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Review of "Atrocity on the Atlantic: Attack on a Canadian Hospital Ship During the Great War" by Nate Hendley and "Asleep in the Deep: Nursing Sister Anna Stammers and the First World War" by Dianne Kelly

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Nate Hendley. *Atrocity on the Atlantic: Attack on a Canadian Hospital Ship During the Great War*. Toronto: Dundurn, 2024. Pp. 240.

Dianne Kelly. *Asleep in the Deep: Nursing Sister Anna Stammers and the First World War*. Fredericton: Goose Lane Editions and the Gregg Centre for the Study of War and Society, 2021. Pp. 222.

Even though investigations are still ongoing, at this early date, if news reports can be trusted, it seems that Russian forces have committed a litany of war crimes in Ukraine. Forced deportations, summary executions, torture, rape and the deliberate targeting of civilians and civil infrastructure have combined to deprive Russia of whatever moral legitimacy it might have possessed at the outset of its “special military operation.” For its part, on 17 March 2023, the International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for Vladimir Putin, the president of the Russian Federation, over alleged war crimes, specifically the unlawful deportation of children. But war crimes are nothing new, of course. In one form or another, atrocity has occurred in war throughout history. In the 20th Century alone, the Holocaust; the Rwandan genocide; and the massacre of Bosniak Muslims at Srebrenica have in many ways become the defining feature of their respective conflicts. In this, the First World War was no different.¹

On the evening of 27 June 1918, a German U-boat, U-86, torpedoed His Majesty’s Hospital Ship (HMHS) *Llandoverly Castle* in the Western Approaches off the coast of Ireland. The sinking of this defenceless ship of mercy ultimately claimed the lives of 234 individuals and left only twenty-four survivors. Being on its return voyage from Canada to the United Kingdom, it was devoid of patients, a small miracle to be sure for otherwise the death toll would have been much higher indeed. Having claimed its prey, the U-boat surfaced and started shelling the lifeboats in which the initial survivors – the ship’s British crew, Canadian Army Medical Corps personnel and

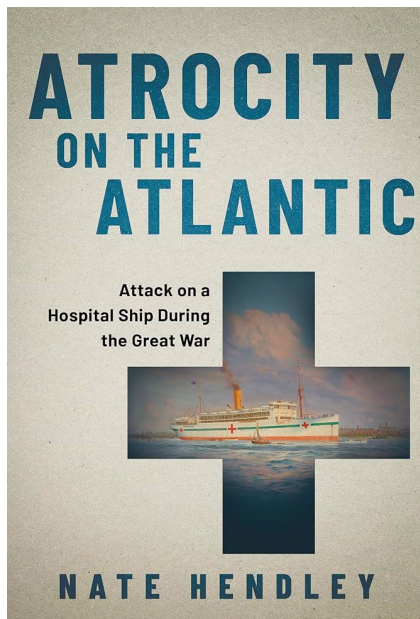
¹ For example, the use of “asphyxiating or deleterious gases” was outlawed by the Hague Conventions prior to the First World War, but soon became a weapon of choice used by many belligerents. See Tim Cook, *No Place to Run: The Canadian Corps and Gas Warfare in the First World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999), 14-17; and Diana Preston, *A Higher Form of Killing* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

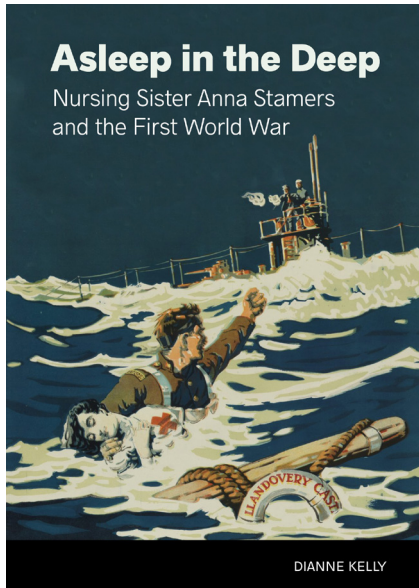
nursing sisters – were taking refuge, all in an attempt to eliminate witnesses to what was clearly a war crime. Being illuminated with lights and painted as required (a green band with red crosses on a white background), the *Llandoverly Castle* was clearly out-of-bounds, but was nevertheless sunk on the completely unfounded pretext of ferrying American aviators to the seat of war.

