

THE LITTLE-KNOWN SINKING OF THE WILHELM GUSTLOFF

A SINKING DEADLIER THAN THE TITANIC & LUSITANIA COMBINED

9,000 + DEATHS

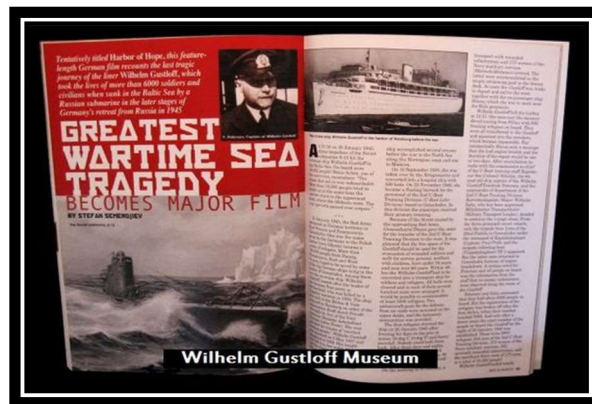
200



VIDEO'S

NARRATIVE: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2ULBwRCiw> (11 MINUTES)

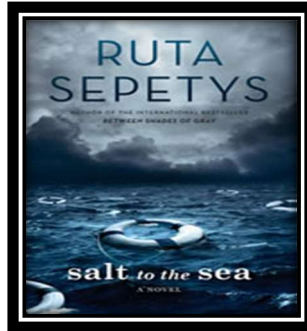
THE FULL STORY: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=roWKlk3ahas> (48 MINUTES)



World War II was drawing to an end with the Nazi regime nearing its fall. Many saw the writing on the wall and desperately fled to Germany. **10,582 people crammed aboard a ship designed to hold only 1,900.** There were not nearly enough lifeboats for everyone, and many of these were frozen to the deck and useless. The Soviet submarine hit the cruise ship with three torpedoes. Most of the passengers drowned in the icy waters of the Baltic Sea.



The Wilhelm Gustloff Fully Loaded



Ruta Sepetys

Despite the high number of casualties, so few know about this tragedy. Novelist Ruta Sepetys decided she wanted to raise awareness of an event of this magnitude. She wrote a book entitled **Salt to the Sea**, which was released on February 16, about fictional characters on the Wilhelm Gustloff. Sepetys is drawn to “hidden histories,” as her first novel *Between Shades of Grey* shares a character crossover with her latest young adult novel.

Her interest in the sinking of Wilhelm Gustloff was ignited when she found out she had a cousin who almost boarded the cruise ship. The cousin opted to delay her travel, but as the ship departed she felt she had made the wrong decision. It turns out that decision probably saved her life.

Sepetys was able to track down two divers who explored the wreckage in the 1960s, in a Soviet operation. The Soviets wanted to search the ship to repossess any treasure that had sunk with it and eventually ordered parts of the wreckage to be blown up. It was considered an obstruction to shipping that needed to be dealt with.

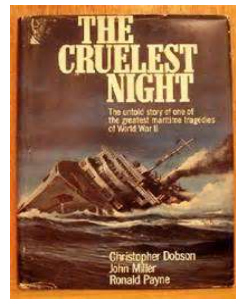
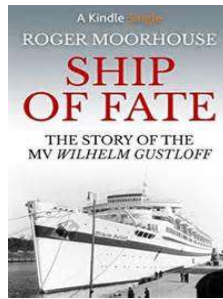
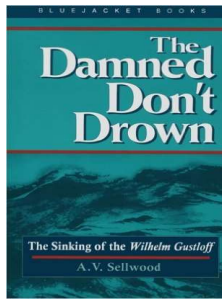
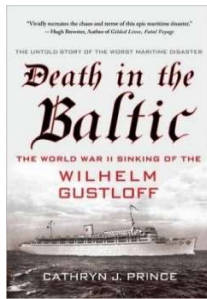
Sepetys has a couple of theories to explain why a tragedy of this magnitude was covered up. The Nazis did not want word to get out that people were fleeing, to avoid a further drop in the public’s morale. At that point in the war, it was quite clear that the Nazis would be defeated. Some survivors did speak about the event but reported that shortly afterward they received a knock on their door from the authorities, telling them to stop spreading lies.

