

The Golden Age of German Passenger Shipping

by Kate Vescera

During the period beginning at the very end of the nineteenth century up to the First World War, Germany was one of the most dominant countries in Atlantic passenger shipping. Germany seriously competed with Britain for supremacy on the Atlantic during this period. This also coincided with the rise of German political power and the competition in shipping was an extension of the political and colonial competition between Britain and Germany during this period, which was also one of the underlying causes of the First World War. Therefore, this period was the golden age of German passenger shipping, because Germany would never be dominant in this area again, although German ships did hold the Blue Ribband, which was the unofficial award given to the passenger liner crossing the Atlantic with the highest average speed, again in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

German ships during this period carried a large number of immigrants to America, but they also carried many wealthy and famous people in very luxurious conditions. Thus, Germany was important in both the high end and the low end of the market.

Imperial Germany

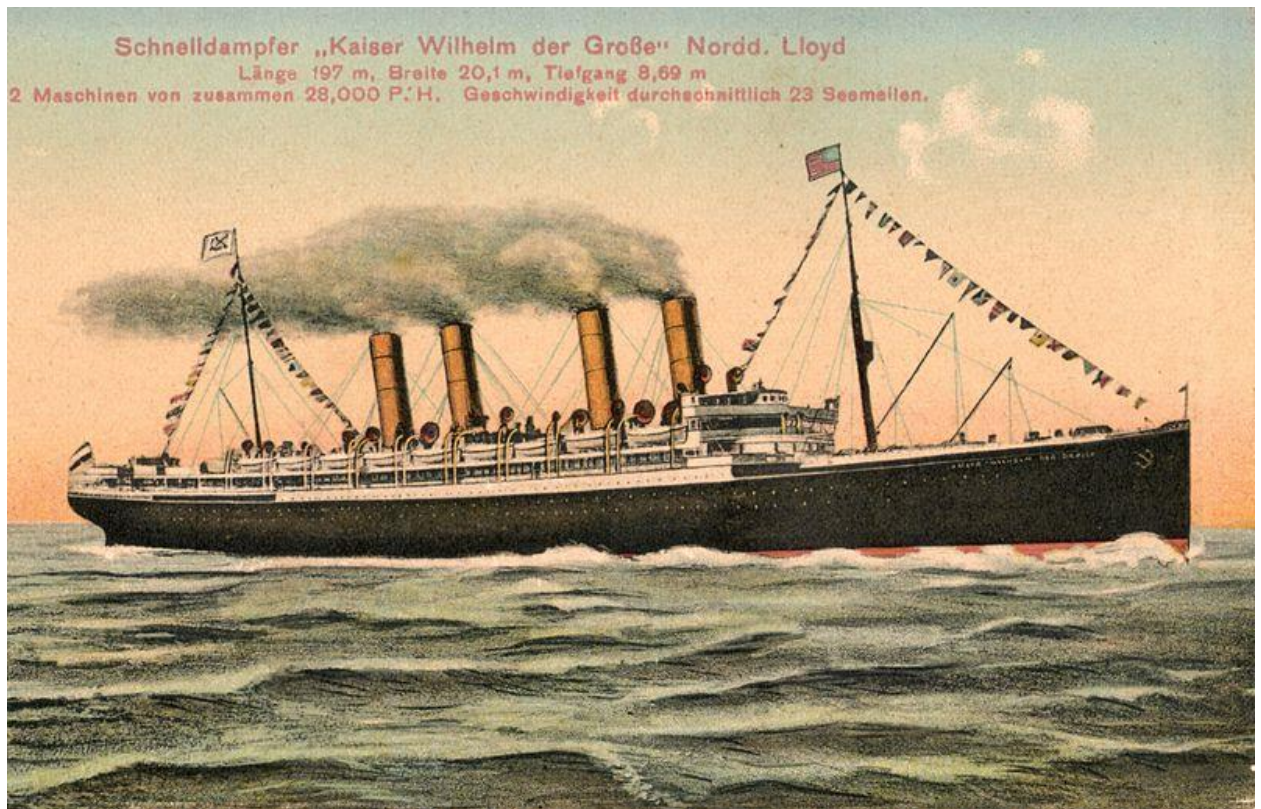
Up until the 1880s, the Atlantic passenger trade was dominated by the British shipping lines, particularly Cunard and White Star. Germany was not a major player at this time, but Imperial German power was on the rise by the turn of the century. Wilhelm II, Queen Victoria's grandson, was crowned Kaiser of the German Empire in 1888. Then in 1889 he attended a British fleet review at Spithead. While he was impressed with the military vessels on display, what really caught his eye was White Star's *Teutonic*, which was the largest ship afloat at the time.

