How Gothic Was My U-Boat: The Welsh Press and German Submarine Warfare

In an article that exposes the roots of Grexit-era Germanophobia, Rita Singer details how Welsh press coverage and poetry about U-Boat attacks on Welsh ships evolved into racialized depictions of German U-Boat combatants as ‘Huns’, monsters, ghouls and Satanic fiends.

In July 1914, The Strand Magazine published Arthur Conan Doyle’s latest story ‘Danger!’ where ‘Captain John Sirius, belonging to the navy of one of the smallest Powers in Europe’ relates his part in his country’s successful war against Great Britain.¹ This story, set in the near future, hinges on the breakdown of diplomatic relations between Norland, a fictional Germanic country, and Britain. In only six weeks, Sirius and his eight (!) submarines starve the enemy into submission. As child mortality soars and socialists run riot, the entire Royal Navy blockades Norland’s single naval base instead of protecting merchant vessels trying to land sorely needed grain and livestock at British ports. ‘Danger!’ ends with a fictional London Times retrospective of Britain’s naval humiliation by an insignificant Germanic country using nefarious tactics, and the announcement of ‘the immediate construction of not one but two double-lined railways under the Channel’.

While the literary merits of Conan Doyle’s invasion story are debatable, it is, however, remarkable for several reasons. The story mimics earlier invasion fiction exploring potential military campaigns against Great Britain. It plays to the fear of famine as a key threat to the social and political order of this island nation. However, considering the story hinges on the efficient use of submarines, Conan Doyle does not invoke the fear of an invisible and unpredictable enemy whose attack could lead to a watery death. In this sense, ‘Danger!’ is still very much a story written in peacetime, albeit a politically fraught peacetime: Archduke Franz Ferdinand and Sophie, Duchess of Hohenheim, had recently been assassinated, and by 4 August, Europe was at war.

Until late 1918, The Strand published several short stories in which submarine warfare played a central role, peaking in 1917 with three stories and two non-fiction features. Among these was ‘The Tale’, the last Joseph Conrad story published in his lifetime.² Within two years, the submarine stories shifted from evoking plucky Britshers fighting upstart Germans to an inward struggle where the British male psyche battles against unseen and unknowable enemies. The following examples from Welsh newspapers demonstrate that the stories in The Strand were not published in a vacuum, but are best understood as one type of artistic response to the development of German submarine warfare, reflecting how this was reported in the press.

Blockading Germany’s main ports quickly became a priority for the Royal Navy as it meant choking the movement not just of arms and military personnel, but also civilian goods like food and raw materials used for daily consumption. With a consumer market similar to Britain, Germany greatly depended on overseas imports. However, Germany’s much smaller coast line meant the country and its population were much more vulnerable to blockades. In 1914, the submarine was still a comparatively new and expensive technology that was also prone to malfunction. Most countries’ navies regarded them with suspicion and continued to put their resources into tried and trusted warship technology. While few in number, German submarines were technologically further advanced than those of other countries, and the Imperial Navy agreed to trial them to terrorise British merchant vessels and force the Royal Navy to withdraw their battleships to home waters. By Winter 1914-15, the first U-boats were sighted in the Irish Sea and at the end of January 1915, the first Welsh ships were reported sunk.

An early victim of the Handelskrieg (merchant war) was the small steamship Linda Blanche registered at Bangor. She was on her way from Manchester to Belfast when she was stopped on 30 January 1915 by the German submarine U 21 under the command of KapLt Otto Hersing. The first
two newspapers to report the sinking were Y Dinesydd Cymreig and Haverfordwest and Milford Haven Telegraph. Whereas the Welsh-language newspaper heralds the case as ‘“Gorchest” suddlongau Germani’ (‘German submarines’ “feat”’), its Anglophone cousin attempts to condemn the ‘Irish Sea Raid’, but strikes a remarkably uneven tone. The Haverfordwest reporter identifies the submariners as pirates, noting that the Linda Blanche was ‘shattered […] by explosives’ and that she ‘fell a prey to U 21’, but the sailors’ testimonies undercut the violent language, stating that the Germans handed out cigars, made sure there was enough fresh water in the life boats and even pointed them in the direction of the next passing vessel for a quick rescue.

