

## ATLANTIC 1939–1945: THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC

**TASK INSTRUCTIONS**

**The key question:** Can you raise the cash for the Battle of the Atlantic Museum?

**Your task**

Your task is to write a report about the significance of the Battle of the Atlantic to support the Western Approaches Museum in Liverpool.

Use the report table to help plan your report.

**CAN YOU RAISE THE CASH FOR THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC MUSEUM?**

British Prime Minister Winston Churchill made these two remarks about the Battle of the Atlantic in WW2:

- *The only thing that ever really frightened me during the war was the U-boat peril.*
- *The Battle of the Atlantic was the dominating factor all through the war.*

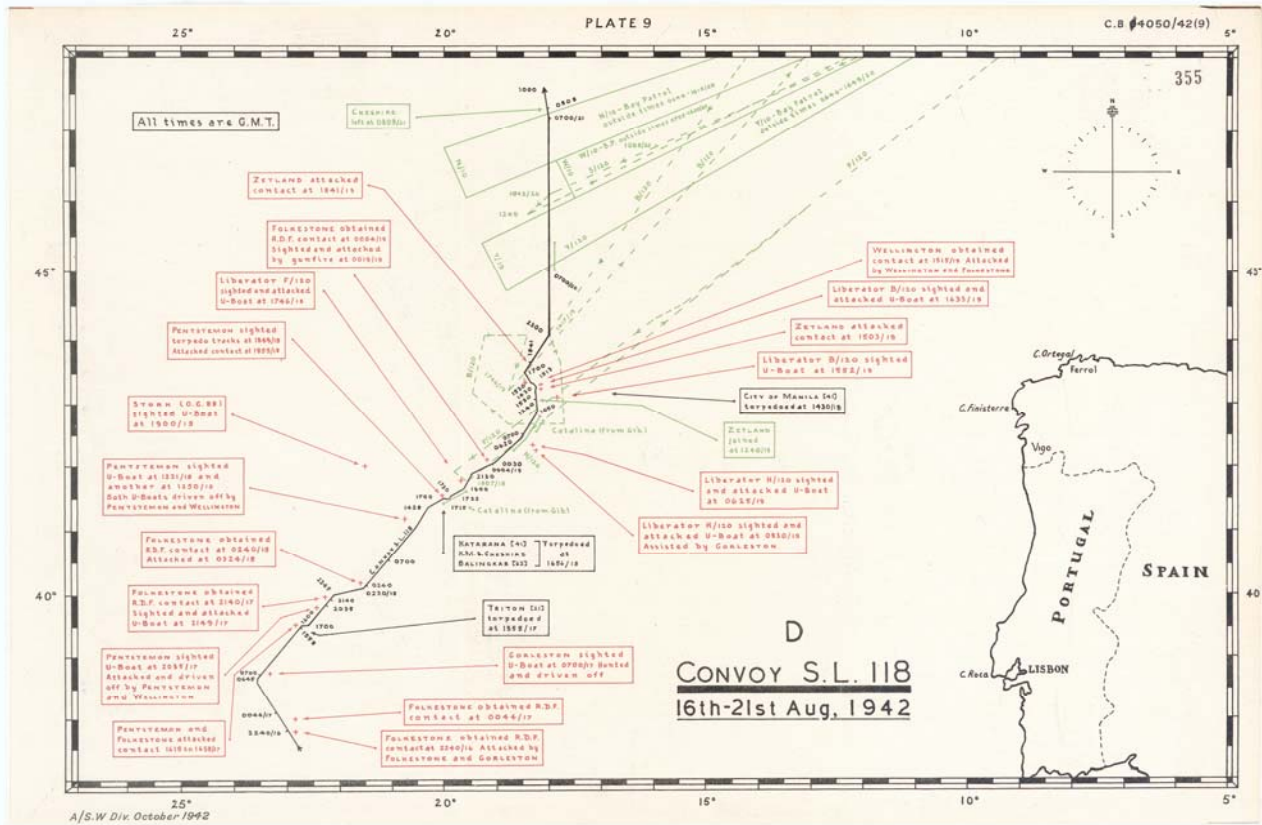
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**Your task**

The Western Approaches Museum in Liverpool needs your help. The museum is based in the actual underground bunker that served as Britain's headquarters during the Battle of the Atlantic. The museum wants to raise money to develop its exhibition. Your task is to write a report about the significance of the Battle of the Atlantic to support the Museum.

**ATLANTIC 1939-1945: THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC**

A chart showing the attacks on an Atlantic convoy in August 1942.



**ATLANTIC 1939–1945: THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC****What is this source?**

This chart shows what happened to just one convoy of ships, Convoy SL118, as it tried to cross the Atlantic in 1942, at the height of the battle. Commanders of the Royal Navy used this chart to examine how and where German forces had attacked.

Captains of ships kept detailed records (logs) of any actions they took part in. The chart was probably drawn up after the convoy reached Britain, based on these logs.

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**What's the background to this source?**

By 1940 Nazi leader Adolf Hitler was in control of most of Western Europe. Only Britain and its empire opposed him. Although Hitler failed to invade Britain in 1940, his forces still threatened the country. The greatest danger for Britain was that German forces could cut off supplies of troops, food, medicine and equipment from Canada and the USA. This was exactly what the Germans tried to do. This campaign became known as the Battle of the Atlantic.

