



The Baltimore Sabotage Cell: German Agents, American Traitors, and the U-Boat Deutschland during World War I by Dwight R. Messimer.

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The main title of this book is misleading. Less than a fifth of the volume concerns a German sabotage cell operating out of Baltimore during World War I. The remaining four-fifths are devoted to a German cargo submarine, the *U-Deutschland*, of the book's subtitle.¹ The two topics are linked by a thin thread: the key personnel in the Baltimore sabotage cell happened also to be in charge of the cargo submarine's shoreside operations in the United States. This is a popular history with unfulfilled scholarly pretensions. It tells a straightforward, interesting, reasonably well researched story. But, judged as a work of scholarship, it is rife with problems.

The Baltimore cell was one of the sabotage networks Germany established in the United States in the first part of World War I. It was charged with damaging American production of munitions for the Allies. The only German sabotage cell not shut down by US authorities before the American entry into the war, it fomented strikes and carried out the deadliest and most spectacular wartime act of sabotage in the United States: the 1916 Black Tom explosion, which destroyed a vast quantity of arms, killed a handful of people, and even damaged the Statue of Liberty half a mile away.

The U-Boat *Deutschland* was the prototype for a submarine construction program designed to allow Germany to restore some degree of trade with the United States both for diplomatic reasons and to replenish its stores of important rare metals and other crucial supplies needed only in small amounts. The vessel made the journey to America twice in 1916. The second submarine of its class, the *U-Bremen*, was lost on its maiden voyage to America and the program was scrapped in late 1916, when the *U-Deutschland* and four of the other six cargo subs then under construction were converted into war ships.

Members of the Baltimore cell founded the Eastern Forwarding Company (EFCO) to manage the *Deutschland's* operations in US waters; it handled the logistical and security arrangements for docking the ship and the buying and selling of supplies. Though there was some overlap of personnel, EFCO and the sabotage cell were separate but mutually aware entities.

Historian and US Army veteran Dwight Messimer (formerly of California State Univ.–San Jose) has written books on German submarines in World War I and American naval and air forces in World War II. Despite his efforts to attract a popular audience, aspects of the book's early chapters are rather banal, especially the two-page fictional conversation that opens the volume. Chapter 2 introduces such a dizzying array of historical characters involved in the sabotage cell that one is forced to reread many passages to keep track of the cast of characters and their hierarchy. These defects disappear as one reads on into the heart of the book, which conveys a gripping tale.

A scholarly appraisal cannot be so generous. In his choice and presentation of subjects, the author

1. The author has previously written a book about the same vessel: *The Merchant U-Boat: Adventures of the Deutschland, 1916-1918* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 1988). The present volume is an extensive rewrite of that work, particularly with regard to the sabotage cell and the Eastern Forwarding Company.

makes a muddled attempt to blend three distinct elements: an intelligence study of the Baltimore sabotage cell, an interdisciplinary analysis of the German cargo submarine program and EFCO, and finally an account of the naval operations and personnel of a single U-boat.

Given this tripartite subject matter, choosing the *U-Deutschland* as the narrative focal point obscures any overarching argument. The terse (four-page) first chapter² mostly sketches the wider context, with some attempt to frame the book as a study of the German response to the British blockade, which confronted

Germany ... with two related, but somewhat dissimilar, problems: how to break the blockade and how to stop or seriously disrupt the British supply line across the Atlantic.... One of the two solutions to Germany's problems, sabotage, was incompatible with Germany's primary diplomatic goal to keep the United States out of the war, whereas the other, breaking the blockade [with cargo submarines], provided the least danger of bringing the United States into it. (5)

However, a dedicated study of Germany's efforts to break the blockade would not focus exclusively, or even primarily, on the cargo submarine program, but rather its trade with neutral neighbors. As Nicholas Lambert has shown,³ a critical problem for the British was interdicting Germany's trade with the northern European neutrals—the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. Though these countries were entitled under international law to trade freely with the United States, Britain sought to limit that trade to minimize the chance of supplies being re-exported to Germany. Nonetheless, smuggling appears to have been rampant, especially early in the war, and Germany acquired many orders of magnitude more American supplies via neutral nations than through two trips by a single cargo submarine, a fact Messimer mentions only briefly in chapter 10 (109).