The Kaiser was able to tour the ship, which had been transformed into an armored cruiser to display her potential for military use, but the Kaiser was most interested in the passenger amenities which were much more extravagant and comfortable than German ships of the time. The Kaiser is reported to have commented to one of his subalterns "We must have some of these." As the Kaiser's wishes regarding passenger ships became known, the two largest passenger lines in Germany, the Hamburg America Line (or HAPAG) and North German Lloyd (Norddeutscher Lloyd in German) began plans for bigger and more luxurious ships.

Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse

The first of the new breed of German ships to be built was the *Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse* of North German Lloyd. She was launched in 1897 and her maiden voyage was in the autumn of that year. She was the first liner to have four funnels and her funnels were grouped in two sets of two, rather than being evenly spaced. The *Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse* was the largest ship in the world when was completed and held the title until 1899. She captured the Blue Ribband in November 1897 and some of the earliest Marconi wireless experiments were also held on board in 1900. She was the most popular ship on the Atlantic for a period, even though she was notorious for rolling. Her four funnels also came to be associated with safety by the traveling

public (particularly those travelling in steerage) and four funnels soon became the norm, with some ships that only had three functioning funnels adding a dummy funnel.



Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse, *Color postcard, circa 1910 (Wikimedia Commons).*

The *Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse* was designed on the inside to make passengers feel as though they were still on shore and staying in a castle on the Upper Rhine. The design of her interior spaces included the highest ceilings at sea yet with gilt and columned lounges, detailed wood carvings, stained glass and elaborately framed paintings. The goal was to overwhelm anyone who came on board with the majesty of the German Empire.

During the First World War, she was converted to an armed merchant cruiser by the Imperial German Navy and was sunk in 1914 by the converted British cruiser HMS *Highflyer* in Spanish West Africa in the Battle of Rio de Oro.

