



The Sinking of the Lancastria: The Twentieth Century's Deadliest Naval Disaster and Churchill's Plot to Make It Disappear

Jonathan Fenby

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On June 17, 1940, just after the Dunkirk evacuation had supposedly ended in success, several thousand of the many British troops still left in France swarmed aboard the five-decked cruise liner Lancastria. Immediately after they boarded, the ship was dive-bombed by the German Luftwaffe, the 17,000-ton Lancastria sank, and hell on earth ensued. German fighter-planes strafed the oil slick sea, setting it ablaze as British troops banded together singing "Roll out the Barrel" in a courageous attempt to protect any sense of hope that still remained. With 4,000 soldiers, women, and children dead — and some estimates as high as 6,000 — the disaster would eclipse that of both the Lusitania and the Titanic. Although the story was picked up in the United States a few weeks later, it was reported only once by any British news outlet, and as the war progressed the tragedy eventually vanished from the public record and the collective memory of a nation under siege. Author Jonathan Fenby argues that this was the result of a shrewd but necessary kibosh put in place by Winston Churchill in order to preserve British morale; Churchill claimed he simply forgot to tell his administration they could report the news.

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