How did U-boats threaten Britain?

L/O – To identify the key features of the German U-boat campaign and the reasons why it was defeated by Britain
The U-boat threat

• Despite British claims of victory at Jutland, by 1917 the German submarines had brought Britain close to defeat in the war.

• As an island, Britain relied heavily on its merchant fleet to ferry imports of food and supplies from abroad. The Germans planned to use U-boats (submarine) to end this trade.
Unrestricted U-boat Warfare

• In Feb 1915, Germany announced that all merchant shipping either entering or leaving British waters would be destroyed.

• It was an ambitious plan as the Germans only had 21 U-boats at the time, and there were more than 15,000 sailings a week to and from British ports.
Sinking of the Lusitania

• This campaign of unrestricted U-boat warfare sank only 4% of British capacity during 1915.

• In May 1915 it also caused the sinking of the Cunard liner, *Lusitania* with the loss of 1,198 lives, including 128 Americans. Following a protest by the United States the Germans reduced their indiscriminate sinking of ships which ensured the USA’s continued neutrality.

• However, the death of so many US citizens and then the sinking of US vessels led to a deterioration of relations between Germany and the USA.
LUSITANIA SUNK BY A SUBMARINE, PROBABLY 1,260 DEAD;
TWICE TORPEDOED OFF IRISH COAST; SINKS IN 15 MINUTES;
CAPT. TURNER SAVED, FROHMAN AND VANDERBILT MISSING;
WASHINGTON BELIEVES THAT A GRAVE CRISIS IS AT HAND

SHOCKS THE PRESIDENT

Winston Churchill's Secret Plan to Destroy the Lusitania

WASHINGTON DEEPLY STARED BY THE LOSS OF AMERICAN LIVES.

BULLETINS AT WHITE HOUSE

White House issue orders to naval forces.

NESTS OF CONGRESS CALL

Loss of Lusitania prompts call for further action.

CAPITAL FULL OFHUNGRY

Majority rules in White House before decision is made.
Resumption of U-boat Warfare

• By 1917, the German U-boat fleet had increased steadily (almost 200 in 1918). Germany felt confident that Britain could be brought to its knees by another campaign of unrestricted warfare.

• Merchant captains left port knowing that one in four ships would not reach their destination. By April 1917 Britain had only six weeks’ food supply left. Lord Derby, Secretary of State for War, admitted the government was at ‘its wit’s end as to how to deal with these submarines.’
The Convoy System

• On the insistence of the Prime Minister, Lloyd George, the convoy system was introduced.

• Merchant ships sailed in groups and were protected by Royal Navy destroyers. Losses dropped dramatically, and the U-boat threat was defeated.

• It was the Germans who were finally starved into submission in 1918.
Q Ships

- Q ships were old British steamers armed with hidden guns and torpedoes and, because they were loaded with wooden caskets, wood or cork, they were almost unsinkable.

- The idea was to attract the U-boat close to the ship and then remove the gun coverings and shell the U-boat as quickly as possible.

- By the end of the war, there were about 200 Q ships; they had sunk 14 U-boats at a cost of 27 Q ships.
Horned Mines

• By 1918 both the English Channel and the North Sea had been closed off by rows of **deadly mines** under the surface.

• Horned mines were large round metal containers **packed with explosives**.

• Several spikes or ‘horns’ stuck out – if a ship touched a horn, the mine would **explode**.
Depth Charge & Hydrophone

• A depth charge was a container about the size of a large oil drum, packed with explosives.

• It was fired into the sea above a U-boat and set to explode at a certain depth.

• Some ships had hydrophones which enabled operators to hear nearby submarine engines and then order depth charges to be dropped.
DESTROYERS FITTED WITH HYDROPHONES ON BOWS AND STERN

MOVABLE DIAPHRAGM ATTACHED TO MICROPHONE

SOUND WAVES FROM SUBMARINE'S MOTORS

ENEMY U-BOAT
Raids on U-boat Bases

• The British attempted to block off the U-boat bases at Ostend and Zeebrugge using block ships which were sunk at the entrance to the harbours.

• These two attacks in early 1918, had limited success and did not completely block off the ports.