Hoboken Pier Fire

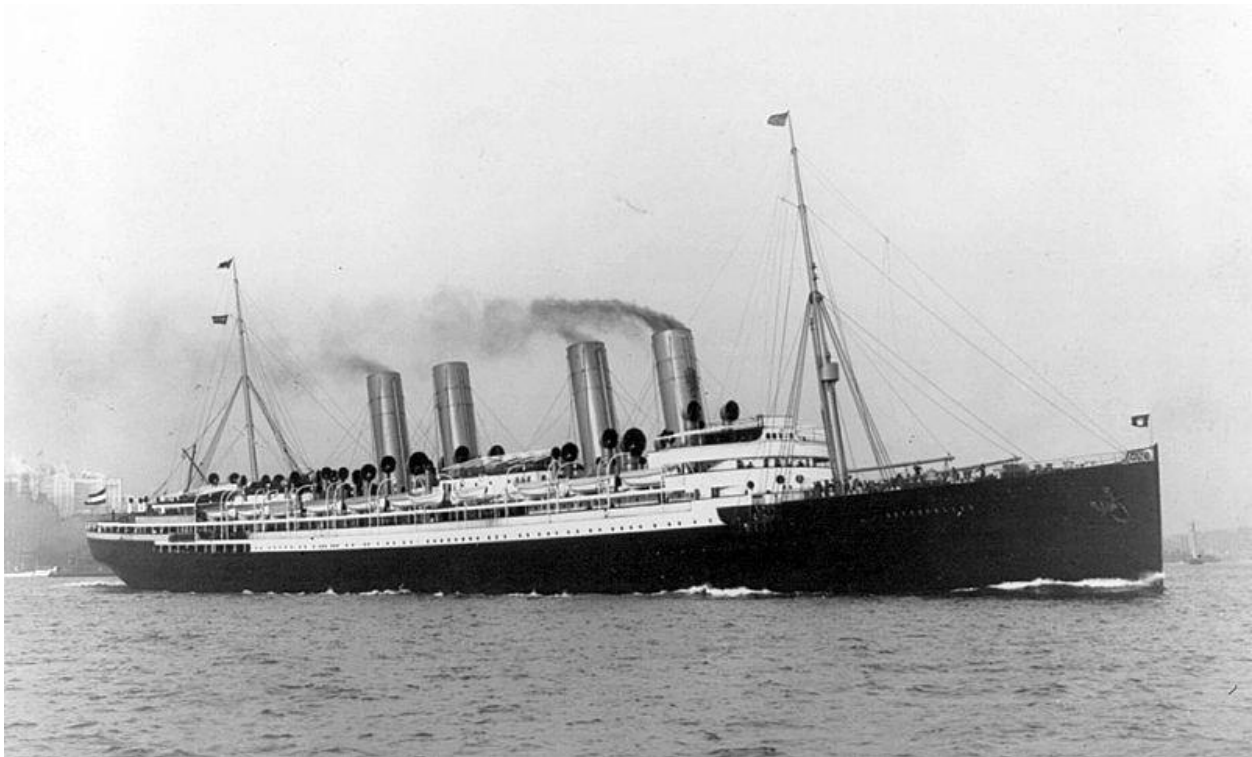
In 1900, the *Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse* was involved in a tragic incident known as the Hoboken Pier Fire of 1900. At the turn of the century, the German line piers in New York Harbor, which were constructed of wood, were located in Hoboken, New Jersey, on the opposite bank of the Hudson from the piers in New York City.

On June 30, 1900, a fire broke from a stack of cargo on the North German Lloyd docks, and quickly spread to the ships *Saale*, *Main*, and *Bremen*, which were docked there. Tragically hundreds of people lost their lives in the fire. Some people were trapped on the ships as they burned and were not able to escape through the portholes. Others drowned in the Hudson after jumping overboard. This incident led to size of portholes being increased so that an average sized person could fit through them.

The *Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse* was docked at the North German Lloyd piers and she was the first ship that the tug boats pulled away from the dock after the fire began, as she was considered the most valuable. Although she did catch fire in several places, the fire boats put out the fires quickly and she did not suffer serious damage. After this incident new steel piers were soon constructed to reduce the risk of fires in the future.

Deutschland

North German Lloyd's great rival was HAPAG and HAPAG soon had an answer to the *Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse*, which was the *Deutschland* of 1900. She had a long, low profile, also with four stacks and HAPAG was determined that she would be more ornate, innovative and faster than the *Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse*. She was in fact faster and captured the Blue Ribband in the summer of 1900. However, all of this speed came at a price. She had very powerful engines and they caused excessive vibrations which were very unpleasant for passengers. She retained the Blue Ribband until 1906, but was never as profitable as had been hoped.



SS Deutschland (A. Loeffler, Tompkinsville, N.Y., Wikimedia Commons).

In 1911, she was converted to a white-hulled cruise ship and the focus shifted to comfort and elegance rather than speed, and was renamed the *Victoria Luise*. She was refitted with less powerful engines and she was not used by the German Navy during the war because she was so slow. After the war, the Allied Reparations Committee decided to leave her in German hands because of her poor mechanical state. She briefly resumed service to New York in the early 1920s, mostly carrying immigrants, and she was sold to be scrapped in 1925.

Kronprinz Wilhelm

The next entry in the game of one-upsmanship between HAPAG and North German Lloyd was North German Lloyd's *Kronprinz Wilhelm* of 1901. North German Lloyd had hoped that she would recapture the Blue Ribband from the *Deutschland*, but it turned out that she was not powerful enough to do so. While she carried First, Second and Third Class passengers, Third Class was the most profitable for the company and she carried many immigrants to America. During the First World War, she was converted to an Armed Merchant Cruiser and sank several allied ships in the South Atlantic. However, she put into the port of Norfolk, Virginia for provisioning and repairs in April 1915, and was quickly interned by the U.S. Government. In 1917 she was converted into a U.S. troopship and then laid up after the war. She was eventually scrapped in 1923.