In the post-war period, the West and East German governments did not want to offend the Soviets. Other Germans were hesitant to report that they had been victims of anything during that war. **Or perhaps it was since the submarine captain who sank the cruise ship was later dishonorably discharged for alleged neglect of duty by the Soviet navy and this led to information about the sinking being suppressed.**

Sepetys was also drawn to this topic as a refugee story since her Lithuanian father had resided in refugee camps for nine years before relocating to the United States. The similarity between the migrant influx to Europe today and the plight of refugees during World War II was an unexpected coincidence. This allows the readers to draw parallels between the past and the present.

The author hopes that readers will get to know the protagonists of her novel and find a way to empathize with them and understand the unimaginable challenges people fleeing war face. Many people have no concept of a war-torn country, or what it means to be forced out of the only country you know.

Other books about the incident by other Authors:



German civilians were fleeing in terror from East Prussia, and for many of them, the only route of escape was across the icy Baltic Sea. They packed the port of Gotenhafen, near Danzig, hoping to find passage to the west. Hitler ordered all available civilian ships into the rescue effort. The Wilhelm Gustloff was one of these. A 25,000-ton passenger liner, it had been used before the war by the "Strength through Joy" organization to take German workers on low-cost vacation excursions.

On January 30, 1945, when it steamed out of Gotenhafen, it carried a crew of just under 1,100 officers and men, 73 critically wounded soldiers, 373 young women of the Women's Naval Auxiliary, equivalent to our WAVES, and more than **8,000 desperate refugees, most of them women and children.**

Soviet submarines and aircraft were a constant menace to this rescue effort. They regarded the refugee ships in the light of Ehrenburg's genocidal propaganda: the more Germans they could kill the better and it didn't make any difference to them whether their victims were soldiers or women and children. At just after 9:00 PM, when the Wilhelm Gustloff was 13 miles off the coast of Pomerania, three torpedoes from the Soviet submarine S-13, under the command of Captain A.I. Marinesko, struck the ship. Ninety minutes later it sank beneath the icy waves of the Baltic. Although a heroic effort to pick up survivors was made by other German ships, barely 1,100 were saved. The rest, more than 8,000 Germans, died in the frigid water that night.



This is the last known photo of the Gustloff, taken as it left port around 12:30 PM on January 30, 1945

A few days later, on February 10, 1945, the same Soviet submarine sank the German hospital ship, General von Steuben, and 3,500 wounded soldiers aboard the ship, who were being evacuated from East Prussia, drowned. To the Soviets, inflamed by Jewish hate propaganda, the sign of the Red Cross meant nothing. On May 6, 1945, the German freighter Goya, also part of the rescue fleet, was torpedoed by another Soviet submarine, and more than 6,000 refugees fleeing from East Prussia died.

The lack of knowledge (or concern) in the United States about any of these terrible maritime disasters of 1945 is profound, even among people who consider themselves knowledgeable on naval matters. And this ignorance stems from the deliberate policy of the controlled media, a policy which has relegated these disasters to the category of non-events.

The reason for this media policy originally was the same reason which led the Jewish media bosses to blame the slaughter of 15,000 Polish officers and intellectuals in the Katyn Woods in 1940 on the Germans. They knew that the Soviets had done it, as part of their effort to "proletarianize" Poland and make the Poles more amenable to Communist rule, but they didn't want to tarnish the image of our "gallant Soviet ally," as the Reds were called by the controlled U.S. media during the war. They wanted Americans to think that the Germans were the bad guys and the Soviets were the good guys, so they simply lied about the Katyn massacre.

We will never know the exact number of those who perished in the Gustloff tragedy because crew members lost count when thousands of refugees jammed every corner of the ship. Regardless, historians commonly agree that it is the most deadly single-ship disaster ever. For years, estimates of those who lost their lives ranged from 5,000 to 10,000. Now it is generally agreed to be well over 9,000. Recently, this was confirmed by a sophisticated team of experts assembled for the Discovery Channel's "Unsolved History".