Two recently published books relate the story of this doomed hospital ship, one discussing a nursing sister who was aboard and subsequently drowned, the other examining the entire course of events as concerns the ship from its loss during the war to the present day. Both are quick, easy and enjoyable reads, but that fact alone belies the seriousness of the topic with which they deal.

Asleep in the Deep by Dianne Kelly traces the short but eventful life of nursing sister Anna Irene Stammers, one of fourteen aboard who lost their lives. A 30-year-old from Saint John, New Brunswick, she had served at Moore Barracks in England, No. 1 Canadian General Hospital in France and No. 16 Canadian General Hospital, also in England. By the time that she was posted to *Llandoverly Castle*, Stammers was truly an experienced, veteran nurse. She had since 1915 when she enlisted seen so much of war, including the German bombing of the Canadian hospital at Étaples – yet another war crime alluded to in both books – that she required a prolonged period of leave in Canada to rest and regain her health.

If *Asleep in the Deep* offers a micro-perspective on the tragedy through the lens of but one individual, *Atrocity on the Atlantic* by Nate Hendley takes a macro-approach. Beginning his book with the sinking of the *Llandoverly Castle* – he jumps right into the action whereas Kelly builds to a powerful climax – he traces the entire story of the ship through the initial commemoration of the lost souls, the post-war war crimes trials at Leipzig, the cultural amnesia that soon followed and the commemorative products created one hundred years





after the fact (in the form of an opera by Stephanie Martin and Paul Ciufu, and art by renowned Canadian artist Silvia Pecota). His book is very much about the sinking of the *Llandoverly Castle*, but it is also about what followed in the years and decades afterwards.

The first half of *Asleep in the Deep* is actually less about Stammers as an individual and more about the varied environments in which she (and her fellow nursing sisters) lived, worked and sometimes died. It is not a biography in the traditional sense. Lacking any personal writings, save for one letter drawn from a 1918 newspaper, Kelly is forced to reconstruct the civilian and military worlds through which Stammers

navigated by relying on an impressive array of primary and secondary sources that together weave a plausible composite narrative. Because of Kelly's reliance on supposition, the book provides a general, yet at the same time informative, contextual description of people, places and events that (undoubtedly) affected Stammers. Unlike some of her contemporaries, such as Clare Gass,² very little is in fact known about this particular nursing sister outside of the sterile details provided in her personnel file and other official documents: her fears and cares, her perceptions and her innermost thoughts are all, unfortunately, unknown. Indeed, Stammers was selected as the subject of this book, not because she offers a novel glimpse into the life and times of a woman at war, but rather because she was the only nursing sister from New Brunswick to die during the First World War, and by extension, when the *Llandoverly Castle* was sunk; this fact alone encouraged Kelly to investigate her life and death.

Because Stammers can only be accessed through the writings of others, both contemporary to the war and afterwards, *Asleep in the Deep* offers little that is not already known as concerns military nursing during the First World War. The impact of repeatedly

² Susan Mann, ed., *The War Diary of Clare Gass, 1915-1918* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000).

treating traumatic injuries on the physical and psychological endurance of nurses; the great disparity between civilian and military nursing in terms of intensity and presenting medical histories; and the fluctuation in hospital admissions coinciding with the amount of activity at the front are all repeated, commented upon and thus reinforced. The book, therefore, provides a good first introduction to the lives of nursing sisters in general, using Stammers's (supposed) experiences as the vehicle through which their history and experiences can be related.

On the other hand, *Atrocity on the Atlantic* is very well-documented. As Hendley states, "There are no imagined conversations in this book: any quotes contained in it have been taken from newspaper accounts, witness testimony, court decisions, letters, diaries, interviews, memos, and other sources" (p. 2). His bibliography is indeed robust. Because he examines the entire story of the *Llandovery Castle*, rather than the life trajectory of a single nurse, the range of sources open to him was broader.