Johannes Poppe

The man behind the interior design of North German Lloyd's ships was German architect Johannes Poppe. He was well known in Bremen where he had designed a number of public building and prominent residences. He was the first maritime designer to really bring luxury to ships on a large scale. He also pioneered the idea of recreating rooms from buildings onboard ships to make passengers feel like they were still on shore. His signature style was very ornate and florid, filled with lots of ornaments, curlicues, cartouches, stained glass, and grills.

Kaiser Wilhelm II

The *Kaiser Wilhelm II* of 1903 was North German Lloyd's next ship and its largest yet. She was intended to capture the Blue Ribband, but she was not able to do so until her fourth season in 1906 when she took it from the *Deutschland*. However, the *Kaiser Wilhelm II* only held the Blue Ribband until 1907 when Cunard's *Lusitania* took the title.

All of North German Lloyd's ships in this class were named after members of the German royal family, and this led to them affectionally being known as the Hohenzollerns of Hoboken, which was where they all docked in New York Harbor. North German Lloyd received permission from the royal family to use their names and this endorsement added luster to North German Lloyd's reputation. The German royal family even sailed on these ships sometimes. This association helped to attract passengers, particularly Americans who found the idea of association with European royalty enticing.

The *Kaiser Wilhelm II* was interned in the United States in 1914 and then converted to a troopship in 1917. She was laid up after the war until 1940 when she was offered to the British

as a troopship, but she was rejected due to her age and poor condition. She was sold to be scrapped in the same year.

Kronprinzessin Cecile

The final ship in North German Lloyd's quartet of greyhounds was the *Kronprinzessin Cecile* of 1907. She was also the last of the German four stackers. She was distinctive not for her size or speed, but for how luxurious she was. Some of the first class suites had private dining rooms and a top suite cost one hundred times as much as a steerage ticket. Johannes Poppe was engaged to design her public rooms and while his work still retained his signature look, it was also lighter, airier, and less Baroque, embracing a more modern esthetic.



First Class Dining Room of the Kronprinzessin Cecilie, designed by Johannes Poppe (Wikimedia Commons).

The *Kronprinzessin Cecile* is perhaps best known for her actions at the beginning of the First World War. In late July 1914 she was eastbound out of New York carrying \$10 million in gold and \$1 million in silver which was bound for the treasury in Berlin. She was still in North

American waters when she received word that war was imminent. Rather than risk capture by the British, the Captain decided to return to an American port since the U.S. was still neutral.

The ship sailed under radio silence and the crew painted black bands around the tops of the funnels because at a distance, the *Kronprinzessin Cecile* resembled White Star's *Olympic* (the *Titanic*'s sister ship), and the addition of the black bands made the funnels appear like White Star livery. The ship put into the small resort harbor of Bar Harbor, Maine, much to the surprise of the residents. Her true identity was soon discovered and she was interned by the U.S. government.

She was converted to a troopship in 1917. She later made a special trip from New York to Vladivostok to evacuate troops and refugees, making her the only German four stacker to sail in the Pacific. She was laid up after the war close to her sister the *Kaiser Wilhelm II*. Also, like her sister, she was offered to the British as a troopship in 1940, but was rejected due to her age, and was sold to the scrappers.

Amerika

While HAPAG had trailed behind North German Lloyd in several ways, they moved to another level with the *Amerika* of 1905. She was the largest ship in the world for a year and the first ship to have an elevator. However, it was her interiors and amenities that made her stand out and made her the most prestigious ship on the Atlantic for a period. She was interned in Boston at outbreak of the First World War and was seized by the U.S. government in 1917. Like many other German ships she served as a troopship and then was laid up after the war. In 1921 she was put back in service and was laid up again in 1931. She was converted to a troopship again in 1941 during the Second World War. She was laid up yet again after the war and eventually broken up in 1958 after a very long career.