Next, the book's discussion of the cargo submarine program, and of the *U-Deutschland* in particular, is often dauntingly exhaustive. Walter Runciman, the British President of the Board of Trade, sounded alarm bells in late 1916 not because of German sabotage efforts in the United States, but because Germany's submarine campaign was actively seeking to disrupt Britain's trade with America. Messimer facetiously dismisses this idea, writing that "there were not enough U-boats to effectively block Britain's transatlantic sea trade" (5). Why exaggerate sabotage endeavors to the exclusion of much more serious German threats to that trade?

Turning to Messimer's three principal subjects of discussion, I find that his brief investigation of the Baltimore sabotage cell does modestly advance our knowledge of German intelligence operations in the United States, a topic largely absent in the existing historiography.⁴ Specifically, he clarifies the structure, operations, and personnel of the cell, but makes no real attempt to assess the impact of its activities. Thus, Messimer's account is more a springboard for a proper scholarly study of German sabotage operations in the United States, which remains a desideratum.

For a study of how Germany sought to disrupt Britain's trade with America, meanwhile, the book's focus on the Baltimore sabotage cell is equally problematic. Messimer delves lovingly into the minutest details, diligently explicating the program, public reaction to it in both Germany and America, the propaganda surrounding it, the cargo carried in both directions, and how it was acquired, etc., etc. But no case is made for the necessity or potential value of the program. Even had it gotten properly up and running, it could have done no more than mildly relieve shortages of key supplies needed only in the

2. Excluding the opening fictional conversation. The book lacks both introduction and conclusion.

3. In *Planning Armageddon: British Economic Warfare and the First World War* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 2012)—not cited by Messimer.

4. See my "Intelligence in the First World War: The State of the Field," *Intelligence and National Security* 29 (2014) 290-91.

smallest quantities. (Compare this to the millions of tons of cargo transported by the armada of Allied and US merchant vessels.)

The closest the author comes to identifying a larger significance of the *U-Deutschland* is his claim that the “commercial U-boat project ... became the best indicator as to which direction the German war effort would go. As long as the cargo boats were in operation, the peace advocates held the high ground” (111). The scrapping of the cargo submarine program seems to bear this out: it was canceled on 16 December 1916, just three days after Germany made its peace offer to the Allies and a full three weeks before its decision to launch unrestricted submarine warfare, which brought the United States into the war on the Allied side three months later. Though the timing is suggestive, there is no research to indicate that it reflected a change in German leadership attitudes. Messimer certainly does not demonstrate that, for all of the details he provides, the cargo submarine program much concerned Germany’s military and civilian leaders. In fact, he never explains just why the program was terminated.

Such omissions stem from Messimer’s uneven archival research. He himself hints at this in his preface: “During the intervening twenty-eight years [since the publication of *The Merchant U-Boat*] ... previously inaccessible archives in Germany and the United States opened up online, making it possible to literally travel the globe and never set foot out of my house. The amount of new material that became available, was, and still is, staggering” (xi). We may surmise that the neglect of certain sources and the overemphasis on others may correlate with their internet (in)accessibility.

It must be said, however, that the author’s account of the *U-Deutschland*’s stays in the United States does add something new on German-American relations in the second half of 1916 and may therefore interest students of American history. The US State Department’s attitude to the submarine provides a window into the complexities of American diplomacy relating to the British blockade. The surprising, almost celebratory enthusiasm with which the American public received the submarine on its first visit (to Maryland in July) contrasts sharply with the frostier reception the U-Boat met on its second visit (to Connecticut in November). Though Messimer leaves the implications of this unexplored, they merit further investigation.

Finally, the chapters on the *U-Deutschland*’s Atlantic crossings and its combat actions after its repurposing as a war vessel comprise a kind of naval case study of life aboard a German submarine and the details of its operations. The text here is dramatic, gripping, and meticulously accurate. What precisely we are meant to take away as their larger contribution to the literature remains a mystery.

It is possible and desirable to write good scholarly history that yet appeals to a general audience. *The Baltimore Sabotage Cell* is, taken as a whole, not such a book.