The North Wales Chronicle soon caught up with the Bangor sailors for another thorough interview. Once again, the incident is related in sensationalist terms. The majority of the article contains eyewitness testimonies by the captain, John Ellis, and two of his crewmen, bringing a sense of immediacy to the report:

*They scrambled on board the ‘Linda Blanche’ [...] and one of the men went with a bomb to the forepart and another German went to the upper bridge, but whether this man had a bomb I could not say definitely. In fact, I am not sure where the second bomb was placed. Another German went into the chart room and ransacked the drawers in search of the ship’s papers. Whilst he was doing this the fuses of the bombs were lit, and there was a rush for the boat.*

Captain Ellis builds up a frantic scene as the German submariners search and subsequently sink the Linda Blanche without any hesitation. In the short-lived chaos, the military training of the German crew becomes obvious as they easily navigate their way around the cargo ship and perform their duties efficiently. This contrasts with the civilian sailors’ confusion. At first, they thought the submarine was British; and when told to surrender their vessel, the captain forgot to bring the ship’s papers. Whereas the handling of explosives and loaded pistols should have made it abundantly clear that they had been caught by the enemy, one of the crew described the German submariners as follows:

*The Germans were fine young fellows, not big, but smart. ‘As smart as our chaps, every bit,’ said one of the crew. Several of the Germans spoke excellent English, and they waved the British flag triumphantly in the faces of their captives, but all in good humour.*

Early into the war, the Welsh press framed the sinking of the Linda Blanche as dangerously armed high jinks at sea. The sudden appearance of enemy submarines in home waters and subsequent unceremonious destruction of a civilian vessel should have been frightening. However, the newspapers and interviewed crew completely underestimated the danger. They failed to recognise actions of war even when they were involved in them. In fact, U 21’s commander Hersing is believed to have fired the first live torpedo of the war, sinking the cruiser Pathfinder. Just a few months after sinking the Linda Blanche, he sank the HMS Triumph and Majestic at Gallipoli – earning him the moniker ‘Destroyer of Battleships’.

At the end of January 1915, public discourse in Wales as in wider Britain still located the war ‘over there’ on the European mainland. It was not only newspaper reporters who underestimated the danger of submarine warfare. The Admiralty recommended skippers steered their vessels along zigzag courses or, when outrunning the enemy was impossible, suggested ramming the attacking submarine. In addition, British merchant vessels were advised to fly the ensigns of neutral countries and paint over ship names. Germany interpreted these largely defensive tactics as a violation of the rules of war and responded with a declaration of unrestricted submarine warfare in February 1916. Thus, any vessel sighted by a U-boat in British waters became a target, civilian or not. Following
Germany’s escalation of the conflict and the rapid increase in the number of destroyed merchant vessels, Welsh newspapers began to use the same aggressive language in reporting the war at sea as had hitherto been reserved for the land war.

On 28 March 1915, U 28 under the command of Georg-Günther von Forstner attacked and sunk the passenger steamer Falaba on her way from Liverpool to West Africa with the loss of 104 lives. Whilst the attack occurred in Irish waters, the survivors were landed at Milford Haven. The public outpouring of grief focused first and foremost on the passengers. Headlines such ‘Murder by Torpedo’ or ‘The Falaba Crime’ did not beat about the bush. According to the Abergavenny Chronicle, this was ‘[t]he most atrocious crime yet committed [...] and the Germans callously watched the drowning people, laughing at their struggles and making no attempt to save them’. While reminding readers that some of the survivors’ testimonies might contradict each other, the reporter of the South Wales Weekly Post presents an uncompromising judgement:

[T]here is complete agreement on the point that the commander of the enemy submarine and his men behaved more like fiends than human beings. Of all the German inhuman floutings of the rules of warfare there is no worse record than that to be now charged against these men. [...] Those guilty of the murder of innocent men and women are outside the pale of consideration as prisoners of war.

Classifying the German submariners as monsters, the reporter denies them due justice as this would only apply to fellow humans. The swiftness of the attack and U 28’s alleged behaviour towards civilians significantly escalated the language used for reporting the submarine war. For example, on 16 April 1915, the Carmarthen Weekly Reporter published a polemic poem by T. I. Jones from Carmarthen written in response to the sinking of the Falaba. Jones rails against the ‘ghoulish deeds’ of the ‘Satanic fiends’ otherwise referred to as ‘Huns’, questioning whether Germans have indeed a soul as their closest ally is ‘[t]he prince of darkness’, before finally rounding off that ‘blood shall be [the Germans’] tears’.