Albert Ballin

The driving force behind HAPAG at this time was its very hands-on Managing Director Albert Ballin. Ballin had started out in 1875 running his family's modest shipping line that focused on shuttling immigrants to new lives in America. Through a series of mergers and ventures he became involved with HAPAG, and he eventually became the Managing Director around the turn of the century. He had an eye for detail and was always looking for ways to improve HAPAG ships and the passenger experience. He was also constantly on the lookout for what was new and fashionable. He shared the Kaiser's determination that German shipping should reign supreme on the Atlantic.

Charles Mewès

One of Ballin's important contributions were the partnerships he initiated between HAPAG and architect and designer Charles Mewès and hotelier Cesar Ritz. Ritz and Mewès opened the Paris Ritz, one of the first modern hotels, in 1898. The Ritz was done in Louis the 16th style and immediately became very fashionable and popular. Mewès and Ritz also collaborated on the Carlton Hotel in London a couple years later and Ballin dined there at the

Ritz-Carlton Grill. He was very taken with the experience and design and determined that he wanted his ships to emulate it.

Mewès was engaged to design all of the interiors for the *Amerika*. This was also an innovation in that previously ships had usually included a hodgepodge of styles, rather than having a unified style designed by one person. Mewès' focus was on making a ship feel like a grand hotel so that passengers would forget that they were at sea. His designs were on a smaller scale than Poppe's and more focused on making passengers feel comfortable rather than awed.

Cesar Ritz and Aguste Escoffier

Another revolution introduced by German ships of this era was having an *à la carte* restaurant on board. Previously, passengers had always dined at set times in large dining rooms, but with the introduction of the *à la carte* restaurant, passengers could choose when to dine, and ate in an environment more like a restaurant on shore than a dining saloon at sea. Passengers could purchase a ticket with meals or without meals. If they purchased a ticket without meals, they would dine in the restaurant and pay based on what they ordered.

The first such restaurant was on board the *Amerika* and was run by Ritz-Carlton staff. Ritz trained the staff and chef Aguste Escoffier trained the chefs. Passengers dined at private tables, rather than long communal tables. The restaurant was designed by Mewès and had individual tables lamps, crème and gold walls and dark blue carpets.

Kaiserin Auguste Victoria

The *Amerika*'s near-sister ship was the *Kaiserin Auguste Victoria* of 1906. She was the world's largest ship until 1907. She was named after and christened by the German Empress. She was originally going to be named *Europa* (as a compliment to her near-sister *Amerika*), but HAPAG decided that since she was intended to carry many immigrants to the New World, they did not want her name to be tied to the Old World. Her profile was similar to the *Amerika* and she also had two funnels and four masts and a Ritz Carlton *à la carte* restaurant.

