How did trade blockades in World War One cause starvation in Lebanon?

Narrated by Carine Torbey

3. Battles and blockades

At the end of the nineteenth century, Britain had the biggest navy in the world, and dominated international maritime trade. Yet Germany was catching up.

It is perhaps not surprising then that one of Britain's first acts of World War One was to impose a naval blockade on Germany.

Before the war, Germany had been importing a quarter of its food, and in 1915, the blockade was expanded when the British declared food to be contraband.

The British blockade intercepted thousands of merchant ships headed from neutral countries to Germany's North Sea ports.

Germany's imports had dropped significantly. And during the winter of 1916-17, riots broke out over the lack of food.

But Germany had also adopted the tactic. U-boats, could wreak havoc from beneath the waves.

In 1915, Germany declared the waters around Britain a war zone, and warned it would target any ship that entered.

The sinking of the Lusitania passenger liner resulted in over a thousand deaths, including the loss of over a hundred American lives. An outcry followed, and with American threats, over this and other incidents the German policy of torpedoing without warning was halted.

In February 1917, German leaders took the desperate decision to launch an unrestricted submarine war in the Atlantic.

Britain was even more dependent on imports for its food than Germany, and the U-boat menace hit hard. At one point in April 1917, the country was reduced to just six weeks cereal supply.

But disaster was avoided.

World War One forced the nations who fought it to become more self-sufficient, and it would be decades before they traded across the globe quite so extensively again.