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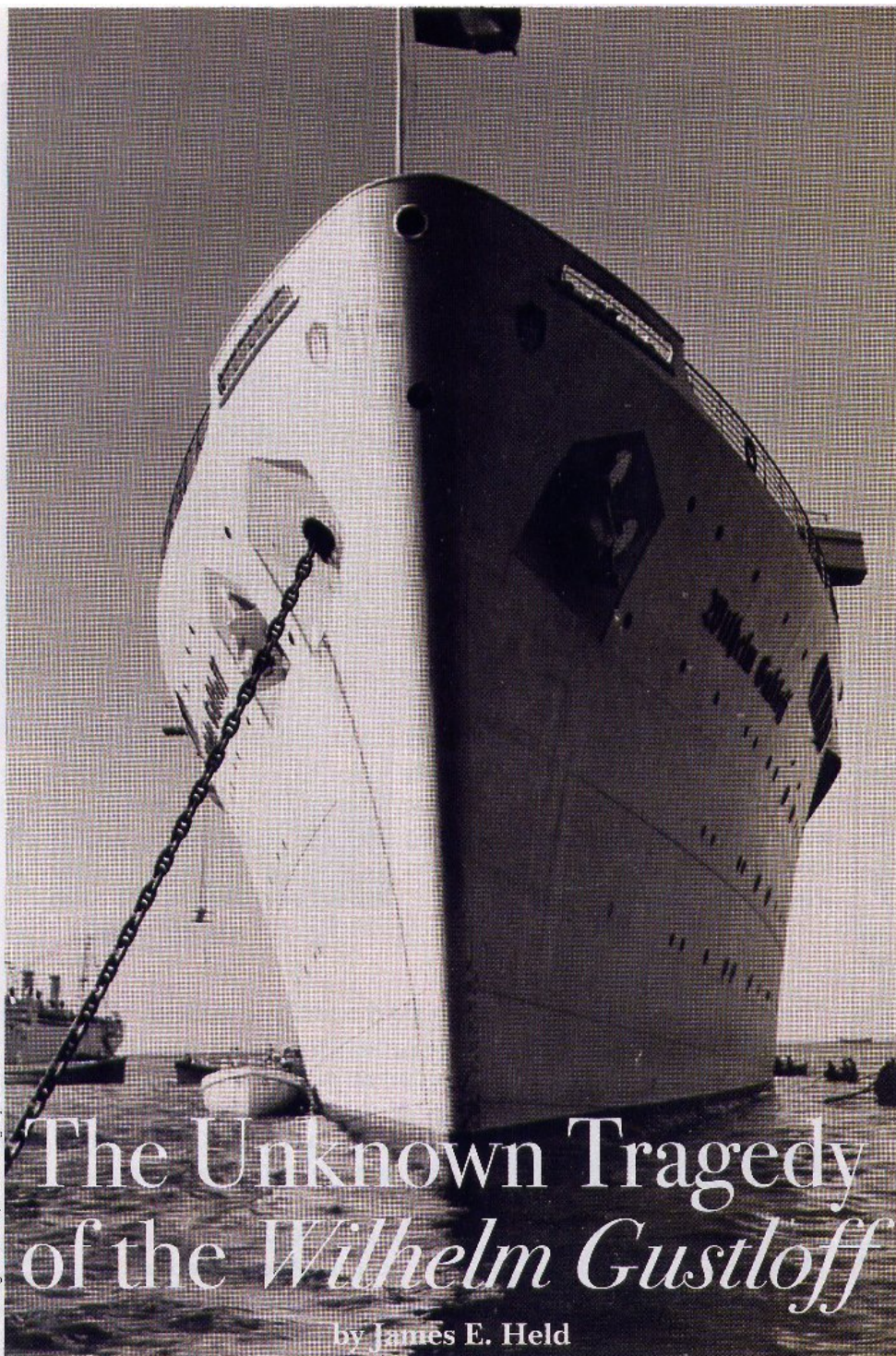
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# The Unknown Tragedy of the *Wilhelm Gustloff*

by James E. Held

In the twilight of World War II, a series of torpedoes from a Soviet submarine sent the *Wilhelm Gustloff* to the bottom of the Baltic Sea claiming more lives than 9-11 or the sinking of the *Titanic*