The Germans used submarines (U-boats), aircraft and surface ships to attack shipping bound for Britain. When the war began Canada also declared war on Germany. The USA was neutral, although it favoured Britain strongly by supplying food and equipment. A good example was the Lend Lease scheme that supplied huge amounts of military equipment to Britain. When the USA joined the war in 1941 the scheme continued, and the US naval forces also took direct action against German forces in the Atlantic.

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**It's worth knowing that..**

It is difficult to get accurate figures, but something like 50 000 merchant seamen were killed during the war. This service suffered the highest losses of any of the services in WW2. The range of attacks listed here gives some indication of the danger of trying to supply Britain during the war.

The names on the document are mostly the names of ships in the convoy. The "Liberator" mentioned a couple of times was a long-range bomber which was used to attack U-boats. RDF stands for Radio Directional Finder. This worked like radar to try and locate U-boats.

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**How will you use this source?**

1. How many attacks did the convoy suffer in total?
2. How many ships were torpedoed or sunk?

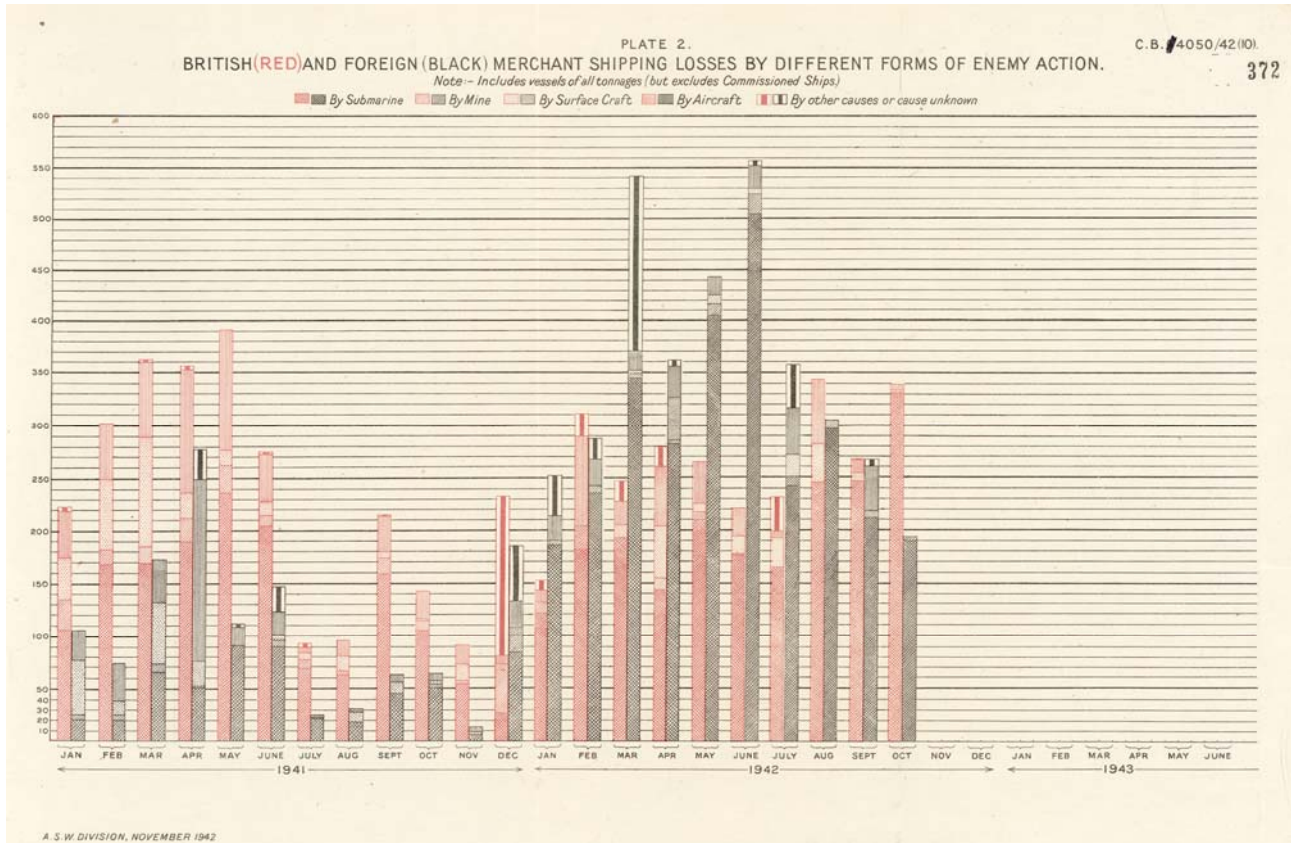
**ATLANTIC 1939–1945: THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC**

3. How did the convoy protect itself?
4. Does this source provide evidence to support either or both of these views?
  - o 'Serving on a convoy was tiring and frightening.'
  - o 'The men who served on the convoys were very brave'.
5. Does this source help you to explain why the Battle of the Atlantic was so significant?