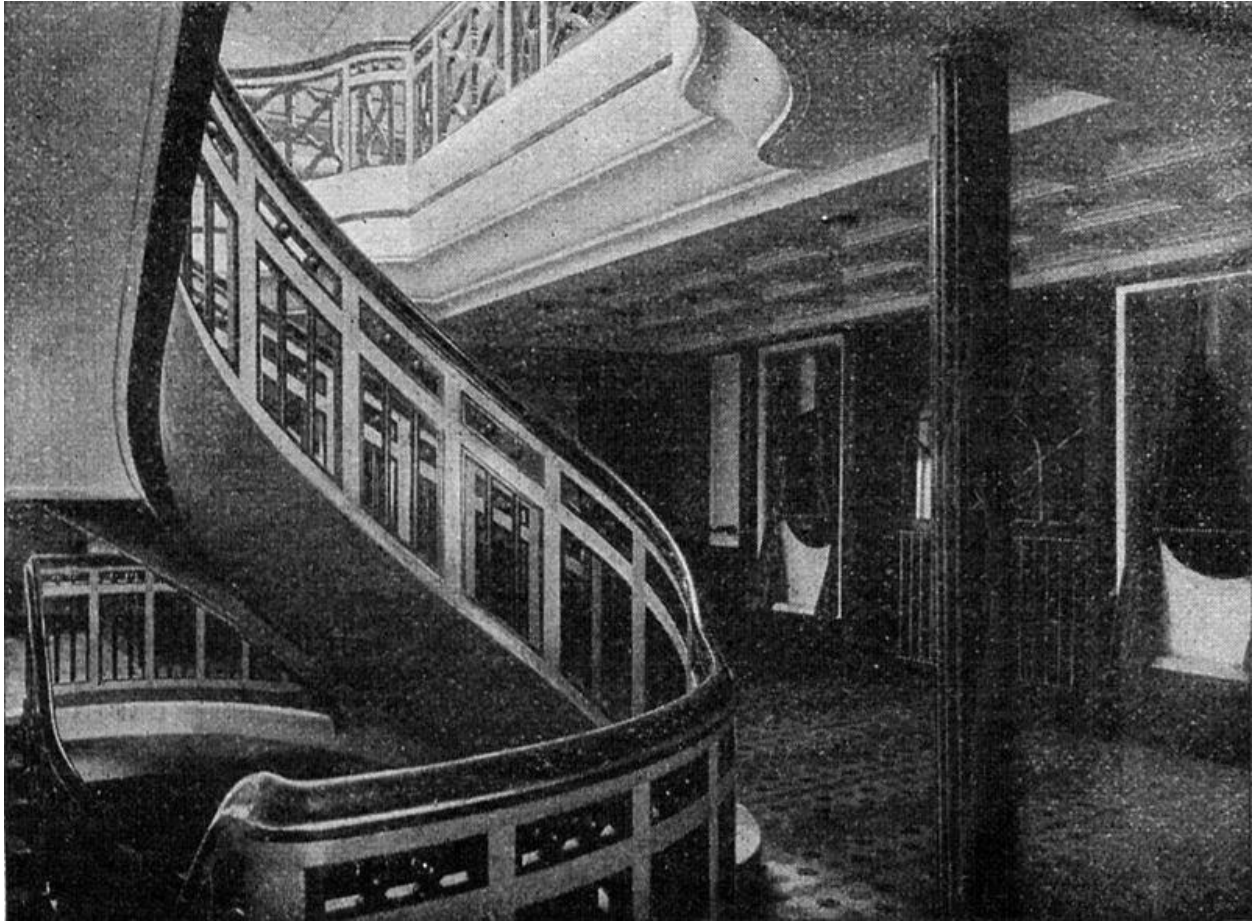


Kaiserin Auguste Victoria, *Winter Garden*, sitting room (Library of Congress, George Grantham Bain Collection).

During the war she was laid up in Hamburg. She was surrendered to the British government in 1919 and was chartered to the U.S. government as a troopship. In 1921 she was sold to Canadian Pacific Steamships and renamed *Empress of Scotland*. She mostly sailed on the Southampton-Cherbourg-Quebec City run and did winter cruises until 1930 when she was sold to the breakers.

George Washington

The next ship we will look at, North German Lloyd's *George Washington* of 1909, was unique in her interior design. Her name was selected to appeal to both immigrants heading to America and also Americans heading to Europe. Her interiors were designed by Bruno Paul and Rudolf Alexander Schroder and she was one of the few ships to have an Art Nouveau style. Her interiors were much more modern and simple than her predecessors and lacked the more overwrought style of Poppe. Given her name, she sported many murals of iconic locations associated with American history, like Mount Vernon and the White House.