News of Gustloff's sinking is not reported within the remains of the Third Reich. Hitler could not bear to bring more bad news to his collapsing regime. Except for a minor mention in a couple of newspapers, it also remains largely unreported in Western Allied countries. Official bulletins in the Soviet Union make no mention of it. It seems the profile on the tragedy was doomed right from the start. Ironically, the only known high-profile mention of this tragedy is a front-page newspaper story in Nachrichten für die Truppe (News for the Troops) - an allied propaganda newspaper dropped out of bombers over remaining pockets of German soldiers as the war nears its end.

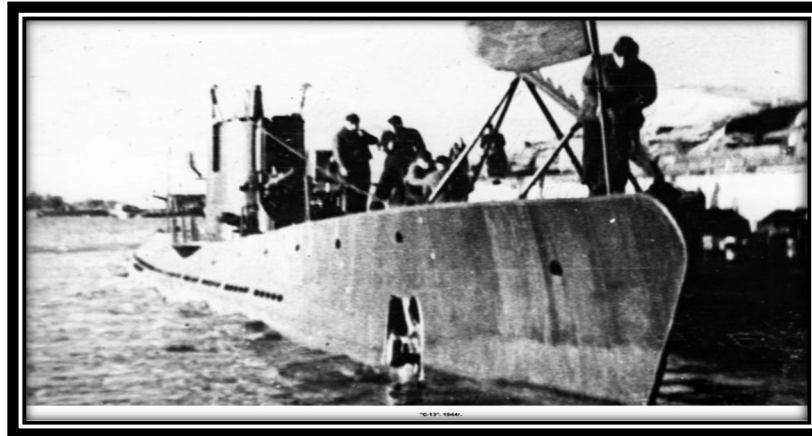


S-13 Captain Marinesko

You would think S-13 Captain Marinesko's troubles with the NKVD (eventually to become the KGB) would fade now that he has scored the biggest target in history. Moreover, he managed to sink one more significant target on February 9, 1945, before returning to base (the Steuben - over 15,000 tons and 3,000 lives sinking in only seven minutes). But Marinesko is not declared a "Hero of the Soviet Union" like some of his counterparts who have achieved less. He has become a marked man - his character is deemed less than compatible with the Soviet ideal. Despite all efforts to gain recognition for his achievements, he was dishonorably discharged from the Navy in October 1945. Trouble continues to follow him. After employment at a state institution, Marinesko is dubiously charged with "stealing property" after quarreling with a director. He is sentenced to three years of hard labor in Siberia. Through quick wit and resourcefulness, he survives by convincing gulag authorities that he is best served on the docks rather than in the mines - where sickness and death can come quickly. Regardless, his plight takes its toll. Unknown to him, cancer is beginning to grow inside his body and illness sets in.

Finally, in the early 1960s, he was given the recognition he fought for. He is reinstated as Captain Third Class and receives a pension. In October 1963 - eighteen years after sinking the Gustloff - he finally received the traditional honorary ceremony due to a captain upon successful return from a mission. He dies 3 weeks later of cancer - at least knowing that acknowledgment had finally come his way. In 1990, Mikhail Gorbachev posthumously awarded Marinesko with his elusive "Hero of the Soviet Union" title.

Today, Marinesko is regarded as a hero in Russia - especially by submariners in the Navy who regard him as the ultimate role model. The official line in Russia has been one of the Gustloff packed with armed forces - leaving out the fact that it carried thousands of refugees.



The S-13 German U-Boat



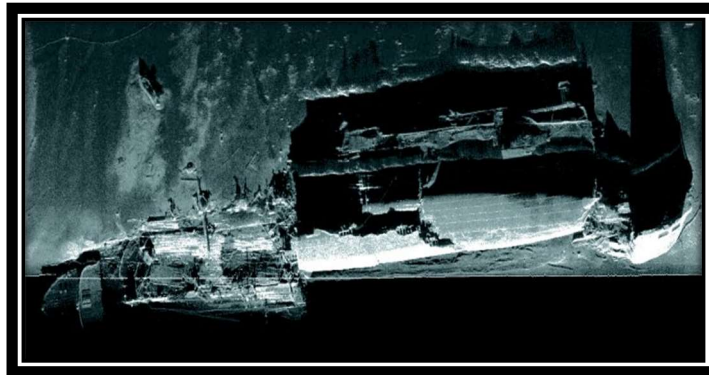
S-13 portrayed on a Russian stamp, issued in 1996