**ATLANTIC 1939-1945: THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC**

**Source A: Graph to show Allied shipping losses and causes of loss, 1941-42**

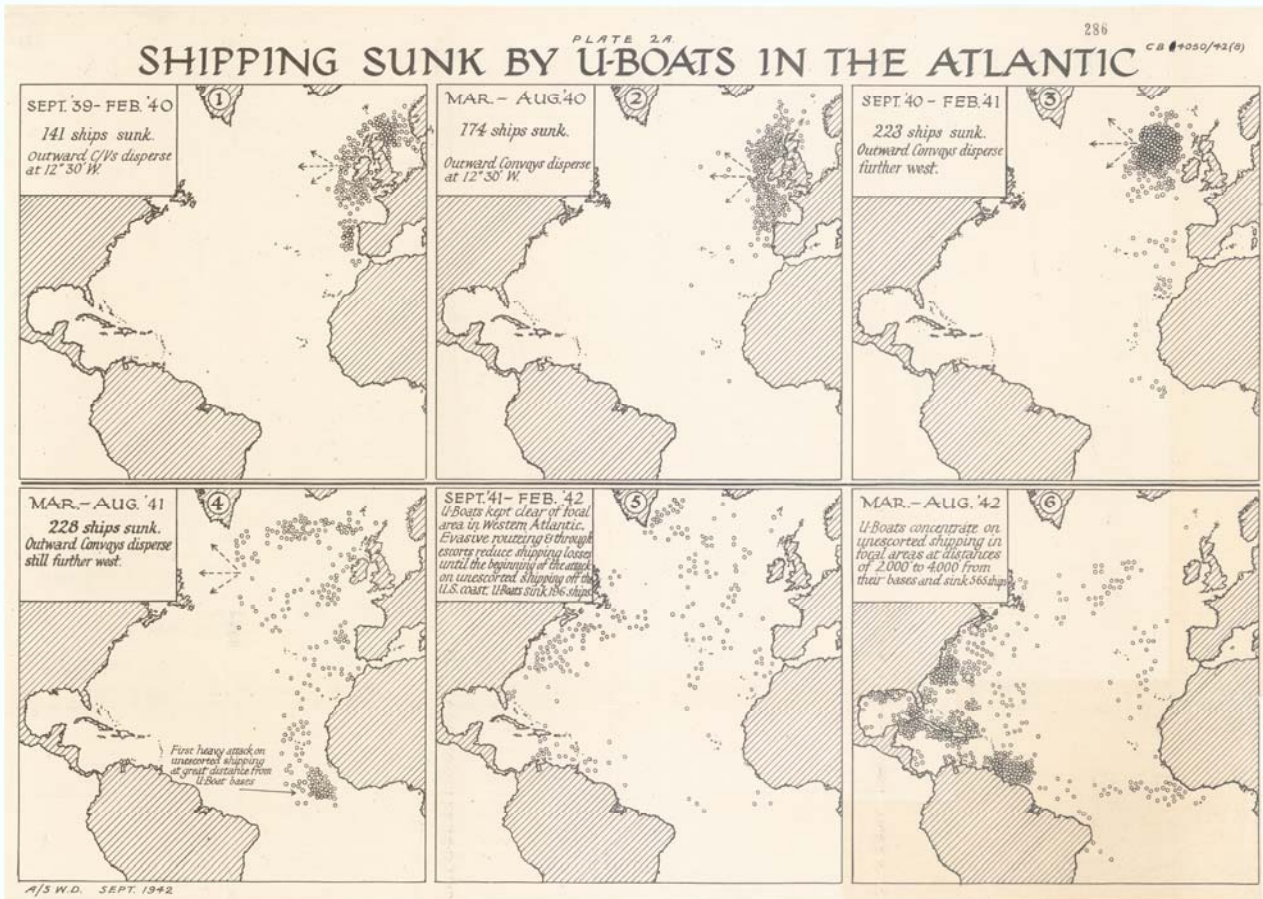
Catalogue ref: MFQ 586/7/372



**ATLANTIC 1939-1945: THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC**

**Source B: Chart to show the location of Allied shipping losses, 1941-42**

Catalogue ref: MFQ 586/5/286



## ATLANTIC 1939–1945: THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC

### What is this source?

The Royal Navy produced both sources. They show how serious the situation was in the Battle of the Atlantic in 1941–42.

No details are entered for 1943 because the graph (Source a) was completed in 1942. This does not mean that there were no losses for that year!

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### What's the background to this source?

From 1940 onwards the greatest danger for Britain in WW2 was that German forces could cut off supplies of troops, food, medicine and equipment from Canada and the USA. This was exactly what the Germans tried to do. This campaign became known as the Battle of the Atlantic. The Germans used submarines (U-boats), aircraft and surface ships to attack shipping bound for Britain.

The years 1941 and 1942 were the worst years in the Battle of the Atlantic. In 1941 they lost 1300 ships and in 1942 they lost 1661 ships.

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### It's worth knowing that...

By late 1942 Britain was only able to import about one third of the goods it normally imported in peacetime.

In January 1943 the Royal Navy only had two months worth of oil left to supply its ships.

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### How will you use this source?

1. Study **Source a**. Find the heaviest months for British shipping losses.
2. Which weapons used by the Germans seemed to do most damage?
3. What does **Source b** tell us about German tactics in the Battle of the Atlantic?
4. Is it possible to see links between both sources?
5. Would these sources have been useful to navy commanders?
6. Would it be fair to say these sources show that Britain's situation in 1942 was serious, or do you think desperate is a more accurate word?
7. Does this source help you to explain why the Battle of the Atlantic was so significant?