Late in 1917, another significant sinking of a passenger ship in Welsh waters was reported. In the early hours of 28 November, the Apapa was attacked near Point Lynas, off Anglesey, by U 96 on patrol in the Irish Sea. Ten days later, The North Wales Chronicle reported on the official inquest at Bangor where survivors told of their experiences that night. As the reporter retreats behind the authentic voices of the witnesses, the article gains a greater level of immediacy and emotional involvement. One of the engineers testified:

About 4.10 a.m., there was a tremendous crash, which shook the ship from stem to stern, accompanied by a terrific rush of water into the engine room. A torpedo had struck the ship [...]. I immediately called the fourth engineer [...] to assist in stopping the engines. [...] I then looked into the stokehold to see that all the men had got clear, and was making my way to the starting platform, but was swept off my feet.

The engineer continued in his testimony and told how the lifeboats were loaded with passengers and crew and lowered orderly into the sea, when the second torpedo hit: ‘The funnel had fallen across [lifeboat] No. 5, and No. 9 was blown up by the explosion of the second torpedo; the fate of the occupants can be conjectured.’ Of course, we should never retroactively psychologise an eyewitness account, especially 100 years after the event took place. However, considering the swiftness of events and the loss of seventy-seven lives, the engineer’s account is calm and analytical apart from a single moment in which he calls the firing of the second torpedo a ‘dastardly act’. Not content with the seeming lack of emotional involvement, the reporter swiftly corrects this impression:
Imagine, then, the courage required to remain in a position down in the bottom of the ship, with the water swirling round, and the danger of explosions from steam pipes into the bargain at the same time knowing that at any moment you may be trapped and all chance of being saved cut off!

The reporter foregrounds the engineers' uncommon bravery facing heavy engines over which they have lost control. However, the emotional involvement is heightened by an appeal to the readers' own fears of drowning which, in pointing out the danger of entrapment, taps into the Gothic trope of being buried alive.

In a separate statement, another surviving passenger describes the attack much more explicitly:

The crash of the explosion was enough to waken the dead [...]. The Huns in their submarine, lying like a dark shadow on the surface of the water some distance away knew [...] their victim was doomed. One can imagine, therefore, the devilish glee with which they would put the second torpedo in position to discharge at the sinking ship. [...] The second torpedo was sent to murder the helpless people who had rushed from their cosy berths to effect their escape from the hand of death.

Similar to the aftermath of the Falaba sinking, the Germans and their submarine are monstered through racialised denigration and association with a demonic existence below the surface. In describing the passengers' difficulty gaining lifeboat seats and steering away from the rapidly sinking ship, this account differs greatly from the ship engineer's professional, seemingly detached observations. It is perhaps owing to the passenger's unrestrained demonstration of distress and racial abuse of the German submariners that the reporter did not have to 'correct' the interpretation of events with an impassioned and even xenophobic narration of events.

While Arthur Conan Doyle's 'Danger!' had no demonstrable effect on public opinion, its language and framing reflect the early news coverage of the war at sea. The sinking of the Falaba in March 1915 was the game changer in how newspapers in Wales reported naval warfare. Whereas German submariners were initially identified as 'pirates', covertly drawing inspiration from adventure literature, the Falaba reports are the first to consistently monster German submariners. In contrast to Gothic writing, however, post-Falaba news coverage did not aim at controlled emotional responses from their readers, but championed an escalation of rhetoric. In the final year of the war, the reading Welsh public not only soaked up every report of submarine attacks on British and allied ships, but also continued contributing to the brutalisation of language by way of submitting original poetry to the newspapers. On 9 May 1918, the Amman Valley Chronicle and East Carmarthen News published an englyn by B. H. Jones (Mab-yr-Awen) of Penygroes: 'Diafl y môr yw'r Tanforyn, – hyf aethus / Lefiathan yr Ellmyn;/ Creulon frad dyfeisiad dyn / Yw y llofrudd, – hyll lwfryn' ('The Submarine is a Sea devil – the presumptuously terrible Leviathan of the Germans; this murderer is a cruel betrayal of man's invention/inventiveness – ugly coward'). Public talk of sea devils, Leviathans, dark shadows on the water and demonic forces not only dehumanised the enemy, but also promoted British militarism as the only permissible way forward.

Research for this article was carried out as part of U-Boat Project Wales 1914-18, a collaboration between the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales, Bangor University and the National Archaeology Society.
Notes


The ambiguity in the third verse allows for alternative readings. I would like to thank Bethan M. Jenkins for her invaluable advice on the translation.