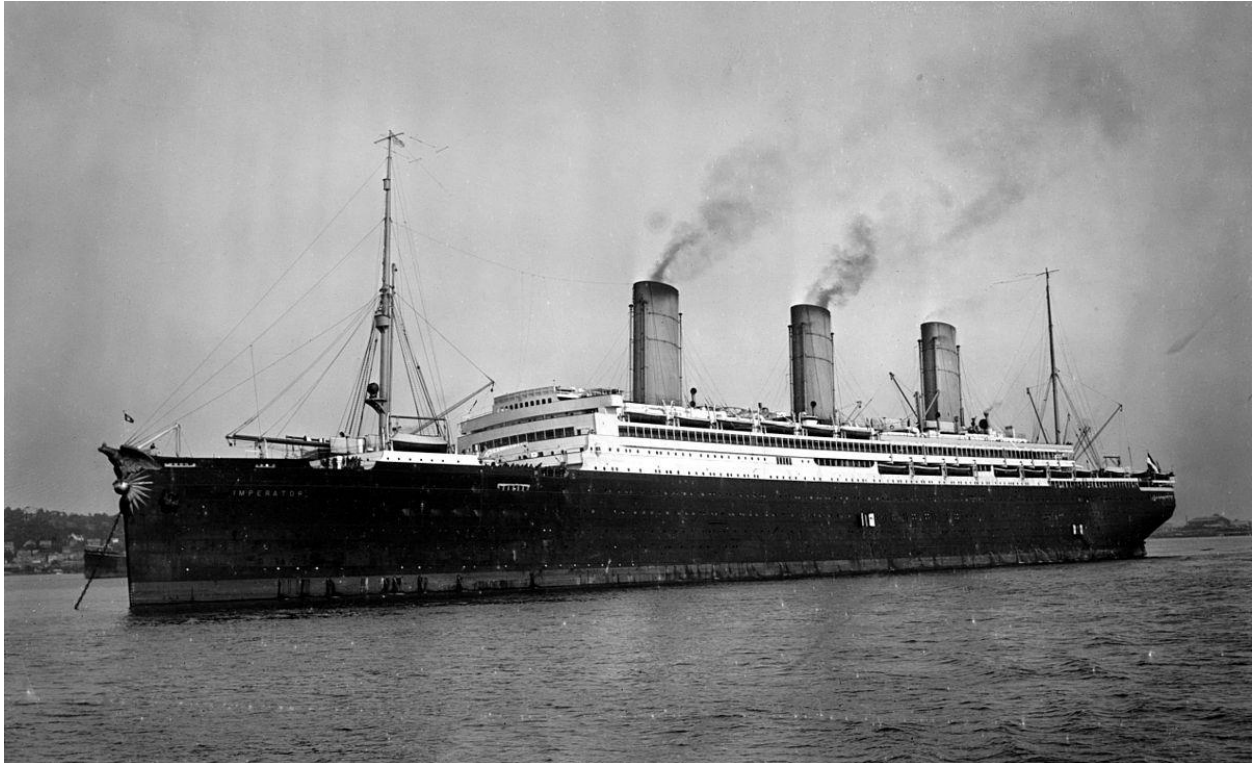
Staircase in the George Washington, (Zeitschrift Deutscher Hausschatz, Heft 1, 1910, Seiten 14 f).

She was interned in the United States at the beginning of the war and then became a troopship in 1917. She is probably most famous for carrying President Woodrow Wilson to the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. She was returned to commercial service in 1921, sailing again between New York and Bremerhaven. She was laid up in 1931, but reactivated again as a troop ship during the Second World War. She was destroyed by fire in 1951 and scrapped thereafter.

Imperator

Although the ships discussed so far were beautiful and innovative, the crowning achievements of German shipping prior to the First World War were HAPAG's *Imperator* of 1913 and *Vaterland* of 1914. These were conceived to compete with Cunard's *Lusitania* and *Mauretania* and White Star's *Olympic*-class ships. However, they were even larger and more luxurious and were supposed to demonstrate the superiority of Imperial Germany to Imperial Britain. The one area in which they were not trying to compete with the British liners though, was speed. Cunard was so dominant in this area that the Germans chose to focus on size and extravagance.

The Kaiser himself launched the *Imperator*, with Albert Ballin by his side in May of 1912, only five weeks after the *Titanic* disaster. The *Imperator* was equipped with 83 lifeboats in a probably excessive response to that incident. She was significantly larger than any other ship at the time, at 52,117 gross tons, 909 feet long and 98 feet wide. She also carried over 4,600 passengers and 1,200 crew, which was a huge number, particularly at the time, but even now. This was partially due to the fact that she could carry 1,772 passengers in dormitory-like conditions in steerage. In a move away from the four stack style that had been popular up to that point, she had three stacks, and they were very tall at almost 70 feet high initially.



