

Two episodes at sea: The submersible *Titan* and hundreds of refugees drowned in the Mediterranean

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The drama involving the submersible *Titan*, missing in the North Atlantic about 435 miles south of St. John's, Newfoundland since Sunday, is being followed by millions worldwide. The vessel's five passengers undertook the voyage to view the wreckage of the *Titanic*, the ocean liner that sank in April 1912 with some 1,500 victims, which lies 12,500 feet (3,800 meters) beneath the surface.

The fate of the five—Stockton Rush, CEO of OceanGate Expeditions (the company that operates the *Titanic* tours); wealthy British businessman and adventurer Hamish Harding; Pakistani corporate director Shahzada Dawood and his son, Suleman; and French dive expert Paul-Henri Nargeolet—is unknown at this point. They reportedly had a supply of 96 hours of oxygen when the vessel descended Sunday morning.

It is inevitable that such an event, in which there is a race against time and the elements, should attract the interest and concern of tens of millions. People deeply and instinctively feel for those trapped in life-threatening conditions and, in the present case, will continue to hope against hope that the *Titan*'s passengers can be extracted from their horrible situation.

The social standing of the individuals does not affect our attitude. There is no room in the socialist movement for anyone who gloats over the possible death of a handful of billionaires, pathetically imagining that such an occurrence would make the world a better place. The process of social revolution, in reality, is bound up with a generalized growth in compassion and requires, as Leon Trotsky once observed, people "with a highly developed psyche."

Nevertheless, appropriate alarm and apprehension about this potentially tragic episode do not send all the serious social issues raised by it flying out the window.

First of all, certain painful but telling historical ironies come to mind. There are similarities, now played out on a miniature scale, between the sinking of the original RMS *Titanic* and its present-day shadow, the *Titan*. There

were prominent wealthy victims of the 1912 disaster too, including John Jacob Astor IV, business magnate and the richest individual aboard the doomed ship, and Pennsylvania Railroad executive John Thayer.

The 1912 sinking and enormous death toll, as various investigations have shown, were entirely avoidable. They were the combined product of corporate profit hunger, ill-conceived plans, countless errors and simple stupidity. "Had it not been for the pride and pomp, the greed and luxury that paraded the upper deck, the *Titanic* never would have gone to the bottom of the sea," American Socialist Party leader Eugene V. Debs pointed out at the time, during a presidential election campaign in which he received nearly 1 million votes.

Likewise, there seems reason to believe that OceanGate's activities merit scrutiny. In 2018, the company's director of marine operations, David Lochridge, presented what's described in the media as "a scathing quality control report" to senior management, including CEO Stockton Rush, and was fired for his efforts. Lochridge prefaced his report by insisting that it was time to "properly address items that may pose a safety risk to personnel" and that "numerous issues ... posed serious safety concerns."

And there are the appalling matters involving the rescue efforts. Famously, the *Titanic* carried only 20 lifeboats, able in theory to accommodate 1,178 people, a little over half of the 2,200 people on board, and many of those put to sea only half-filled.

Even if the submersible *Titan* is located, efforts to save lives will be hindered by the fact that virtually no "rescuing capabilities" presently exist, at least in government hands. A *Forbes* comment points out, astonishingly, that as "the global market for extreme tourist adventures has emerged," submarine rescue has now become "a largely privatized endeavor" and "most governments have little to offer the missing mariners if they are trapped underwater." The decline in America's rescue capabilities "has been dramatic.

In 1960, the U.S. Navy boasted nine dedicated submarine rescue ships and two fleet tugs fitted out for undersea rescue work. Today, the service lacks a single dedicated undersea rescue vessel."

Once again, America's vast military, security and "anti-terror" apparatus only proves capable of ending lives, not saving them.

The present tragedy does not cast "extreme tourism" in a positive light. Desiring to see the five individuals alive and well does not signify approving of their foolhardy "adventures." All too often, individuals with too much money, too much time on their hands, too little brains in their heads and ugly, overweening hubris put their own and other people's lives at risk. Bezos, Branson, Musk and their ilk are parasites, of no social use to anyone.

The question of class intrudes in both tragedies like a knife-blade. Of the approximately 709 *Titanic* passengers in third (or steerage) class, an estimated 537 died. Some 80 percent of male third-class passengers perished, while only 3 percent of first-class women suffered that fate. As has been well documented, steerage passengers on board the *Titanic* were confined to their area in the lower decks by grilled gates, some of which were never unlocked as the ship filled with water.

One hundred eleven years later, class divisions have reached an even higher and more malignant stage. It has now become a tale, in fact, of *two distinct vessels*: the *Titan*, on the one hand, and the fishing boat that sank on June 13 in the Mediterranean, killing hundreds of desperate refugees, on the other.

It is no more possible to imagine Rush and the other wealthy individuals on board the same ship as the refugees, even on its upper decks, than it is to conceive of those unfortunate people anywhere near a submersible carrying a group of rich adventurers, paying \$250,000 a ticket. These are now two entirely separate realms, hostile, distant and impervious to one another.

The nonstop media coverage of the North Atlantic episode is vastly different from the treatment devoted to last week's terrible tragedy off the Greek coast. There the individuals, Pakistanis, Egyptians, Syrians, Afghans and Palestinians, died for the most part nameless, uncelebrated. It is unlikely that some of them will ever be identified.

Another harsh irony lies in the fact that two wealthy Pakistanis are passengers on the *Titan*, while hundreds of impoverished Pakistani men, women and children succumbed in the Mediterranean, leading to outrage and protests in their native country.

Far from facilitating rescue efforts, the various European governments, Greece's centrally, are directly responsible for the conditions that led to the mass drowning. Officials lied

about and covered up their role and slandered the dead and injured. The surviving refugees were thrown into a filthy warehouse facility. Media personalities could hardly stay awake recounting the facts. Large-scale death is now business as usual for these people. The clear implication of the reporting was that the suffering refugees had brought their fate on themselves. The reality of "fortress Europe," like that of "walled-in America," is unspeakable official inhumanity.

Saving the hundreds on board the fishing vessel near Greece, once they were clearly in jeopardy, would have been so much easier than rescuing a vessel possibly resting on the bottom of the sea—for any government or naval force that desired to do so. It's legitimate to raise the question whether, given the homicidal record of the European governments involved, the refugees' deaths may have been deliberately facilitated, as a means of setting an example and intimidating others.

Of course, the entire tragedy could have been avoided if the fleeing people had simply been allowed, as they should have been, to move with dignity and without obstruction from one continent or country to another. Their mass flight has largely been precipitated by the imperialist wars and other operations carried out by the Western powers, the very regimes now presiding over their deaths at sea.

Social inequality, neo-colonial war, the growth of authoritarianism and anti-immigrant hysteria, the debasement of official politics and the media—there is "a world of meaning ... in the sad circumstances" (Debs) of these two contrasting episodes. Unmistakably, however, the general movement of the mass of the population, in the face of a dysfunctional, criminal social order, is toward the left, toward social revolution.



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