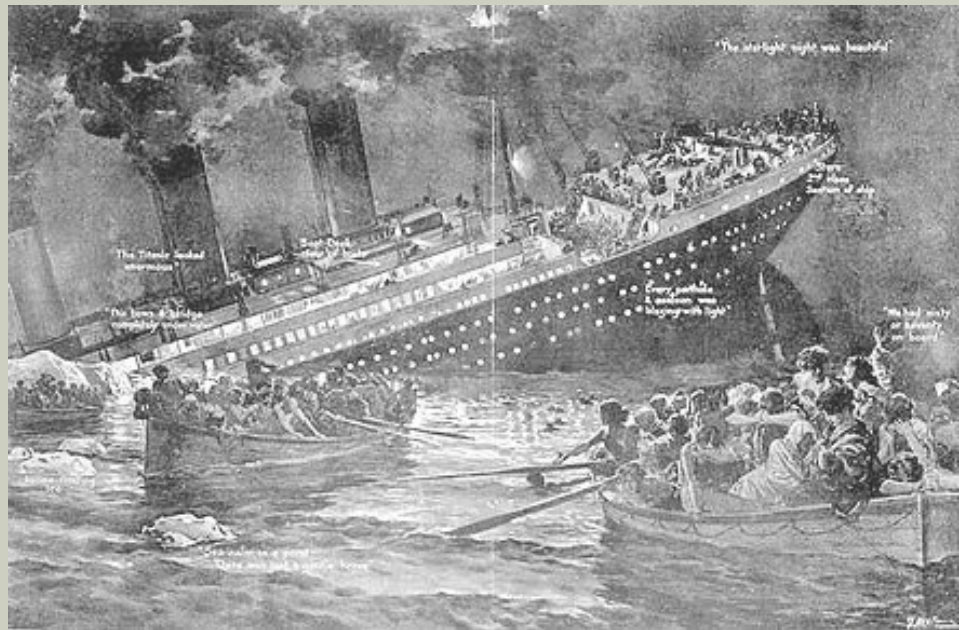


SPEAKING OF RACISM, IMMIGRANTS, REFUGEES

Halil Berktaý

0012. (17 April 2021)



A famous "artist's imagination" illustration of the sinking of the Titanic

In your Recommended Readings for today, [0012.(BBC 16.4.2021) Titanic – searching for the ‘missing’ Chinese survivors] tells the story of another flotsam.

The Titanic sank 109 years and two days ago. She struck an iceberg at 11:40 pm (ship's time) on 14th April, remaining afloat for 2 hours and 40 minutes before disappearing below the waves early on 15th April 1912. Her legend endures — she remains the most tragically charismatic symbol of a Gilded Age of ocean liners that began in the late-19th century, extended beyond World War I, and came to an end (after 1945) with air travel. While it lasted, its cost-profit calculations were based on massive transatlantic migration from the most backward, poverty-stricken, class-oppressed parts of Europe to the United States. Roughly speaking, low-paying Steerage of Third Class passengers (mostly from Ireland, Italy, Greece and the Balkans, Germany, Scandinavia, Poland, Russia or Ukraine) were expected to cover the cost, while the luxurious First and Second Classes provided the profit margin. It was a growing and increasingly competitive market, and it was in order to meet the challenge of its main rivals such as the Cunard Line, as well as, in Germany, Hamburg America or Norddeutscher Lloyd, that in 1908 the White Star Line placed an order with the shipbuilders Harland and Wolff in Belfast for three giants that would be “larger than anything that had gone before while also providing the last word in comfort and luxury” (Wikipedia). Out came the Olympic, the Britannic, and the Titanic – length 270 metres, beam 28 metres, draft 10.5 metres, and displacing 52,000 tons. They each cost 3 million dollars at the time, which is like 300 million dollars today. (I may be touching on the technology involved in next week's 19-21 April SPS 102 lectures on the Industrial Revolution.)

And then the Titanic sank on her maiden voyage from Southampton to New York — and of her estimated 2,224 passengers and crew, she took more than 1,500 with her. By far the vast majority, as you might imagine, were the Steerage passengers down below, while it was the First and Second Class passengers of the two top decks that had relatively easy access to the lifeboats (many of which were lowered half-empty). But among those who survived were six of the eight Chinese on board, who appear to have been sailors crossing the Atlantic to look for work in the Caribbean. Yet, despite their ordeal in the frigid waters of the North Atlantic, the New World was not kind to them. They were made the target of racist slanders in the hysteric aftermath of the disaster. They were refused entry to the US on the basis of the so-called Chinese Exclusion Act. They went to Cuba and from there to the UK, and found employment in the labor-scarcity years of World War I. But then came the post-war recession of the 1920s, coupled with an anti-immigrant escalation, and even though some of them had married British women and had had children, they were summarily deported without any regard for their families. One went to Hong Kong, another to Kolkata (Calcutta), a third to India. A fourth, who had escaped on that fateful night of 15th April 1912 by first tying himself to a wooden cabin door and then being picked up by a lifeboat, eventually gained US citizenship, where after having to cope with racist slurs throughout his later years, he died in old age.

This is just a quick summary. You would do well to read [0012.(BBC 16.4.2021) Titanic – searching for the ‘missing’ Chinese survivors] for the details.