That being said, on occasion, because of the copious amount of material that Hendley had at his disposal, it seems as though he tried to include *everything* of potential interest simply because it was available. The third chapter, for instance, includes numerous excerpts from international newspapers to illustrate Western outrage at the sinking, too many, in fact, that his narrative becomes slightly repetitious. One or two examples, in the opinion of this reviewer, would have sufficed quite nicely. Moreover, some quotations and details were included that added very little to his account. A more judicious use of evidence would have made for a more engaging text, but this is a minor flaw in an otherwise gripping story.

The second half of *Asleep in the Deep*, give or take, is more robust than the first since it discusses events about which much is already known. Around the time that the hospital ship is torpedoed, the book's narrative switches to a discussion of international law and the Hague Conventions, the German policy of unrestricted submarine warfare from February 1917 onward, the loss of the *Llandovery Castle* itself, its legacy, the post-war war crimes trials at Leipzig and the somewhat fleeting remembrance of Stammers. What's more, Kelly provides an intriguing introduction to the Leipzig trials where the *Llandovery Castle*, which was in Canadian service at the time of its sinking, was one of the cases tried before the court. The discussion that Kelly offers in this section of the book is exceptionally valuable

for it situates Stammers's death in the broader context of the war and, perhaps of interest to local readers, shows how a city came to grips with losing one of their own. Because newspapers covered the many memorials to Stammers with vigour and interest, more is actually known with certainty about her death than her life!

Of note, Hendley's work expounds at length upon the trials at Leipzig, labelled "farfical" by many contemporary commentators (p. 127). With a German court and German judges trying German war crimes cases, the idea of impartiality was questioned from the outset, an arrangement that was not repeated a generation later after the Second World War. The captain of U-86 was not tried owing to his residence in the free city of Danzig (essentially being beyond the reach of Allied or German justice), while two of his lieutenants received relatively light punishments for their actions. But what is important about this case, as Hendley makes more than clear, is the precedent that it set. The idea that subordinates were somehow absolved of responsibility for their actions simply because they were following the orders of a superior was soundly put to rest at Leipzig; manifestly unlawful commands were not to be followed. The *Llandoverly Castle* case was, in the end, a landmark decision that continues to influence jurisprudence to this day. The defence of "superior orders" did not work in 1921 at Leipzig, nor did it work again (thankfully) in the 1940s at Nuremberg and elsewhere. For the dead, justice was not served immediately, but their deaths have influenced war crimes cases ever since. Perhaps that is some consolation.

Throughout the First World War, the Allies, Canada included, couched their actions as a fight against German tyranny and *Kultur*. Being on the side of right, it was easy and expedient for them to cast Germany as the opposite of all that was good, pure and just. Yet in his discussion about the German attack on the *Llandoverly Castle*, Hendley beneficently repeats the possibility that the British, specifically the Royal Navy, may have committed war crimes of their own. Far from being unassailable, the Allies, again including Canada,³ may have similarly sunk to the same depths as their adversaries. In August 1915, and again in September, the British Q-ship, HMS *Baralong*, flying a false flag (that of the then-neutral United States), was able to get close to two German U-boats and sink

³ Tim Cook, "The Politics of Surrender: Canadian Soldiers and the Killing of Prisoners in the Great War," *Journal of Military History* 70, 3 (2006): 637-65.

them, afterwards, in one case, killing survivors in the water (p. 119-21). In drawing uncanny parallels to the *Llandoverly Castle*, Hendley, whether inadvertently or not, casts a shadow on the Allied war effort and helpfully reminds his readers to be cautious when considering claims of honour and propriety.

Overall, both books, *Asleep in the Deep* and *Atrocity on the Atlantic*, are useful additions to the literature on military nursing, as in the case of the former, and the impact of the First World War on society, specifically international law, as in the case of the latter. The sinking of HMHS *Llandoverly Castle* was one of the great tragedies of the war for Canada and has, in the time since, become somewhat of a touchstone for discussions of criminality and ethics during wartime. What was really an isolated, albeit atrocious, incident in the North Atlantic turned into an event of global proportions and lasting repercussions, a history-defining moment in time.

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