Why did the Titanic sink, and who was to blame for the tragedy?

Why did the Titanic sink? The ship was supposed to be unsinkable, so how could it possibly be that she sank to a watery grave on her maiden voyage? There are several theories about whose fault it was, and obviously there was a combination of factors involved but let’s just take a look at the way that some of the blame has been cast.

Was it Captain Smith’s fault? He was the Captain of the Titanic, and in fact, the Titanic’s maiden voyage was his retirement trip. In other words, it was his last voyage. All he had to do was get to New York in record time. He had said before the voyage, “I cannot imagine any condition which would cause a ship to founder.” Modern ship building has gone beyond that. But, Captain Smith, an experienced seagoing captain, ignored seven iceberg warnings from his crew and from other ships. If he had called for the ship to slow down, then maybe, just maybe, the Titanic disaster would not have happened. But Captain Smith was determined to make it across the Atlantic in record time, and he didn’t want the ship to slow down.

Another theory is that it was the ship builders’ fault. About three million rivets were used to hold the sections of the Titanic together. A rivet is a kind of metal bolt that holds two sheets of metal together. When the wreck of the Titanic was finally discovered some of the rivets were recovered from the wreck and analysed. The findings show that they were made of substandard iron. When the Titanic hit the iceberg that eventually sank it, the force of the impact caused the heads of the rivets to break, and sections of the Titanic to come apart. If good quality iron rivets had been used, the sections may have stayed together, and it is possible that the ship wouldn’t have sunk.

Or, was it Bruce Ismay’s fault. Bruce Ismay was the managing director of the White Star Line, the shipping company that built and launched the Titanic, and he was aboard the Titanic on its maiden voyage. Competition for Atlantic passengers was fierce, and the White Star Line wanted to show that they could make a six-day crossing, which was unheard of at the time. To meet this schedule, the Titanic couldn’t afford to slow down. It is believed that Ismay put pressure on Captain Smith to maintain the speed of the ship. In other words, he kept telling Captain Smith to go faster and faster, and not to slow down.

Could the sinking of the Titanic also, in part, have been the fault of Thomas Andrews, the ship’s architect? The belief that the ship was unsinkable was in part due to the fact that the Titanic had sixteen watertight compartments. However, the compartments didn’t reach as high as they should have done. The White Star Line didn’t want them to go all the way up, because this would have reduced living space in first class. If Mr Andrews had insisted that they were the correct height, then perhaps the Titanic wouldn’t have sunk.

Another theory, well, not as to why it sank, but as to why so many people died, was that it was the fault of Captain Lord. Captain Lord was Captain of the Californian, another ship in the area at the time. The final iceberg warning was sent to the Titanic by the Californian. This ship, captained by Stanley Lord, had stopped for the night about nineteen miles north of the Titanic. At around 11:15 in the evening, the radio operator on the...
Californian turned off the radio and went to bed. Sometime after midnight, the Californian crew on watch\textsuperscript{18} reported seeing rockets\textsuperscript{19} that were being shot into the sky from a big liner\textsuperscript{20}. Captain Lord was told about this, but he concluded that the ship was probably having a party. No action at all was taken by the Californian. If the Californian had turned on the radio, she would definitely have heard the distress messages\textsuperscript{21} from the Titanic, and would have been able to reach the ship with enough time to save all the passengers.

Inquiries into the reasons for the sinking of the Titanic were held in both America and Britain\textsuperscript{22}. The conclusions reached by these inquiries were, in some respects, almost identical. The American inquiry concluded that Captain Smith of the Titanic should have reduced the speed of the ship, because of the icy weather conditions. However, the British inquiry reached the conclusion that, maintaining speed in icy weather conditions, was common practice, really. However, both inquiries agreed that it was Captain Stanley Lord of the Californian who was the most at fault for the number of deaths. The inquiries stated that if Stanley Lord had taken notice of the er, rockets being fired from the Titanic, and had gone to the Titanic's assistance, then everybody would probably have been saved.

Both the American and the British inquiries made the following recommendations. One, that all ships must carry sufficient lifeboats to carry the number of passengers on board\textsuperscript{23}. If the Titanic had had enough lifeboats, it would have been possible to save a lot more passengers, possibly even all of them. Two, that ships' radios should be manned twenty four hours a day\textsuperscript{24}. If the radio on the Californian hadn't been switched off, then the Californian would have picked up the Titanic's distress signal\textsuperscript{25}, and they would have been able to go to their rescue. Three, regular lifeboat drills should be held on all ships\textsuperscript{26}. If the lifeboat drill hadn't been cancelled on the very day before the Titanic sank, then perhaps more people would have known how to reach the lifeboats, and the lifeboats wouldn’t have left half empty. Four, the speed of a ship should be reduced in icy or foggy conditions. If the Titanic hadn’t been travelling so fast, possibly, it wouldn’t have struck the iceberg at all, or with so much force, and wouldn’t have sunk.

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\textsuperscript{1} a watery grave (idiom) = the bottom of the sea
\textsuperscript{2} on her maiden voyage = on her first voyage (note: we talk about ships as being feminine)
\textsuperscript{3} the way that some of the blame has been cast = who has been blamed
\textsuperscript{4} in record time = in the quickest ever time
\textsuperscript{5} to founder = to fail / to sink / to collapse
\textsuperscript{6} Modern ship building has gone beyond that = Many advances have been made in ship building so that scenario is no longer possible
\textsuperscript{7} to slow down (phrasal verb) = to reduce speed
\textsuperscript{8} the ship builders = the company that built the ship (Harland and Wolf in Belfast)
\textsuperscript{9} bolt = piece of metal or threaded bar which comes with a nut and is used for joining pieces of metal together
\textsuperscript{10} the wreck of the Titanic = the sunken remains of the Titanic
\textsuperscript{11} The findings show that = The results of the inquiry show that
\textsuperscript{12} Substandard = Low quality
\textsuperscript{13} to come apart (phrasal verb) = to separate
\textsuperscript{14} Schedule = timetable
\textsuperscript{15} Ismay put pressure on Captain Smith to maintain the speed of the ship = Ismay used his influence to persuade or force Captain Smith to maintain the speed of the ship
\textsuperscript{16} In other words = Expressed in another way
\textsuperscript{17} watertight compartments = compartments within the ship which would not allow water to pass to other areas of the ship
\textsuperscript{18} on watch = performing observation or lookout duties
19 Rockets = flares / distress signals (like fireworks)
20 Liner = ocean liner / large passenger ship
21 distress messages = mayday or SOS signals
22 were held in both America and Britain = took place in (phrasal verb) America and Britain
23 on board = on the ship
24 radios should be manned = radios should be operated
25 would have picked up (phrasal verb) the Titanic’s distress signal = would have received the Titanic’s distress signal
26 regular lifeboat drills should be held on all ships = regular practice sessions to demonstrate on ship emergency escape procedures