**ATLANTIC 1939-1945: THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC**

**A telegram sent by US President Roosevelt to Prime Minister Churchill, November 1943**

Catalogue ref: PREM 3/413/4

FROM THE PRESIDENT:

OUR OFFICE OF WAR INFORMATION AND NAVY DEPARTMENT RECOMMEND THE FOLLOWING STATEMENT, WITH WHICH I AGREE:

[ 1. DURING THE MONTHS OF AUGUST, SEPTEMBER AND OCTOBER APPROXIMATELY 60 UBOATS WERE DESTROYED. THIS BRINGS TO MORE THAN 150 THE NUMBER OF UBOATS DESTROYED DURING THE LAST SIX MONTHS. THE RECORD OF THE LAST THREE MONTHS IS PARTICULARLY GRATIFYING BECAUSE DURING MOST OF THIS PERIOD FEWER UBOATS WERE OPERATING. FEWER TARGETS WERE PRESENTED FOR OUR AIR AND SEA FORCES.

2. DURING AUGUST, SEPTEMBER AND OCTOBER MORE UBOATS WERE DESTROYED THAN ALLIED MERCHANT SHIPS WERE SUNK BY UBOAT ACTION. THE RATIO OF UBOAT TO MERCHANT SHIP ATTRITION DURING DURING OCTOBER WAS MORE SATISFACTORY THAN IN ANY PREVIOUS MONTH. IN-FACT, OUR TONNAGE LOSSES FROM ALL CAUSES IN OCTOBER WERE THE LOWEST OF ANY MONTH OF THE WAR.

**What is this source?**

This source is part of a series of telegrams which President Roosevelt of the USA and Prime Minister Winston Churchill sent each other during the course of the Battle of the Atlantic.

Roosevelt and Churchill had a close relationship that probably helped effective cooperation in the battle.

**What's the background to this source?**

During the Battle of the Atlantic German U-Boats and aircraft tried to cut off Britain's supply lines across the Atlantic. The years 1941 and 1942 were the



## ATLANTIC 1939-1945: THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC

worst years in the Battle of the Atlantic. In 1941 the British and their Allies lost 1300 ships and in 1942 they lost 1661 ships. By late 1942 Britain was only able to import about one third of the goods it normally imported in peacetime.

The tide began to turn in 1943. At that time British code breakers were able to read many German naval signals. There were also effective new weapons against U-Boats such as depth charges.

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### **It's worth knowing that...**

One of the key elements in turning the tide against the U-boats was the development of long-range aircraft that could spot the U-boats using specially developed radar. These could direct escort ships to attack the U-boats or they could attack the U-boats themselves.

Another key factor was the development of the Liberty Ship. This was a ship built in US shipyards that could be built in a few months. By 1943 the US shipyards were producing more ships than the U-boats could sink.

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### **How will you use this source?**

1. How does the message of this source compare to the map and chart showing Allied losses in the source box?
2. What is the biggest achievement mentioned in this source?
3. What made this turnaround possible?
4. Does this source help you to explain why the Battle of the Atlantic was so significant?

## ATLANTIC 1939-1945: THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC

**Telegram from Prime Minister Winston Churchill to US President Truman June 1945**

Catalogue ref: PREM 3/413/7

**Extract a**

With the surrender of Germany the Battle of the Atlantic has ended; German U-boats have ceased to operate and are now proceeding under Allied Orders.

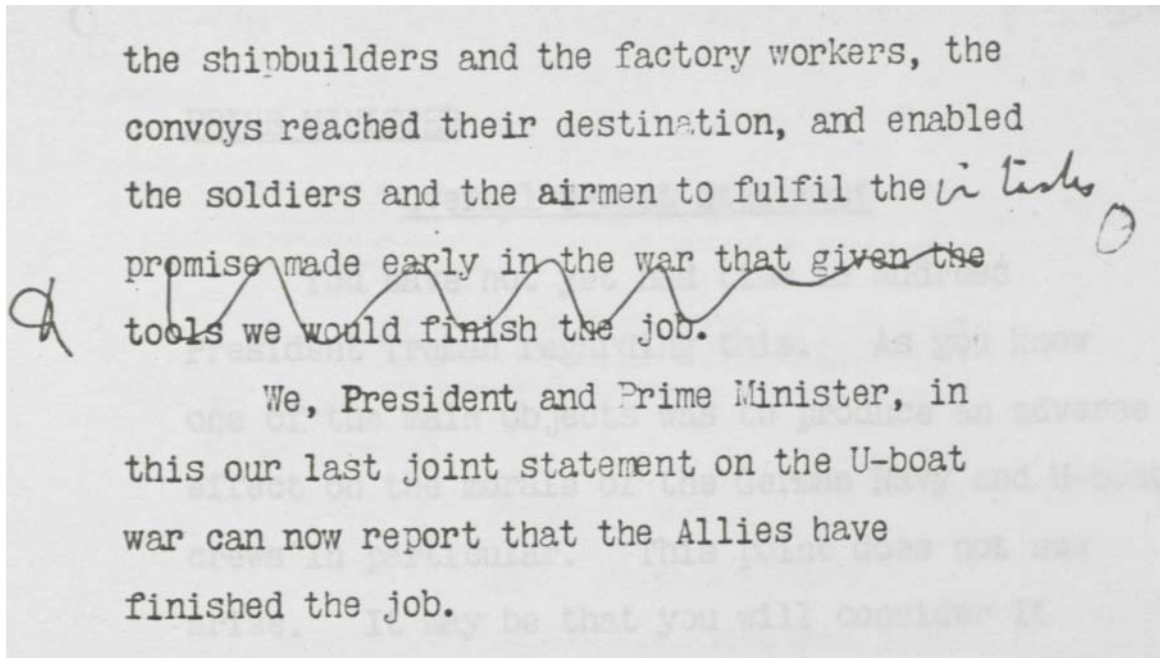
Beginning in September 1939 it has been a long and relentless struggle; a struggle demanding not only the utmost courage, daring and endurance, but also the highest scientific and technical skill.

