

British Blockade Extends

This is what Britain did on November 3, 1914, when it announced, allegedly in response to the discovery of a German ship unloading mines off the English coast, that henceforth the whole of the North Sea was a military area, which would be mined and into which neutral ships proceeded "at their own peril." Similar measures in regard to the English Channel insured that neutral ships would be forced to put into British ports for sailing instructions or to take on British pilots. During this time they could easily be searched, obviating the requirement of searching them on the high seas.

This introduces the second and even more complex question: that of contraband. Briefly, following the lead of the Hague Conference of 1907, the Declaration of London of 1909 considered food to be "conditional contraband," that is, subject to interception and capture only when intended for the use of the enemy's military forces. This was part of the painstaking effort, extending over generations, to strip war of its most savage aspects by establishing a sharp distinction between combatants and noncombatants. Among the corollaries of this was that food not intended for military use could legitimately be transported to a neutral port, even if it ultimately found its way to the enemy's territory. The House of Lords had refused its consent to the Declaration of London, which did not, consequently, come into full force. Still, as the US government pointed out to the British at the start of the war, the declaration's provisions were in keeping "with the generally recognized principles of international law." As an indication of this, the British admiralty had incorporated the Declaration into its manuals.

The British quickly began to tighten the noose around Germany by unilaterally expanding the list of contraband and by putting pressure on neutrals (particularly the Netherlands, since Rotterdam more than any other port was the focus of British concerns over the provisioning of the Germans) to acquiesce in its violations of the rules. In the case of the major neutral, the United States, no pressure was needed.

The Germans responded to the British attempt to starve them into submission by declaring the seas around the British Isles a "war zone." Now the British openly announced their intention of impounding any and all goods originating in or bound for Germany. The effects of the blockade were soon being felt by the German civilians. In June 1915, bread began to be rationed. "By 1916," Vincent states, "the German population was surviving on a meager diet of dark bread, slices of sausage without fat, an individual ration of three pounds of potatoes per week, and turnips," and that year the potato crop failed. The author's choice of telling quotations from eye witnesses helps to bring home to the reader the reality of a famine such as had not been experienced in Europe outside of Russia since Ireland's travail in the 1840s. As one German put it: "Soon the women who stood in the pallid queues before shops spoke more about their children's hunger than about the death of their husbands."