

Who was responsible for the loss of life with the sinking of the Titanic?

By Rebecca Gutteridge Year 9

RMS Titanic, so called the 'unsinkable ship', became the largest maritime disaster in history when she hit an iceberg on her maiden voyage through the North Atlantic. Much indecision surrounds the blame circle of the sinking of the largest vessel ever built and there are many theories which divide experts even today. However many believe it is an accident which could have been averted. I believe that a combination of factors are at fault.

Harland and Wolff

Harland and Wolff had difficulty finding enough workers, and in an effort to save money employed poor riveters from small forges; the work needed was very skilled and each rivet was hand crafted. In the British inquiry Harland and Wolff were accused of importing less rivets than were needed and sub-standard iron to save money. The rivets used for the majority of the ship were only crafted from iron which is weaker than steel – considered state of the art at the time. Only the central hull used steel rivets as wrought iron was easier to work by hand. The iceberg ripped along the hull which pinpoints that even the strongest rivets were not a match against the force of the collision. Recent scientific analysis of rivets found in the wreckage showed that the iron rivets contained large amounts of molten slag, which would have made them weak and brittle causing the heads to crack on impact; therefore weakening Titanic's resistance against the iceberg. However the velocity of the impact was predicted at 1 million tonnes per second which although cannot be proven I think would have fatally damaged even a modern ship as the recent sinking of the Costa Concordia shows. So I think this is not the cause of the ships sinking.

Environmental factors

The shipping lane Titanic took on the night crossed the Labrador Current: a very cold band of water which carried icebergs from Greenland along the North Atlantic. Between November 1911 and Titanic's sinking 20 boats had sunk across the shores of Newfoundland. In 1912 it had been exceptionally mild and roughly 1000 entered the shipping lanes when the average was 500. This should have been taken into account and the captain should have prepared for this. Also in testimonies given during the inquiry passengers and crew commented on how "unnaturally cold" the night had been and that the sea had been so calm it was "hard to distinguish where the sky ended and the sea began." The moon had not risen so it may have been difficult to see without waves breaking against it. Water temperature was tested every hour and on the night it was -2°C, and hundreds of passengers tried to save themselves by jumping ship due to the lack of lifeboats. There were enough lifejackets for everyone onboard, so if the water had been warmer those in the water could have survived long enough to be picked up by the returning lifeboats. Whereas when the ship sank people froze to death in minutes. I do not think the cold water mirage theory likely as the lookouts still should have seen it with enough time to turn, the ships stopping time was supposedly around 800m in three minutes and it should have taken even less time than at to turn the ships angle away from the iceberg.

Thomas Andrews

Titanic's design was not unlike other ships of the era. It was the second of three 'Olympic class ocean liners' all built very similarly and was quite normal in structural design. Titanic was so alike its sister Olympic, blueprints were never made for Titanic. Thomas Andrews made design faults which could have been the deciding factor in the ship sinking after it was damaged. Andrews designed sixteen

watertight compartments for all of the Olympic liners which were intended to keep the ships afloat should an accident such as two ships colliding happen. However so they did not lessen upper class accommodation they were made smaller, and so crew could gain access to different decks and stores in the hull easily the doors to the compartments were left open. This meant five flooded with water, and the ship could only float if four of them were flooded. Thomas Andrews was aboard the ship to check for problems and should have insisted they were closed. The idea may not have worked in the first place so I don't think this should be depended on for the fall of the ship. It cant have been very effective as modern ships do not use them today.

Crew

Lookouts- The lookouts should have spotted the iceberg and as it was a cold night they could easily have been slacking on the job. They should have seen the iceberg earlier and been able to avoid it. On the other hand they may have had their vision impaired by the cold conditions, and based on statements the weather appeared to be very out of the ordinary, which they may not have experienced before. The keys to the binocular cabinet were not on board and this was a very stupid mistake. But they were supposedly advised that obstructions were easier to spot with the naked eye than binoculars and had no choice, even so they may have been able to confirm their sighting earlier with them.

Radio Operator- The radio operators worked for the Marconi Company independently and sent passenger messages, if they did not prioritize weather warnings. The operator apparently suffered interference when receiving the Californians iceberg warnings; but this may have been to avoid prosecution. Even if this did happen it still gave him no reason to ignore it. However other sources say he was preoccupied by passenger telegrams, which seems more likely. If the lookouts and captain had been more aware they could have slowed down or seen the iceberg earlier, many more lives could have been saved and they might not have hit the iceberg at all.