Germany's object was to cut the Allied sea communications, upon which the maintenance of the Allied war effort depended. This included the movements and supply of armies and air forces during successful campaigns in four continents.

Losses have been heavy both in lives and materials; at the peak in 1941 and 1942 the issue of the struggle hung in the balance. On the other hand over 700 U-boats have been sunk and many others have been destroyed by the Germans themselves in the final stage. Most of these successes have been achieved by the combined Allied naval and air forces working in the closest co-operation; others are due to mines laid from aircraft and ships; others to bombing in harbour, and a few U-boats were lost by marine dangers.

But success was achieved. Thanks to the sailors and airmen, the scientists and technicians,

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**Extract b**

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**What is this source?**

This source is part of a series of telegrams which the President of the USA and Prime Minister Winston Churchill sent each other during the course of the Battle of the Atlantic.

For most of the war the US President was Franklin D Roosevelt. He died in April 1945 and was replaced by Harry Truman.

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**It's worth knowing that...**

This source was one of a series of joint statements that the Prime Minister and President drafted and then published to their countries. It gives some indication of the importance of the Battle of the Atlantic that they concentrated so much time and effort on it.

By the time this statement was read out the war against Germany was over. The war against Japan continued until September 1945.

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## ATLANTIC 1939-1945: THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC

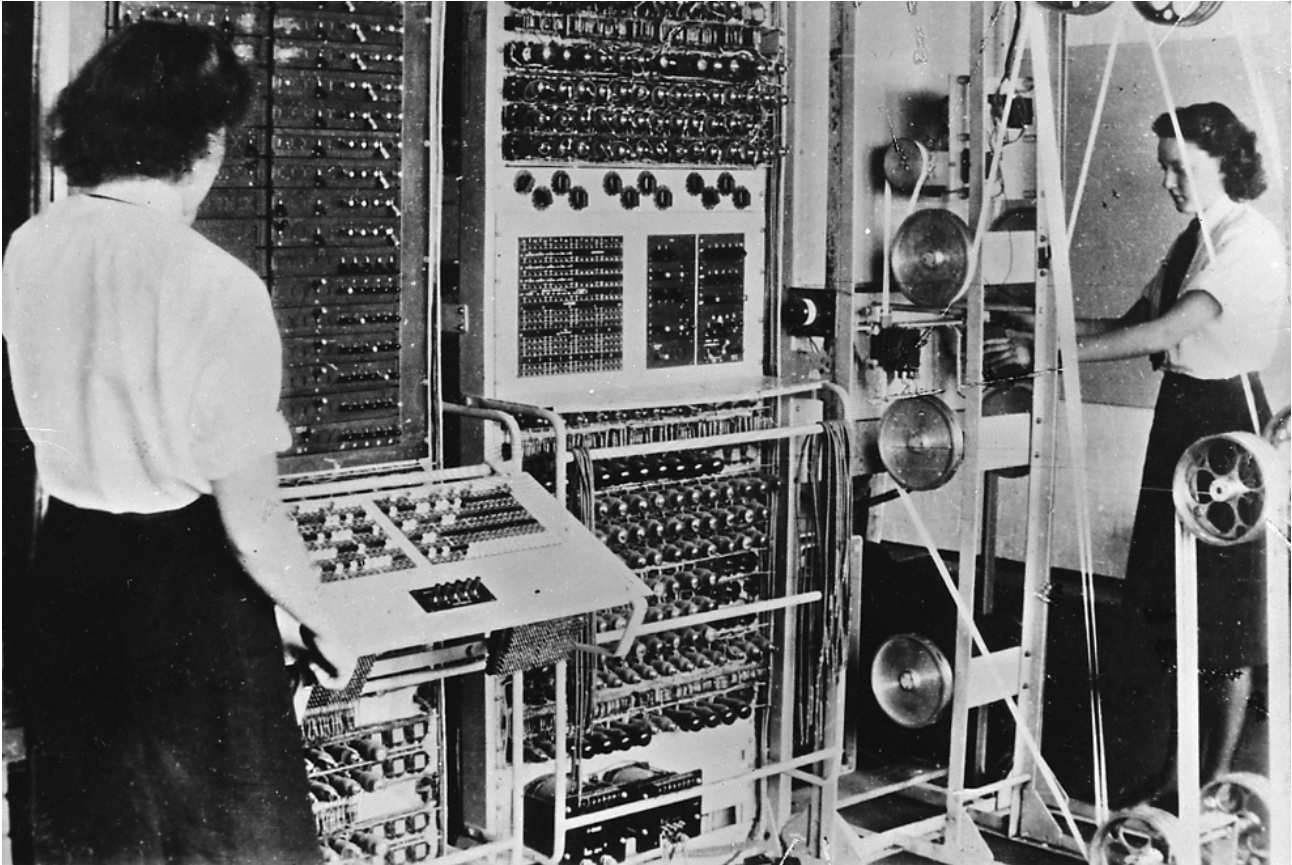
**How will you use this source?**

1. What qualities brought victory in the Battle of the Atlantic?
2. According to Churchill, what weapons and tactics deserved credit?
3. What types of people does he praise?
4. Does this source help you to explain why the Battle of the Atlantic was so significant?

