

A SHIP NAMED ARMENIAN

Posted on February 27, 2013 by Keghart



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Tigran Kalaydjian, Cyprus, February 2013



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Built as a freighter, the *SS Armenian* was a valuable transportation vessel in the profitable cargo service that existed between Great Britain and North America at the turn of the 20th century. The exact location of her final resting place remained a mystery until 2008, when her wreck was discovered off the western coast of England and she was seen for the first time since World War I.

For a ship born during the *Hamidian* massacres, it was perhaps inevitable that she would meet her doom in that darkest of years – 1915 – at the same time as the people with whom she shared her name were being driven to their ghastly death.

This is the story of the *SS Armenian*...

The *SS Armenian* was built in 1895 by Harland & Wolff, the Belfast shipyard that would later become famous for making the legendary trio *Titanic*, *Olympic* and *Britannic*. The vessel was 156 metres long and had a displacement of 8,825 tonnes. She was launched on Nov. 25, 1895 as the *SS Indian* for Frederick Leyland & Co, but wasn't delivered until September of the following year, by which time she had been renamed the *SS Armenian*.

With very little contact between Great Britain and a nation called Armenia, the clue behind the sudden name change lies in the events inundating the British press throughout 1895-96. For during that horrific time, the Sultan and the ruling elite of the Ottoman Empire were diligently putting into action their final solution to the 'Armenian Question', a solution which required the destruction of the empire's Armenian minority as a cohesive unit and its dispersal throughout the country. Their abominable policy involved forced assimilation, the settling of Turks in Armenian-populated regions, the incitement of Moslem fanatics and Kurdish militias to commit atrocities against unarmed

Armenians, and a plan of organized, indiscriminate killing of men, women and children by the sultan's military.

Starting in the late summer of 1894, the massacres of Armenians had gradually grown in scale and reach, eventually encompassing several large provinces in the east of the empire. In October 1895, reports of the slaughter of hundreds of Armenian men in the town of Erzurum provoked shock and indignation across the world. Newspaper articles regularly depicted the sultan as a bloodthirsty tyrant, a butcher of women and children, and sympathy for the Armenians was widespread. Leading newspapers such as the *Times*, *Morning Post*, *Daily News*, *New York Times* and *Le Petit Parisien* published articles and editorials by prominent public figures condemning the Turkish crimes. Heartwrenching eyewitness accounts were bringing home the magnitude of the massacres, filling the public both in Europe and America with disgust and anger at the savagery of the pogroms. One account sent by a Catholic prelate stationed in Western Armenia described a typical scene:

Over the whole province the work of destruction has been pursued, every town, every hamlet having been given over to pillage and murder... The inhabitants who have been spared have been stripped of everything of use or value. Those who fled from the doomed districts were pursued and cut down mercilessly, without regard to age or sex, by the barbarous Turks. The bodies of many children and young girls lie under the charred debris of the ruined homes.

By 1896 close to 300,000 innocent lives had been lost throughout the Armenian highlands. In a speech delivered in Liverpool that year, former Prime Minister William Gladstone protested vehemently against the atrocities and called for resolute action by the European powers against the Turks. Against this background, there is no doubt that the unremitting suffering of the Armenians would have been well ingrained in the consciousness of the wider British public. And with the constant flow of gruesome news reports causing outrage and clamours for justice, it is understandable why the people behind the building of the *SS Armenian* would choose to rename the vessel. It may have been a small but significant gesture, an expression of solidarity with the Armenian people in their hour of torment and agony.

Fitted out with stables to transport horses, the *SS Armenian* commenced her maiden voyage from Liverpool to Boston on Sept. 28, 1896. Three years later she was contracted by the British authorities to serve as a transport in the Boer War, and in 1901 she was used to transport 963 Boer prisoners of war to Bermuda.

After the war, in March 1903, the ship's management was taken over by the White Star Line – the same company that would come to operate the RMS *Titanic* just a few years later – and she resumed her cargo service between Liverpool and New York. In 1910 she was repainted in the distinctive Leyland insignia – a pink funnel with a black top.