Other crew- Crew had never been through a real evacuation before or any training, most of them were not seamen and they had not been trained in that profession. But it was their job to fill the lifeboats properly; the first lifeboat only contained 28 passengers when its capacity was 65. Apparently the distress flares and lights were sent at the all at once so where interpreted wrongly. Many more lives could have been saved if they had not panicked and had acted more professionally and convinced reluctant passenger to leave the ship earlier. Also more life boats should have gone back to look for passengers, only 13 people were rescued from the sea because the boats left it so long to go back. Even if they were scared it is self centred that only 1 lifeboat went back. There were enough lifeboats for ½ the passengers but only 1/3 filled the lifeboats. This was the fault of the crew for not conducting them efficiently into boats.

White Star Line

The ship industry was very competitive at a time just after the end of the industrial revolution when travel and ship building had hit a boom in popularity and profit. I think White Star Line rushed the building of Titanic to meet growing demand and I think they tried to skimp on testing and research. They rushed straight into building the largest ship with the most lavish interior in an effort to keep up with the growing market, prioritizing Edwardian grandeur and thinking safety came with size and stability, which it obviously did not. They wanted to surpass rival companies by introducing the new Olympic class ocean liners it seems like they had taken on more than they could build in two years. White star line also named Titanic 'the unsinkable ship' which was conceited and used looks to live up to the name. Olympic collided with HMS Hawke in 1911 and suffered minimal damage, the two ships where built together in the same slipway which only reinforced claims that the three liners where immune to disaster. Bruce Ismay allegedly put pressure on the captain to be on time so they

could show the ship off. It was also cowardly and ironic that he survived the sinking of his own ship after all the bravado he said about it not being able to sink.

Captain Smith

Captain Smith was accredited as an accomplished seaman and it was his last voyage before his retirement. He had had 40 years experience and had been working with White Star Line for 24 years. He had already captained the Olympic so new how to control a large vessel. Although the speed can't be proven, the liner was supposedly going at an average speed of 22 knots, I still think it was going too fast through treacherous waters. However it would have been acting contrary to popular opinion and would have diminished his reputation, as it was considered normal at the time to steam into ice fields to get out of them quickly; which does not use much sense as it is like running into a mine field which increases the risk. He also cancelled Titanic's lifeboat drill which could have prepared crew for an unknown reason. I think he was over confident and this could have been the ship's downfall. The worst he believed could happen was a slight boat collision. Captain Smith even said: "I cannot imagine any condition which would cause a ship to founder. Modern shipbuilding has gone beyond that."

The Californian

The Californian could easily have come to Titanic's aid. Captain Lord decided because the flares were let off at once in panic they were fireworks and a ship was having a party. Even if they could not distinguish what the signals meant they should have made more effort to contact the ship and they should have gone off course to check nothing was wrong. It was lazy and cost lots of lives, because it seems likely they did not want to go off course and be behind schedule. They should not have left the radio unmanned, if they had received the signal they could have helped. This was a big part of why so many lives were lost. The Carpathia was 4 hours away and still came to Titanic's assistance.

Lifeboat Laws

The national board of trade endorsed a ship being safer and more stable than carrying enough lifeboats. Lifeboat laws at the time stated that any ship over 10,000 tonnes should carry 16 lifeboats. This was a very out of date law as ships were getting larger and the Titanic weighed roughly 45,000 tonnes. Titanic carried four more collapsible lifeboats but this still was only enough for 1/2 of the passengers. The lifeboats were designed to ferry passengers to a rescue ship should a boat collision happen. This was again a conceited decision to show off the stability of the ship and how confident they were it was unsinkable. After the sinking of Titanic laws were changed which shows how outdated they were: All ships must carry sufficient lifeboats for the number of passengers on board. Ship radios should be manned 24 hours a day. Regular lifeboat drills should be held. Speed should be reduced in ice, fog or any other areas of possible danger.

The loss of lives I think was mainly due to the lack of lifeboats, Captain Smith, and the Californian. The ship's main downfall was the attitudes of those who made it. They brandished the Titanic as the 'unsinkable ship' or 'floating city' when no man made object could ever be so and put too much confidence in their own abilities. Everyone became so comfortable they failed to notice the dangers around them, and masking it with elaborate, ornate furnishings and increasing the size does not make a difference. It is almost always human error which causes horrible tragedies like this. No matter what people think they can achieve, money or intelligence cannot guarantee safety and nature should never be underestimated. The company were pompous and arrogant for not seeing the signs and they built for class and ornate beauty in an effort to make money and not to ensure people's lives. Because of that so many lives were lost.