## ATLANTIC 1939-1945: THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC

**Colossus codebreaking computer in operation, 1943**

Catalogue ref: FO 850/234

**What is this source?**

This is a photograph of one of the highly advanced codebreaking computers developed at Bletchley Park. The job of this machine, called Colossus, was to try out thousands or even millions of combinations of possible codes in order to try and decode German messages.

The first Colossus was probably the most advanced computer in the world when it went into operation but after the war every single one was broken up because the project was so secret. This photograph is one of fewer than a dozen that give any idea of what the machines were like.

## ATLANTIC 1939–1945: THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC

### What's the background to this source?

From 1940 onwards the greatest danger for Britain in WW2 was that German forces could cut off supplies of troops, food, medicine and equipment from Canada and the USA. This was exactly what the Germans tried to do. This campaign became known as the Battle of the Atlantic. The Germans used submarines (U-boats), aircraft and surface ships to attack shipping bound for Britain. U-Boats received information about targets and also about where to meet up with supply ships by radio. The Germans thought that their messages were safe because they were sent using the Enigma code.

In fact, British code breakers cracked the code, helping convoys to avoid attack. It also helped Allied ships and aircraft to hunt down U-Boats. The key development in cracking Enigma came when a British ship captured a U-Boat in May 1941. A team of code breakers including most famously mathematician Alan Turing based at Bletchley Park, near present day Milton Keynes, developed machinery like the Colossus to help do this.

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### It's worth knowing that...

The work of Turing and his colleagues played a key role in helping scientists and engineers to develop modern computers.

The Colossus machine itself was not used to break the Enigma code. It was used to crack a German army code called Lorenz.

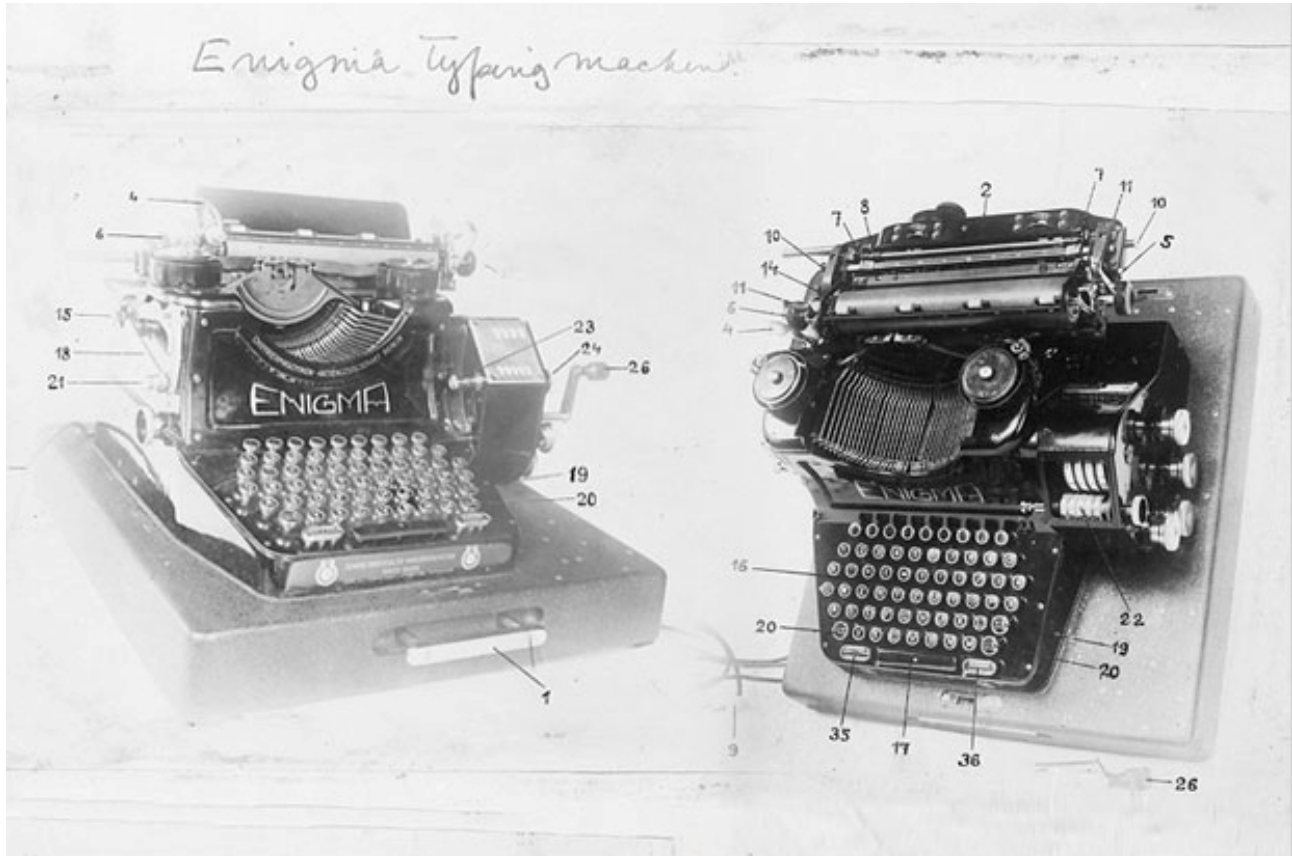
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### How will you use this source?