Imperator, circa 1913 (Library of Congress's Prints and Photographs division).

Her interiors were designed by Mewès. Her first class dining room could seat all first class passengers at once and the dining room itself reached through two floors, with a dome reaching through a third floor. She also had a Ritz-Carlton restaurant, which was incorporated into her winter garden, and she was noted for her huge Pompeian style-pool.

In order to ensure that she was the longest ship in the world, she initially had a very ugly golden eagle figurehead, and the eagle was clutching a globe in its talons with HAGAP's motto "Mein Feld Ist Die Welt", meaning "My Field is the World". However, this was knocked off in a storm and was not replaced.

The *Imperator* was a very popular ship, but her career sailing for Germany would not last long. She was laid up in Germany during the First World War. She briefly served as a U.S. troop transport returning troops to the U.S. at the end of the war. Then she was given to the British as reparations and she became Cunard's *Berengaria* in 1921. She was a running mate to

the *Mauretania* and *Aquitania* during the 1920s and 1930s, and was a very popular ship. She was sold for scrap in 1939.

Vaterland

The next of HAPAG's great trio was the *Vaterland* of 1913. She was 31 feet longer than the *Imperator*. Construction on her hull was just getting started at the time of the *Titanic*'s sinking, so additional safety features were also added. Her interiors were also designed by Mewès. Her interiors were similar to the *Imperator*, but were considered even more beautiful.

The *Vaterland*'s maiden voyage was in May 1914 and she made only three round trips before the outbreak of the First World War. With war looking imminent in late July 1914, HAPAG made the decision to keep the *Vaterland* in Hoboken rather than risk having her be caught mid-voyage and seized by the British at the start of the war. She was laid up at her Hoboken pier and became a gathering place for German-centric activities while the U.S. remained neutral. In April 1917, she was formally seized by the U.S. government.

She served as a troop transport and then was laid up in 1919. During the early 1920s she underwent an extensive refit and became the United States Lines' *Leviathan*. The *Leviathan* enjoyed a career as the flagship of the United States Lines and was popular through the 1920s. She was laid up in the early 1930s and scrapped in 1938.

Bismarck

The third and final entry in HAPAG's trio was to be the *Bismarck*. She was launched in June 1914 and then all construction ceased with the outbreak of the war. The *Bismarck* would never sail for Germany. She was transferred to the British as war reparations in 1919. Her construction was eventually completed in 1922 and she became White Star's *Majestic*. She was the largest ship in the world until the debut of the French liner *Normandie* in 1935. She was laid up in 1936 and then became a cadet training ship until 1939, when she caught fire and sank and was then eventually scrapped.

Conclusion

After the First World War, most of Germany's merchant fleet which had not been lost during the war, ended up in British or American hands. It seems that the pinnacle of German shipbuilding had come just as the First World War began and, therefore, the world never got to see what else Germany might have achieved if not for the interruption of the war. It was not until the late 1920s that Germany started building substantial passenger ships again. While Germany did build some beautiful and certainly very fast ships during this period, it never again achieved the same level of dominance it enjoyed during the early twentieth century.

The legacy of pre-World War I German shipping did to live on well after the war, however, as the *Berengaria*, *Leviathan*, and *Majestic* were some of the most popular ships of the 1920s and early 1930s. They were not surpassed in size until the mid-1930s so they were the

largest ships in the world for over 20 years and influenced the design of the next generation of ships.

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Bio

Kate Vescera is a maritime historian and is a collector of ocean liner memorabilia. She serves as the President and on the Board of Directors of the Southern California Chapter of the Steamship Historical Society of America (SSHSA) and she also serves on the National Board of Directors of SSHSA. Additionally, she is on the Board of Directors of QMI- Restore the Queen, a non-profit organization that works to preserve the legacy and history of the RMS Queen Mary. An attorney by profession, she studied Political Economics and Russian at U.C. Berkeley as an undergraduate, and attended Pepperdine University School of Law where she obtained a J.D. and an M.D.R.