of England's blockade? How does he make this point?

Cartoon # 2

GERMANY UNDER ALL

March 12, 1915

This is another cartoon that parodies a national anthem. In this case it is the old German imperial anthem *Deutschland Uber Alles*, literally translated as *Germany Over All*.

1. How are the U-boats represented in this cartoon?
2. Is this cartoon sympathetic to the German cause? Explain.

Cartoon # 3

JOHN BULL USES THE AMERICAN FLAG FOR PROTECTION ("CAWNT YOU SEE I'M A BLOOMING YANKEE!!")

March 1915

This cartoon refers to the practice taken up by the British of flying a neutral flag (especially American) when in the declared war zone. The artist chose to depict one of the most well known British merchant ships, the Lusitania, to represent the entire merchant navy. Ironically, the Lusitania would end up being torpedoed two months later. After the war it was divulged that the Lusitania was carrying an extensive shipment of munitions in the hold.

1. Why is John Bull's claim supposed to be unconvincing?
2. In addition to flying a German flag, how else is the German identity of the submarine sailor made apparent.
3. Is this cartoon sympathetic to the Germans? Explain.

Cartoon # 4

THE MISTRESS OF THE SEAS ("Shall we attack, Sir?" "Oh, no; first we must signal for help! We are hardly three times as strong as the Germans.")

March 1915

This German cartoon is a bitter commentary on how they perceived the British Royal Navy. The two men in admiral's uniforms are supposed to be British officers.

1. According to this cartoon, how did the Germans view the British navy?
2. In your opinion, was this a legitimate perception on the part of the Germans?
3. In light of this German perception of the British navy, why did the Germans feel justified in using their U-boats as they did?

Cartoon # 5

THE CROWNING ACHIEVEMENT (THIS LATEST SUBMARINE VICTIM MAY BE THE LAST)

May 3, 1916

This cartoon ran in American newspapers in 1916. Later that year Wilson was running for re-election with the campaign slogan "He kept us out of war." He was re-elected but by April 1917 he was asking Congress to declare war on Germany: nearly one year after this cartoon first appeared.

1. What does the sinking ship represent?
2. How is the U-boat represented in this cartoon?
3. What does the artist think is going to happen in the near future? Was his prediction correct?