1. Describe the Colossus machine. Are modern machines this complicated?
2. Does the Colossus suggest that the British government invested a lot of resources in technology and intelligence?
3. What do you notice about the operators of Colossus?
4. Is the Enigma machine a valuable piece of historical evidence?
5. Do these sources help you to explain why the Battle of the Atlantic was so significant?

## The German Enigma Machine

Catalogue ref: HW 25/6



### What is this source?

This is a photograph of an Enigma machine. This was the apparatus used by the German navy to 'encrypt' or code the messages they send to and from their ships in order to keep them secret.

Enigma worked like a typewriter except that it typed messages in code. The person receiving the message needed the key to the code to understand the message. It was supposed to be unbreakable.

## ATLANTIC 1939–1945: THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC

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### It's worth knowing that...

The work of Turing and his colleagues played a key role in helping scientists and engineers to develop modern computers.

The information gained by Bletchley Park by reading decoded German messages was called 'Ultra'. It is often suggested that the use of Ultra shortened the war by at least a year.

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### How will you use this source?

1. Describe the Colossus machine. Are modern machines this complicated?
2. Does the Colossus suggest that the British government invested a lot of resources in technology and intelligence?
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## ATLANTIC 1939-1945: THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC

### **This in our Time**

ITN Ref: BP01013015906

Courtesy of [ITN/Source](#), London.

**Extract 1 from a British newsreel called "This in our time" about the history of Liverpool.**

### **Transcript**

1939. After the years of rehabilitation it was war again and Liverpool became the gateway to the Western Approaches. And this time it was a grim struggle for survival. A struggle kept alive by Britain's mastery of the seas but a mastery that was challenged to its limits by the ruthlessness of the Luftwaffe and the German U-Boats.

And from a cellar in the shadow of the town hall operated the nerve centre of the convoy system which played its part against tremendous odds with the dogged courage that has always been associated with the Merchant Marine.

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### **What is this source?**

These extracts come from a film about the history of Liverpool. It was made towards the end of the war.

The film used footage from previous reports and broadcasts and then added a voice over to explain Liverpool's role in the Battle of the Atlantic.

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### **What's the background to this source?**

By 1940 Nazi leader Adolf Hitler was in control of most of Western Europe. Only Britain and its empire opposed him. Although Hitler failed to invade Britain in 1940, his forces still threatened the country. The greatest danger for Britain was that German forces could cut off supplies of troops, food, medicine and equipment from Canada and the USA. This was exactly what the Germans tried to do. This campaign became known as the Battle of the Atlantic.

The Germans used submarines (U-boats), aircraft and surface ships to attack shipping bound for Britain. When the war began Canada also declared war on Germany. The USA was neutral, although it favoured Britain strongly by supplying food and equipment. A good example was the Lend Lease scheme that supplied huge amounts of military equipment to Britain. When the USA joined

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the war in 1941 the scheme continued, and the US naval forces also took direct action against German forces in the Atlantic.

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### **It's worth knowing that...**

The British headquarters for the Battle of the Atlantic was originally in Plymouth. However, it was vulnerable to air raids and was not a main port for the Atlantic convoys. In 1940 the command centre was moved to an underground bunker in Liverpool.

During the war Liverpool handled about one third of Britain's total imports unloading around four convoys a week. During the war about 4.7 million troops passed through, about 1.2 million of them Americans.

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### **How will you use this source?**

1. Why was Liverpool the command centre for the Battle of the Atlantic?
2. Is there any evidence that Liverpool handled the pressure of war well?
3. What impression do you get of life for the sailors in the convoys?
4. Would you say this source is more useful than our "starter" source showing the journey of convoy in August 1942 for studying the Battle of the Atlantic?
5. Do these film extracts help you to explain why the Battle of the Atlantic was so significant?

Use this report table to help plan your report

## ATLANTIC 1939–1945: THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC

### **This in our Time**

ITN Ref: BP01013015906

Courtesy of [ITN/Source](#), London.

**Extract 2 from a British newsreel called "This in our time" about the history of Liverpool.**

### **Transcript**

Often these cargo ships were like sitting ducks for fast German raiders and U-Boats, but still on they came. No fewer than 1285 convoys arrived at Liverpool during the war, the largest consisting of well over 60 ships.

Yet despite the day and night bombing of the port by the Luftwaffe, besides the natural technical problems of coping with so many ships, there was no serious delay in docking.

At one time there were as many as 60 ships, outward and inward bound lying at anchor at the bar.

Another attack beaten off. A rare moment of respite. By the sacrifice of so many of these gallant men, under the command of Admiral Sir Max Horton, the Battle of the Atlantic was won.

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### **What is this source?**

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The film used footage from previous reports and broadcasts and then added a voice over to explain Liverpool's role in the Battle of the Atlantic.