The Red Army offensive launched on January 13, 1945, quickly drove the Wehrmacht to the Baltic shores of East Prussia, Germany's easternmost province. Over four million trapped civilians escaping Soviet massacres fled into blizzards on what historian Antony Beevor calls "the largest panic migration in history." Aircraft strafed their long wagon treks

and, if overtaken by Russian soldiers, men were murdered and women violated. Their sole salvation became *Operation Hannibal*, launched January 21, by the Commander of the German Navy, Admiral Doenitz; seven hundred ninety vessels in a sealift seven times larger than Dunkirk, braved storms, mines, and torpedoes to rescue two million East Prussians,

but one – the *SS Wilhelm Gustloff* – became history's largest maritime disaster.

War on the Eastern Front possessed a singular savagery, and Soviet propagandist Ilya Ehrenburg exhorted soldiers to avenge countless Nazi atrocities: "Kill. Kill. In the German race there is nothing but evil...Use force and break the racial pride of these Germanic women. Take them as your lawful booty!" Red Army Captain and future Nobel laureate, Alexander Solzhenitsyn captured in verse the brutal retribution:

*And then they shot the housewife first,  
Spattering with blood the carpet's pile  
The husband was bedridden, ill:  
They cured him with a carbine burst.*

*A moaning, by the walls half muffled:  
The mother's wounded still alive.  
The little daughter's on the mattress  
Dead. How many have been on it?  
A platoon, a company perhaps?  
A girl's been turned into a woman,  
A woman turned into a corpse. . .*

**DO NOT FORGET! DO NOT FORGIVE!  
BLOOD FOR BLOOD! A TOOTH FOR A  
TOOTH!**

Terrorized refugees streamed into the Baltic port of Gotenhafen, "the harbor of hope" where, on January 22, 1945, the *Gustloff's* sixty-three-year-old Master, Friedrich Petersen received the ominous orders – *PREPARE THE SHIP TO BE UNDERWAY IN 48 HOURS*. With fifteen hundred submariners boarding as well, he would share command with Naval Captain Wilhelm Zahn over this 25,484-ton vessel, six hundred fifty feet long and seventy-two feet of beam that was launched on May 5, 1937. After a brief career as a cruise vessel with six hundred sixteen cabins and ninety-five-hundred-horsepower engines, she became a hospital ship (*Lazarettsschiff D*), following the 1939 German invasion of Poland. Naval Command, however, realized the *Gustloff's* sixteen knots were too slow for active service and, on November 21, 1940, she made fast in the Baltic harbor of Gotenhafen – Polish Gdynia. This nautical dinosaur became the barracks for the *Second U-Boot Training Division* until Operation Hannibal began.

Merchant Captains Kohler and Weller completed the Officers for the voyage to

Kiel while Chief Engineer Bruno Lobel readied an engine room idle over four years. Second Engineer Walter Knust remembered “. . . we never had time to smoke a cigarette,” but if breakdown offered an easy target, dockside the *Gustloff* was equally vulnerable to refugees desperate to escape the Soviet Flood. Elsewhere, stampedes had crushed children and pushed victims between the surging ships and quays. Many believed this leviathan was unsinkable, but when shipyard manager Eugen Jeissle begged Chief Officer Louis Reese to take his family, he replied, “Don’t! I don’t have a good feeling about this voyage.” And when three hundred seventy naval nurses boarded, one girl wailed. “What’s wrong?” her friends asked, “the *Gustloff* is huge and beautiful.” “I don’t want to go on that death ship!” she cried. Still, purser assistant Heinz Schoen remembered, “A ticket on the *Gustloff* was half your salvation, and we couldn’t hold them back.” Thirteen-year-old Heinrich Korella and his mother stowed-away, and twenty-one-year-old Eva Dorn remembered that refugees “. . . came and they came and they came,” while just offshore, Soviet submarines lurked.