The *Armenian* completed her peacetime assignment in March 1914, before being briefly laid up prior to her deployment as a horse transport during World War I. Although not fitted as a passenger

vessel, she was used to transport the Grenadier Guards, an infantry regiment of the British armed forces, to Belgium on the Oct. 7, 1914.

The SS *Armenian* began her final and fateful voyage in early June 1915 with 175 men onboard. She was chartered to carry a cargo of 1,422 mules from the United States to Bristol in England. The animals were intended as replacements for the horses that had been lost in fighting in France. At around 6:30pm on June 28, while heading northeast off Trevoze Head, Cornwall, a watchman on the *Armenian* sighted a German submarine. In what proved to be a hugely erroneous decision, Captain James Trickey ordered full steam in an attempt to outrun the U-boat, which turned out to be the *U-24*. He was signalled to stop and surrender after two shots were fired across his bow, but he refused. The U-boat's commander, Rudolf Schneider, then opened fire with the deck gun, scoring several hits on the *Armenian*, one shot taking out the Marconi room.

After more than a dozen men lay dead or injured on the deck, Trickey finally agreed to surrender. Much to his surprise, he and the crew were treated well by the Germans from that point on. With several lifeboats damaged from the shelling, they were allowed to take the remaining boats and make for the Cornish coast. The *Armenian* was then sunk by two torpedoes fired into her stern. She went down in minutes.

The survivors were picked up the following day by the Belgian steam trawler *President Stevens*. Four of the injured died before they could be rescued.

Twenty-nine men lost their lives, including nineteen Americans. The *Armenian* needed hands to tend to the mules, so many of the 175 men onboard were muleteers who had been hired at Newport News, Virginia, before sailing. Of the twenty-nine fatalities, twelve were muleteers who refused to abandon the animals and preferred to go down with the ship. Most of them were African-Americans.

International reaction

Following the sinking of the RMS *Lusitania* 52 days earlier, in which more than a hundred Americans had lost their lives, the sinking of the *Armenian* caused a second crisis between Germany and the United States, as the majority of the men who died were again American. Much was made in the press of this fact, with both the British and French papers doing their best to fan the flames of anti-German sentiment in the US, with the hope of drawing America into the war.

While the propaganda war raged in the newspapers, President Wilson carefully considered the *Armenian* incident before making any official pronouncements, preferring to wait until the investigation was over. His procrastination proved expedient. The ship was undeniably engaged in the transportation of contraband to England – work animals destined for the Allied armies fighting in France – and this made her a legitimate target according to most.

Even though the generally-accepted rules of engagement regarding the sinking of merchant ships in wartime required a 'stop and search' approach, it was well-known that not all U-boat commanders

obeyed these rules. However, the investigation found that Rudolf Schneider had indeed tried to stop the ship before opening fire with the deck gun. It is almost certain that had Captain Trickey complied with the order to stop, the SS *Armenian* would have been saved.

The furore caused by the sinking of the *Armenian* eventually abated because of the circumstances surrounding the event, and the United States didn't declare war on Germany until April 1917.

Discovery

In 2002 amateur divers claimed they had discovered the wreck of the SS *Armenian* but their claim was soon found to be incorrect (the wreck was of the auxiliary cruiser HMS *Patia*).

The SS *Armenian* was finally located and identified by wreck hunter and archaeologist Innes McCartney in 2008. The discovery featured on the History Channel in an episode of Deep Wreck Mysteries entitled *Search for the Bone Wreck*. The ship sits upright in 95 metres of water, forty-five miles from the reported location given by the British crew at the time of the sinking. A mass of animal bones was found inside the ship, a testament to the hundreds of animals whose deaths were but a minor statistic in a global conflagration that claimed millions of lives and provided ideal cover for the commission of one of mankind's greatest ever crimes – the Armenian Genocide.

Tigran Kalaydjian

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The account was published in the periodical *Catholic World* in May 1895.

It is worth noting that although press accounts at the time identified the *U-38* as the culprit, because the survivors said this was the number visible on the conning tower, it was in fact the *U-24* and Schneider who sank the *Armenian*.