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By 1940 Nazi leader Adolf Hitler was in control of most of Western Europe. Only Britain and its empire opposed him. Although Hitler failed to invade Britain in 1940, his forces still threatened the country. The greatest danger for Britain was that German forces could cut off supplies of troops, food, medicine and equipment from Canada and the USA. This was exactly what the Germans tried to do. This campaign became known as the Battle of the Atlantic.

**ATLANTIC 1939–1945: THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC**

The Germans used submarines (U-boats), aircraft and surface ships to attack shipping bound for Britain. When the war began Canada also declared war on Germany. The USA was neutral, although it favoured Britain strongly by supplying food and equipment. A good example was the Lend Lease scheme that supplied huge amounts of military equipment to Britain. When the USA joined the war in 1941 the scheme continued, and the US naval forces also took direct action against German forces in the Atlantic.

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**How will you use this source?**

6. Why was Liverpool the command centre for the Battle of the Atlantic?
7. Is there any evidence that Liverpool handled the pressure of war well?
8. What impression do you get of life for the sailors in the convoys?
9. Would you say this source is more useful than our "starter" source showing the journey of convoy in August 1942 for studying the Battle of the Atlantic?
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Use this report table to help plan your report

## ATLANTIC 1939-1945: THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC

**CAN YOU RAISE THE CASH FOR THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC  
MUSEUM?****Extract from German radio propaganda broadcast to Britain in  
December 1941**

Catalogue Ref: IWM 456

Courtesy of Imperial War Museum, London.

In November alone, the German forces sank the following British naval units: one aircraft carrier, one cruiser, three destroyers and a number of smaller vessels. They damaged two battleships including the Prince of Wales, the Repulse and the seaplane carrier Unicorn, of 14,500 tons. That's only a part of the price paid for the attempt to wage naval warfare on the Churchillian scale.

Losses of this rate render far more difficult the task of the British commanders in solving every problem that the war presents. Naval power for Britain is not an independent function. It is an indispensable aspect of her war potential as a whole.

The United States are compact. The defence of their territory in the North American continent is no difficult matter. But the British Empire is scattered all over the world and is incomparably more assailable than the USA. What [President] Roosevelt may lose in the Pacific is small in comparison with what Britain stands to lose.

Even India is threatened. Canada is practically an American dominion, ruled by Roosevelt. The fate of Australia and New Zealand hangs in the balance.

The Royal Air Force is too weak. The Royal Navy is too weak. And as yet, the common sense of the British people is too weak to perceive the catastrophic nature of the plight into which they have allowed Churchill to lead them.

## ATLANTIC 1939–1945: THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC

### What is this source?

This is a radio broadcast by William Joyce. Joyce was a naturalised Englishman, living in Germany, and a loyal supporter of Hitler. He regularly sent out broadcasts that always began with "This is Germany calling..."

His aim was to undermine support in Britain for the war and he frequently urged the British to surrender. The nickname "Lord Haw Haw" was a joke on his drawling accent made by a Daily Express journalist but it became so well known that even German announcers would sometimes introduce him as "Lord Haw Haw".

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### What's the background to this source?

During the Battle of the Atlantic German U-Boats and aircraft tried to cut off Britain's supply lines across the Atlantic. The years 1941 and 1942 were the worst years in the Battle of the Atlantic. In 1941 the British and their Allies lost 1300 ships and in 1942 they lost 1661 ships. By late 1942 Britain was only able to import about one third of the goods it normally imported in peacetime.

The tide began to turn in 1943. By that time British code breakers were able to read many German naval signals. There were also effective new weapons against U-Boats such as depth charges.

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### It's worth knowing that...

There is not much evidence that Joyce's broadcasts seriously undermined British morale. However, there is some evidence that early in the war people did listen to his broadcasts. As the war went well for Germany in the early years, the propaganda could be fairly accurate. Many people listened to Lord Haw Haw to see if there were any clues about German bombing attacks.

William Joyce was executed for treason at the end of the war.

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### How will you use this source?

1. How does Joyce try and convince listeners that the war is going badly for Britain?
2. Do you think that anything that he says is likely to be true?
3. Why do think he has decided to broadcast on the war at sea?

**ATLANTIC 1939–1945: THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC**

4. What do you think he might be trying to achieve by discussing differences between the USA and the British Empire?
5. Does this source help you to explain why the Battle of the Atlantic was so significant?

Use this [report table](#) to help plan your report

**ATLANTIC 1939–1945: THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC**
**Report table**

Use this report table to help plan your report. Study the sources in this investigation. Use each section of the table as a paragraph in your report. If you wish, present your ideas using PowerPoint.

<b>Questions asked by historians to assess the significance of an event</b>	<b>Evidence which suggests that the Battle of the Atlantic was significant</b>	<b>Source(s) which support this</b>
Was it important to people at the time?		
Did it have a deep impact on at least some people?		
How many people were affected in a big way?		
How long lasting were the effects?		
Were there any lessons that help us understand life today?		

**Helpful points and ideas**

As you study the sources, you may want to think about the following points:

- The technology developed in the Battle of the Atlantic
- What would have happened to the war effort if the Allies had lost the Battle of the Atlantic
- What it was like to be in a convoy
- What it was like to be in a U-Boat or aircraft attacking convoys
- The views of key figures like the British Prime Minister and the US President
- The impact of the Battle on port cities, where many of the sailors came from
- What shipping losses meant for ordinary people – hunger, lack of medicines etc
- The impact on the families of those lost at sea