At 1300 hours on January 30, the convoy – consisting of the *Gustloff*, the liner *Hansa*, torpedo boat *Loewe*, and TF-1 – got underway, but the *Hansa*’s engine trouble forced the ships to anchor. Just when the *Gustloff* received orders to continue, the tiny *Reval*, packed with freezing refugees, pulled alongside. If Heinz Schoen speculated that eight hundred passengers clambered aboard, Radio Operator Rudi Lane estimated over two thousand embarked, although no one counted. Then, as the convoy rounded the Hel Peninsula thirty-knot winds and twelve-foot seas forced TF-1 back, leaving the tiny *Loewe* the sole guardian of this behemoth holding perhaps eleven thousand souls.

Seasickness and the stifling heat overwhelmed many. While on deck, lookouts shivered near zero degrees Fahrenheit. Zahn wanted more speed, but the Chief Engineer could not exceed twelve knots with engines inactive for years. Then, a break in the snowfall revealed coastal lights, signifying German convoys were underway in the narrow, mine-swept channel, increasing the risks of collision. Zahn and Petersen agreed to display the naviga-



**OPPOSITE PAGE:** The *Wilhelm Gustloff* launched on May 5, 1937. Less than eight years later it will lie on the floor of the Baltic Sea having taken nearly ten thousand lives with it. **ABOVE:** The *Wilhelm Gustloff* and the *Cap Arcona* (to the rear). The *Cap Arcona* would meet a fate similar to the *Wilhelm Gustloff* when it was sunk on May 3, 1945 by a British fighter/bomber. An estimated five thousand lives were lost.

tion lights, and Alexander Marinesko, commanding Soviet submarine S-13, immediately saw their loom. He maneuvered to the *Gustloff*’s port side and, as his quarry steamed into the sub’s sights, he unleashed the torpedoes.

Despite the odds, the *Gustloff*’s voyage was going well. No mere barracks, she was at sea again on a noble mission. Crew and engines were performing splendidly. The chronometer read 2116 when Captain Weller determined the position at 55-07 North/017-42 East. Zahn and Petersen were finishing their first meal together

when an explosion and terrible jolt sent the dishes crashing. On the navigation bridge, Weller, knocked to the deck, felt two more blasts before he rang, *STOP ENGINES*, as the vessel became immersed in darkness.

After that first explosion on the port bow, most of the off-watch crew was dead. A second torpedo struck mid-ship, killing all but a handful of the Naval Nurses billeted there. Captain Weller failed to reach the Engine Room because the Baltic Sea surged through the breach created by the third torpedo and, with the radio room

## The First but Not the Last

With so many thousands fleeing their war-ravaged countries, accurate passenger counts are difficult to find. The sinking of the *Wilhelm Gustloff* was just the first of a series of German ships sunk in 1945, which took the lives of approximately twenty-four thousand people. Those ships included:

German Ship:	Date:	Sunk by:	Estimated dead:
<i>Wilhelm Gustloff</i>	January 30, 1945	Soviet sub	9343
<i>General Steuben</i>	February 10, 1945	Soviet sub	3500
<i>Goya</i>	April 16, 1945	Soviet sub	7000
<i>Cap Arcona</i>	May 3, 1945	British fighter-bomber	5000
<i>Thielbek</i>	May 3, 1945	British war planes	2800

Note: The *General Steuben* was sunk in nearly the same location and by the same Soviet sub that successfully fired upon the *Wilhelm Gustloff* less than a month earlier.

Source: Institute for Historic Review



From July 4th till July 14th 2004, an official IANTD S.r.l. (International Association of Nitrox & Technical Divers) expedition explored the wreck of the *Wilhelm Gustloff* and documented its final resting place. This shipwreck is all that remains of the greatest tragedy at sea in history. The wreckage 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. Eleven IANTD instructors and divers, skilful, not only in trimix and nitrox use, but also in videography in adverse conditions, documented the shipwreck in an underwater environment with restricted visibility (about 10 meters) and cold temperatures (2.5 C°). The team consisted of Fabio Ruberti expedition leader, Massimiliano Canossa author and organizer of this expedition, Cesare Balzi safety advisor, Andrea Bolzoni photographer, Leonardo Belloni video operator, Nicola Boninsegna photographer, Diego Geraci video operator, Livio Loniti photographer, and Massimiliano Rancan photographer. Additional team members on land included land cameraman Alessandro Luria, and light and sound technician Marina Billi. All divers used Acquamarina® & Dive Rite® diving equipment. The footage is available on DVD (Italian and English soundtrack) from [www.iantdexpeditions.com](http://www.iantdexpeditions.com)

disabled, the *Loewe* had to relay the SOS.

