

Book Review

Die Affäre Patzig: Ein Kriegsverbrechen für das Kaiserreich?

Ulrich van der Heyden

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Van der Heyden's *The Patzig affair. A war crime for the empire?* is a richly illustrated study of the case of U-boat commandant Helmut Patzig, whose U-86 torpedoed the British hospital ship, *Llandovery Castle*, on 27 June 1918.

U-boats were stealth weapons, and therefore of a dubious reputation. They could launch surprise attacks without being spotted, only to disappear quickly again after a successful kill. Submarine warfare therefore occurred in an ethically grey area that many contemporaries viewed with disdain, akin to another terrifying invention used in the Great War, namely poison gas. When the British naval blockade began to upset the German economy, the Germans declared in February 1915 that they would retaliate by conducting unrestricted submarine warfare around the British Isles. This resulted not only in serious losses of tonnage, which threatened to disrupt Britain's own economic lifeline, but also in German attacks on neutral vessels on the mere suspicion that they might transport military supplies. The torpedoing of the ocean liner *Lusitania* by a German U-boat on 7 May 1915 killed nearly 1 200 passengers, which confirmed the image of Germany as a ruthless belligerent that ignored the rules of 'civilised' warfare. The further escalation of submarine warfare in 1916 saw attacks on foreign vessels in British waters without any warning. These assaults were brought to a halt temporarily because American citizens were among the victims. At that stage, the German military leadership was concerned not to provoke the United States into entering the war. These endeavours of scaling tactics back to less jarring practices were short-lived, however, and in February 1917, Germany officially returned to unrestricted submarine warfare. The United States entered the war in April 1917 against the background of an increasingly pugnacious mood amongst the American public that was incited partly by the indiscriminate U-boat attacks. The decision to return to a more rules-based form of submarine warfare in October 1918 came too late to change Allied perceptions of entrenched German malice. More importantly, German U-boats proved to be powerless to prevent the arrival of American 'dough boys' on the Western battlefields, which precipitated the final defeat of the *Kaiserreich*.

Patzig's ruthless actions against the British hospital ship, which was placed in the service of the Canadian forces, may be viewed in the context of an increasingly desperate mood in the German navy. The rules of 'civilised' combat – as much as all governments promised to respect them in peacetime – had been eroded quickly after the shooting

started. The merciless German strategy failed to release the stranglehold of the blockade, but accelerated the spiral of violence, also leading to incidents of coldblooded killing of survivors of destroyed German submarines. The last year of the war saw an unprecedented loss of 90 German submarines due to combat, mines, accidents and scuttling by their own crews.¹

Oberleutnant zur See Helmut Patzig was a decorated officer with a record of many missions in the North Atlantic when he sank the *Llandoverly Castle* off the southern Irish coast. The ship was on its return voyage from Halifax to where it had transported wounded soldiers. On board were crew members and medical personnel of which 234 died, including 14 Canadian nursing sisters. The officers of the U-boat later claimed that they had reason to believe that the *Llandoverly Castle* transported soldiers and military supplies. After the initial interrogation of the surviving captain of the hospital ship, Patzig must have realised that the sinking could not be justified in military terms (pp. 64–65). What made Patzig’s actions even more conspicuous among war-time atrocities, however, was that he later returned to the scene to finish off the surviving witnesses of his actions. He had his crew fire on the victims and, in addition, he tried to ram the only lifeboat that managed to escape with 24 survivors on board. Patzig then falsified his logbook to erase any evidence that his U-boat had been present in the area of the attack.

After the war, the German authorities at first responded quite disinterestedly to questions from the British by claiming their ignorance about the event (pp. 84–85). In the face of the political and economic turmoil in post-war Germany, the Allied powers hesitated to fan the flames of nationalist discontent by handing over war crime cases to British courts. The ‘stab in the back’ legend was adopted enthusiastically by large parts of the political elites and the public, and the Allies wanted to avoid the impression of meting out unilateral victor’s justice. When the British government did not desist from their investigation, however, a case was opened at the Leipzig Supreme Court in 1921. Patzig went underground without ever having to face up to his crime. Only two of his officers, who turned out to be uncooperative witnesses, were found guilty, which unleashed a wave of nationalist resentment in Germany. They received short prison sentences, but were sprung from jail a little later with the help of members of right-wing militias. The arrest warrant for Patzig was cancelled in 1926 in the course of a wider amnesty for soldiers accused of war crimes, which was supported by parties across the political spectrum of the Weimar Republic (pp. 143–146).

Patzig apparently managed to return to civilian life once the danger of extradition to the British had passed, at first under the name of his wife. He joined the Nazi Party in November 1933. In 1937, he was appointed lieutenant commander (*Kapitänleutnant*) of the reserve, to be promoted to corvette captain in 1939, and to frigate captain in 1944. He died in West Germany in 1984 (pp. 178–183).

¹ See uboat.net. “U-boat fates: U-boat losses 1914–1918”. 2022. <<https://www.uboat.net/wwi/fates/losses.html>> [Accessed on 20 March 2022].

The author, whose forte is a prolific output on South African colonial history and missionary studies, has succeeded in contributing a detailed account of the sinking of the *Llandoverly Castle* and its political repercussions in Germany to the existing literature on this event. As he explains, this study was motivated by his discovery of a link between the event and his own family history. The *Gefechtsrudergänger*, a term that could be translated as combat steersman, on Patzig's U-boat was an ancestor of the author. This crew member was a witness to the atrocity, but never dared to step into the limelight as a witness. As the author convincingly points out, the fierce nationalism and right-wing culture prevalent during the Weimar period and then again in Nazi Germany hardly encouraged the presentation of a truthful account of Patzig's attack on the hospital ship and the subsequent murder of the survivors. The story of the torpedoing of the *Llandoverly Castle* became a tale that was passed down in hushed tones over several generations in the author's family. It is not clear, however, why Van der Heyden decided merely to hint at the identity of this crew member who died in 1970. Whether the combat steersman was the author's grandfather or granduncle remains the reader's guess, but the last part of the book somewhat meanders through a complex narrative of the repercussions of this event for his family history during the Second World War and its aftermath. The author has chosen to tell this story in the voice of the objective historian, but some readers may regret that the author has thrown a semi-transparent veil of secrecy over the after-effects of the traumatic events on his own family. Despite these quibbles, however, this accessible publication will be welcomed, not only by historians, but also by a wider readership. The dramatisation of the fate of the *Llandoverly Castle* in the form of an opera, which has recently been staged in Canada, is a reminder that the memory of this horrible event is still alive.²

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² The Llandoverly Castle. N.d. <<https://www.llandoverlycastle.ca/>> [Accessed on 20 March 2022].