Heinz Schön, the ship's purser on board the Gustloff in Gotenhafen, survives to become the world's chief expert on the subject. He authors numerous books and provides consulting to many projects. Currently, he makes his home in Bad Salzuflen, Germany, and manages the "Gustloff-Archive".



Heinz Schön

The wreck of the Wilhelm Gustloff is all that remains of the greatest tragedy at sea in history. It lies in the international waters off the coast of modern Poland, in the stretch of sea between the shallow basin of the Stolpe-Bank and the Danish island of Bornholm.



Unlike the Titanic, it did not take years to establish where the wreck of the Gustloff lay. An accurate position recorded during the sinking (55.07N, 17.41E) and relatively shallow waters (45m/150ft) near the Stolpe Bank make it easy to locate. Sometime after the war ended, it is alleged that the Soviets visited the wreck and scoured for objects of interest. Rumors of a cherished Soviet treasure - **the Amber Room** - in the cargo hold may have provoked a visit. They blow up the mid-ship section to cover their tracks - leaving only the bow and stern reasonably recognizable. Other items have been pilfered from the wreck including the anchors and props. Today, the wreck is officially designated as a grave site and is off limits to divers by order of Polish authorities. However, some dives have been made recently, particularly by Mike Boring and his team in May 2003.

Most importantly, for survivors and family members of those who were lost, memories of this event still haunt them today. For many years, most survivors would not speak of this tragedy.

They repressed it deep within themselves (collectively - Germany as a nation did so as well). Many only started 'opening up' and speaking of it 40 to 50 years after this terrible evening on the unforgiving Baltic.

There is still much for people to learn. Similar to its wreck in relatively shallow waters in the Baltic, the Gustloff still largely remains below the waterline of consciousness in historical awareness.

In any tragedy, however, miracles can happen. Seven hours after the ship went down, a small patrol boat VP-1703 arrived at a sea of floating bodies. Its onboard searchlight finds a lifeboat. When Petty Officer Werner Fick jumps in to inspect it, he discovers an infant wrapped tightly in a wool blanket - astonishingly alive among the frozen corpses. This is the last official survivor of the Wilhelm Gustloff.

With that, the total number of survivors rescued number approximately 1,230. Over 9,000 go to their deaths - trapped at the bottom of the Baltic or floating frozen on its unforgiving surface.

SUMMARY

The torpedoing of the Wilhelm Gustloff by the Russian submarine S-13 resulted in over 9,000 tragic deaths - a staggering figure by any comparison. Heartbreakingly, estimates have indicated that up to half of those who perished were children. Furthermore, the examination of history and facts surrounding Gustloff provides drama rivaling any award-winning movie or book ever made.

However, ask most people to name the greatest ship disaster in history and you'll usually get a response that inevitably includes the Titanic (which is then usually dismissed as being too obvious). Other suggestions will be offered like the Lusitania, Empress of Ireland, USS Arizona, Andrea Doria, etc.

Depending on where you live in the world, the ship names may be different - with the probable exception of the Titanic due to its profile. Rarely will the Gustloff (or indeed other German ships evacuating the Bay of Danzig/Gdansk in early 1945) be among them Why? Perhaps in the years to come, Wilhelm Gustloff will be seen as much more than a footnote in history. In the meantime, many suggestions have been made as to why it is largely an "untold story" today. Here are some in no particular order:

1. Occurred during wartime

Many view wartime disasters as less "tragic" than those occurring during peacetime. Perhaps it is because those trapped in a wartime environment should expect the potential for danger.

2. Happened to the "losing" side

Quite simply, since the dawn of time, the "losing" side of any war has suffered a loss of historical documentation and profile of their events - even tremendously tragic ones.