Below, fifty-seven hundred crammed into the lower decks surged up the passageways. Wounded, children, and the elderly were trampled underfoot, as the strongest struggled through the bottlenecks. Watertight barriers buying the ship time trapped the hapless caught behind steel doors. Few in the horrific confusion grabbed boots, gloves, and life vests before fleeing to the boat-deck where Eva Dorn found that "everything was ice," compounding the challenge of launching lifeboats when most trained seamen were already dead.

Only on the Promenade Decks did armed seamen preserve order. "Remain calm and stay where you are! Help is on the way," they reassured. Glass separated one thousand refugees from the cold and chaos on the boat deck and rough seas swamping many boats and the life rafts. When the list approached forty degrees, however, survivors recalled a deep rumbling before the *Gustloff* began her final plunge bow first. At 2218, the ship's *Götter-*

*dämmerung* became a Wagnerian setting of sirens shrieking, boilers exploding, and cries of those on board that became, in Eva Dorn's words, "thousands of people – one scream." Those in the Promenade Deck were dragged down one hundred eighty feet onto the Stolpe Bank, but for Maria Kupfer, swept through a shattered pane of glass.

Schoen remembers, "You can feel how your body starts to die in the water," and outliving the vessel's suction meant facing exposure, surfacing wreckage, and struggling bodies. A soldier gave nurse Wal-

traud Grueter his life vest, but others in lifeboats and rafts beat off survivors in the water trying to board. Eva Dorn, in a lifeboat, recalls, "There is one face I can paint. He looked at me saying 'you can help me.' But I couldn't. He must have drowned." For most, that bitter Baltic immersion was a death sentence even as rescue vessels arrived.

For the valiant little VP 1703, one newborn boy plucked from a lifeboat was the last of the hundreds saved. All winter long ships ran the gauntlet; on February 10, 1945, Marinesko torpedoed the *General Steuben*, drowning perhaps three thousand while the *Goya*, sunk on April 16, rivals the *Gustloff's* death toll. Evacuations continued, until May 8 and Nazi capitulation, under Admiral Doenitz who states that *Operation Hannibal* sustained "...only one percent losses."

A "calculus of catastrophe," computer simulation run by the University of Greenwich, concluded ten thousand six hundred fourteen people boarded the *Gustloff* while survivor Heinz Schoen has tallied nine thousand three hundred forty-three fatalities, overwhelmingly women and children. Still, how did collective amnesia develop over history's largest catastrophe? The *Gustloff*, resting in the murky Baltic, surfaced in *Crabwalk*, the 2002 novel by Germany's Nobel laureate Günter Grass. Survivor Heinrich Korella pleads, "It is important to remember the people who drowned, to remind others of their fate," so that someday, the world can mourn the *Gustloff* and her victims. **GL**

*A special thanks to Dave Krawczyk and his exceptional website [www.wilhelmgustloff.com](http://www.wilhelmgustloff.com) for assisting with images.*

*Writer James Held dedicates this article to his late friend and survivor of the General Steuben, Wilhelm Wahlmann.*

## For More...

For those interested in learning more about the tragedy of the *Wilhelm Gustloff*, the following books are suggested:

*The Cruellest Night* by Christopher Dobson

*The Damned Don't Drown* by Arthur Sellwood

*Die Gustloff Katastrophe* by Heinz Schoen (Only in German)

*Crabwalk* by Günter Grass

*The Vanished Kingdom* by James Charles Roy

*A Terrible Revenge: the Ethnic Cleansing of East European Germans 1944-1950* by Alfred-Maurice de Zayas