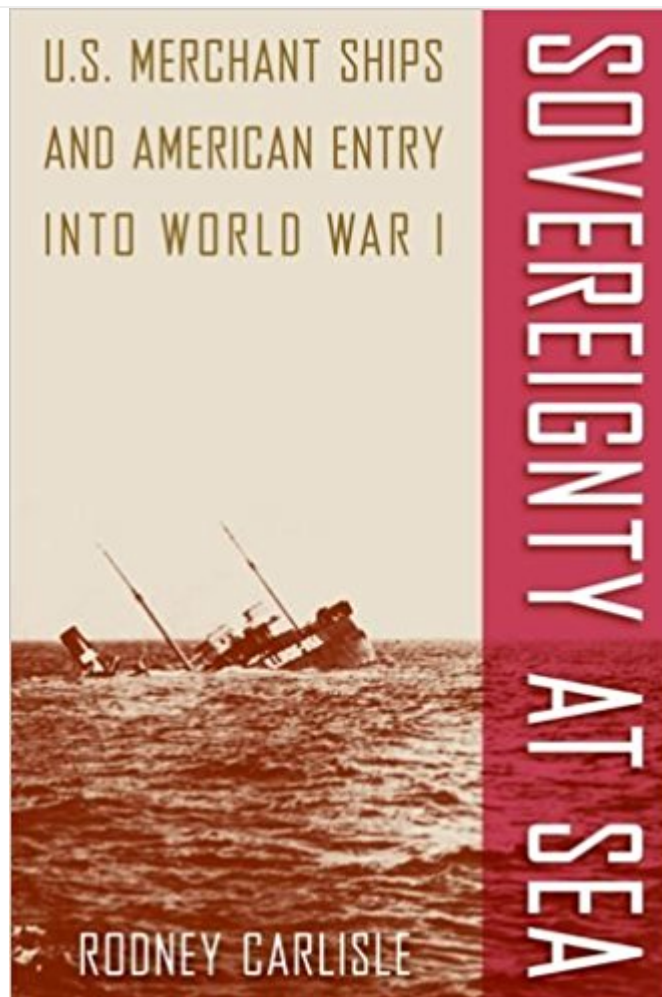


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Sovereignty at Sea: U.S. Merchant Ships and American Entry into World War I



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Reviewed Work(s)

Sovereignty at Sea: U.S. Merchant Ships and American Entry into World War I. By Rodney Carlisle (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009). Pp. 232. Cloth, \$69.95.

In *Sovereignty at Sea*, Rodney Carlisle argues that “the actual cause of American entry into World War I, or the *casus belli*, entirely derived from maritime issues, most especially from events surrounding a little-remembered group of American-registered merchant ships” (6). In doing so, he rejects the idealistic motives such as democracy and self-determination commonly ascribed to the United States generally and President Wilson specifically. Carlisle does not deny that idealism was determinative in the US government’s decisions to implicitly aid Britain and France as opposed to Germany. He acknowledges that many Americans understood the purpose of US entry in moralistic, Wilsonian terms. He argues that the sinkings of three American ships were the specific, overt acts of war that provided the tipping point for the Wilson administration to ask Congress for a declaration of war.

Carlisle begins by reviewing the international rules governing naval warfare at the time as well as the adherence to these rules by the British Royal Navy and the Imperial German Navy. “Cruiser warfare” regulations allowed belligerent nations to sink merchant vessels carrying contraband cargo in international waters provided that the crew was safely evacuated into the life boats prior to sinking. These regulations were codified in the London Declaration of 1909, which was largely observed even it was not ratified by the signatories. On the whole, Carlisle argues that the British and German navies were both quite scrupulous about honoring neutral rights, making violations of these rights more conspicuous. In support of this argument, he demonstrates that on 88 out of 132 US merchant ships sunk between August 1914 and November 1918 there were no crew casualties. In comparison to submarine warfare in World War II, one is struck by the great effort undertaken by German submarine commanders to ensure the safety of neutral crews whose ships had been sunk. For example, one German captain towed the crew of a sunken US merchant ship into sight of a

British patrol boat and then fired the submarine's deck gun to get the attention of the British before diving.

The bulk of the work focuses on the details of various attacks on US ships both prior to and following the German declaration of unrestricted submarine warfare in 1917. Carlisle emphasizes that though Americans travelling on British ships were killed by submarine attacks prior to 1917, these attacks did not constitute a violation of US sovereignty. Examining the deaths of Americans on British passenger lines through the lenses of class and gender, he argues that the deaths of middle-class women and children on vacation received much wider publicity than did the loss of working-class merchant sailors. Given that sovereignty follows the flag of a nation, an attack on US sovereignty would only occur when a merchant ship flying the US flag and registered to an American company was attacked. He details how the loss of 7 US merchant ships between January 1915 and November 1916 were not overt acts of war for various technical reasons. He sees these technical details as having a powerful influence on the actions of the Wilson cabinet and the US State Department. Wilson's reelection on a platform of neutrality confirmed the president's determination to keep the United States out of the war.

The most significant event for Carlisle's argument is the German declaration of unrestricted submarine warfare in January 1917. But Wilson still did not seek war. His message to Congress following the declaration stated that he would not take action unless Germany committed overt acts of war. Wilson "could not believe that German submarine officers would do what the German Foreign Office said they would" (97) and waited for the implementation of the new German policy, which occurred over a period from January 19th to March 18th. During this time, 10 US ships were sunk with a loss of 24 American lives. Specifically, the loss of three merchant ships flying the US flag and registered to large, visible American businesses provided the requisite overt acts of war to which Wilson had referred.

During the debate over the war resolution in Congress, many members presented the losses of US lives and ships back to 1914 as causes for war. The administration, however, viewed only the last three sinkings as appropriate *casus belli*. With later representations of the US entry into the war in mind, Carlisle argues that "the specific ship losses that had represented the cause for war tended to become submerged in broader

issues during the congressional debates” (160). In these debates, one can already identify the idealistic concerns that became the basis for the popular rationale of US entry into the war.

Carlisle concludes by highlighting the relationship of the Neutrality Laws of the late 1930s with the losses of US ships and lives prior to US entry into World War I. He argues convincingly that the creators and supporters of these laws understood US belligerency as a direct result of the sinkings described in this work. Their legislation was specifically designed to prevent these situations from arising again and drawing the United States into another European war.

He notes that the sinkings in question have received scant attention in historical works for three reasons. First, the merchant sinkings were minor in publicity when compared to the attacks on passenger liners. Second, President Wilson clearly presented US entry into the war in idealistic terms and did not mention the specific sinkings that were the focus of cabinet discussion prior to his war address. Finally, historians understandably seek to connect large events like the US declaration of war with large causes, such as Wilsonian idealism.

Sovereignty at Sea is written primarily from the papers of Woodrow Wilson, Robert Lansing, and other administration officials, as well as published newspaper accounts of submarine attacks and the *Congressional Record*. This is a well-written, tightly-argued study that expands our understanding of US belligerency in World War I while highlighting the important role that concepts of international law and sovereignty played in the early 20th century. It is recommended to the specialist and the general reader.

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