3. German war guilt has repressed the disaster

Over the last 60 years, numerous Germans have felt war guilt for their country's role in WWII. Many would have hesitated to mourn, lest they be accused of equating German suffering with Nazi atrocities. There are signs that enough time and healing have passed in Germany for proper acknowledgment of this tragedy. Günter Grass' tremendous book - "Crabwalk" - deals with this issue in a sophisticated and coherent manner.

4. Russian retribution for Nazi occupation

When the Nazis broke their pact with Stalin and invaded Soviet Russia in 1941, their tactics were often brutal and cold. Hitler himself made it clear that this was a war different from that waged in the West. He called it a "war of extermination". When the tide eventually turned and the Soviets were marching toward Berlin, the Red Army had no mercy - and exacted horrific revenge. Since the Soviets were the only Allies in control of the Bay of Danzig both near the end of the war and for many years after, they were not about to mourn the loss of life on any enemy ship.

5. World sentiment regarding Nazi atrocities

As the world learned more about Nazi war crimes and systematic genocide - above all the Holocaust, subdued global reaction to a disaster on this scale is understandable. Under other circumstances, 4,000 innocent children dying in a single disaster would certainly be mourned by almost anyone in a "friendly" or "enemy" nation.

6. Ship was named for a prominent Nazi leader

Wilhelm Gustloff was the leader of the Nazi Party (NSDAP) in Switzerland before his assassination wonders if the profile of this sinking might have been higher if the ship had been named after a city or non-Nazi figure. Ironically, the ship was originally to be called the Adolf Hitler, which may have repressed this disaster even more.

7. **Soviet Submarine S-13 Captain Alexander Marinesko**

Had a different submarine with a different captain sunk the Gustloff, the story may have received a much higher profile in the Soviet Union. Unfortunately for Marinesko, his reputation and indiscretions on land made his character incompatible with the Soviet ideal. His reputation was eventually resurrected many years later by the Soviet Government, but only as a hero who sunk a fascist ship filled with military personnel.

8. **The demise of so many refugees (mostly women and children)**

For months, the disaster remained largely unreported both inside and outside Germany. Hitler wanted to suppress awareness about the death of so many (especially occurring on what once had been the flagship of the KdF and symbol of unity among the German Volk). With the Western Allies, would not have made for a popular news story involving the deaths of so many women and children.

9. **There is no "American" connection or "Hollywood" profile**

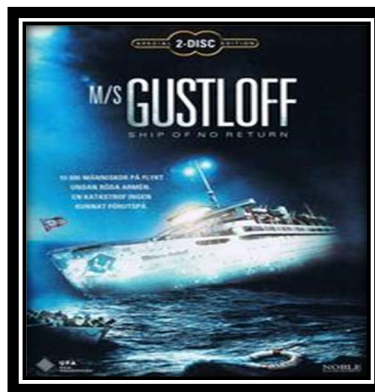
Since comparisons are inevitable, we can see how the Titanic profile was raised even higher worldwide with an Academy Award-winning movie from Hollywood. Unlike the Titanic, the Gustloff was not sailing toward America, nor did it have any American passengers on its decks. This may very well change soon as more learn about the scope of this tragedy and the incredible story that surrounds it.

10. **No world-renowned celebrities or citizens were on board at the time of the disaster**

In another inevitable comparison to the Titanic, none of the Gustloff passengers on the fateful voyage were "rich", "world famous" or of "society's elite". Most were refugees simply trying to escape a terrible situation.

NOTE

In 2009 a German movie was made entitled "MS Gustloff" and was marketed overseas. I could find no evidence of it ever being made into an American movie but a DVD was created, however, I don't think the DVD is even available with English subtitles. I am not certain of this but could find no information indicating it was during my research. A picture of the DVD is shown directly below.



PLEASE UNDERSTAND THAT THIS INFORMATION HAS BEEN GATHERED FROM WEBSITES THAT APPEAR TO BE AUTHENTIC WITH CORRECT INFORMATION, HOWEVER, I CAN NOT GUARANTEE THAT THE DATA IN THIS ARTICLE IS COMPLETELY ACCURATE AND CORRECT