

Murder on the high seas. This was written on the ninth of May, two days after the “Lusitania” was torpedoed without warning by a German submarine Theodore Roosevelt. New York May 11, 1915.

MURDER ON THE HIGH SEAS By THEODORE ROOSEVELT

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Murder on the High Seas

This was written on the ninth of May, two days after the “Lusitania” was torpedoed without warning by a German submarine.—Editor.

THE German submarines have established no effective blockade of the British and French coast lines. They have endeavored to prevent the access of French, British *and neutral* ships to Britain and France by attacks upon them which defy every principle of international law as laid down in innumerable existing treaties, including The Hague Conventions. Many of these attacks have represented pure piracy; and not a few of them have been accompanied by murder on an extended scale. In the case of the *Lusitania* the scale was so vast that the murder became wholesale.

A number of American ships had already been torpedoed in similar fashion. In one case the lives lost included those not only of the American captain, but of his wife and little daughter. When the *Lusitania* sank some twelve hundred non-combatants, men, women and children, were drowned, and more than a hundred of these were Americans. Centuries have passed since any war vessel of a civilized power has shown such ruthless brutality toward non-combatants, and especially toward women and children. The pirates of the Barbary Coast behaved at times in similar fashion, until the civilized nations joined in suppressing them; and the pirates who were outcasts from among these civilized nations also at one time perpetrated similar deeds, until they were sunk or hung. But none of these old-time pirates committed murder on so vast a scale as in the case of the *Lusitania*.

The day after the tragedy the newspapers reported in one column that in Queenstown there lay by the score the bodies of women and children, some of the dead women still clasping the bodies of

the little children they held in their arms when death overwhelmed them. In another column they reported the glee expressed by the Berlin journals at this “great victory of German naval policy.” It was a victory over the defenseless and the unoffending, and its signs and trophies were the bodies of the murdered women and children.

Our treaties with Prussia in 1785, 1799, and 1828, still in force in this regard, provide that “if one of the contracting parties should be at war with any other power the free intercourse and commerce of the subjects or citizens of the party remaining neutral with the belligerent powers shall not be interrupted.” Germany has treated this treaty as she has treated other “scraps of paper.”

But the offense goes far deeper than this. The action of the German submarines in the cases cited can be justified only by a plea which would likewise justify the wholesale poisoning of wells in the path of a hostile army, or the shipping of infected rags into the cities of a hostile country; a plea which would justify the torture of prisoners and the reduction of captured women to the slavery of concubinage. Those who advance such a plea will accept but one counter plea—strength, the strength and courage of the just man armed.

When those who guide the military policy of a state hold up to the soldiers of their army, the “Huns,” and the terror once caused by the Huns, for their imitation, they thereby render themselves responsible for any Hunnish deed which may follow. The destruction of cities like Louvain and Dinant, the scientific vivisection of Belgium as a warning to other nations, the hideous wrongdoing to civilians, men, women and children in Belgium and northern France, in order thereby to terrorize the civilian population—all these deeds, and those like them, done on the land, have now been paralleled by what has happened on the sea.

In the teeth of these things, we earn as a nation measureless scorn and contempt if we follow the lead of those who exalt peace above righteousness, if we heed the voices of those feeble folk who bleat to high heaven that there is peace when there is no peace. For many months our government has preserved between right and wrong a “neutrality” which would have excited the emulous admiration of Pontius Pilate—the arch-typical neutral of all time. We have urged as a justification for failing to do our duty in Mexico that to do so would benefit “American dollars.” Are we now to change faces and advance the supreme interest of “American dollars” as a justification for continuance in the refusal to do the duty imposed on us in connection with the world war?

Unless we act with immediate decision and vigor we shall have failed in the duty demanded by humanity at large, and demanded even more clearly by the self-respect of the American Republic.

Theodore Roosevelt



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