

Wilhelm Gustloff - The Greatest Marine Disaster in History ...and why you probably never heard of it.

by Irwin J. Kappes

The sinking of the TITANIC in 1912 and the LUSITANIA three years later are commonly thought of as two of the greatest maritime disasters of all time. Yet, a German ship carrying mostly civilian refugees and sunk in the Baltic Sea in the closing months of World War II claimed more than twice as many lives as both ships combined. But little has been written about it. Why?



The 26,000 ton, 1,460 passenger ship WILHELM GUSTLOFF was built by Blohm & Voss Shipyards in Hamburg in 1938. It was operated by the "Strength Through Joy" (Kraft durch Freude) workers' union. Budget-priced cruises were provided to German war workers, but the cost included having to sit through Nazi propaganda lectures.

The short answer is that it was considered a "war loss" and in some quarters is not comparable with civilian disasters. After all, it is argued, military personnel by definition know to expect mayhem at every turn in wartime, while the loss of innocent civilians carries a certain aura of deep and personal tragedy.

But wait. The LUSITANIA, a British ship sunk during WWI by a U-boat, may have been carrying civilian passengers, but she was carrying war materiel as well. So this qualifies her as a war loss, too. The fact that the passengers had no knowledge of having been made "fair game" for U-boat attack may compound the tragedy--and bring into question the morality of the British government at the time--but does not affect the ship's obvious status as a war loss.

The best explanation for this dichotomy is that the tragedies of an enemy country simply do not evoke much sympathy among American readers--especially during wartime. The sentiment is, "They brought it on themselves". But as WWII recedes in memory, passions have long since ebbed, and it may be high time to revisit the marine losses of this violent war without consideration for ideology or blame, which as always, rests to varying degrees on both sides.

In January, 1945, the German armies were holding the line against the Russians in East Prussia and Poland. Hitler was optimistic about the eastern front. At his Adlerhorst headquarters near Bad Nauheim, he called together his top leaders to review the situations on both fronts. Present were Hermann Göring, Chief of the General Staff Guderian, Heinrich Himmler, General Gehlen--who was Chief of Intelligence for the Eastern Front--and several other top leaders.

Hitler's favorite general was Guderian, inventor of the blitzkrieg, who spoke first. "My Führer, the eastern front may appear strong, but it is brittle. General Gehlen's reports indicate that the Russian drive for Berlin will begin in three days. They are committing 180 divisions. That means they have seven tanks for every one of ours. And for every one German infantryman, the Russians have ten. My Führer, it is five minutes to midnight. I hope you will find it possible to authorize reinforcements for the eastern front--and if possible, without delay."

Hitler was furious. He would not challenge Guderian directly, but blurted out, "General Gehlen is dismissed, effective immediately. He should be in an insane asylum. The eastern front can hold its own. I can afford to give ground in the east, but not in the west. The east is on its own." With little to lose at this point, Guderian responded coolly, "My Führer, if General Gehlen is to be dismissed, then I ask that you accept my resignation as well." Everyone was taken aback by this daring declaration, but Hitler defused the charged atmosphere by ignoring it and going on with his review of the desperate situation on the western front.

Gehlen's prediction proved dead-on accurate. On January 12th, the Russians broke through on three fronts. By the 26th they reached the eastern shore of the Gulf of Danzig. This effectively cut Prussia off from the rest of Germany. For the 30,000 refugees, concentration camp inmates and wounded soldiers now crowded into the port of Gotenhafen (now Gdynia, Poland), the only escape could be by sea.



Map of the Baltic Sea.

Until now, Grossadmiral Dönitz's "sea bridge" had safely carried over 2-million refugees from East and West Prussia and Courland (present-day western Latvia and Lithuania) to western ports. On January 30th, four large transports were tied up at the Gotenhafen docks: The former passenger liners WILHELM GUSTLOFF, HANSA, HAMBURG, and the hospital ship DEUTSCHLAND. The GUSTLOFF had been the pride of the "Strength Through Joy" Workers' Union fleet. During its short life as a cruise ship, it provided Mediterranean cruises at bargain fares for German workers. The handsome 26,000-ton ship was originally intended to be named ADOLF HITLER, but just before launching, the head of the Swiss Nazi party, Wilhelm Gustloff, was assassinated by a Jewish student in Davos. Always somewhat superstitious anyhow about being honored in this way, Hitler seized the opportunity to order the ship's name change. In this instance at least, Hitler's superstition would prove prophetic.

With all cabins occupied and passengers jammed into passageways, the GUSTLOFF got underway at 1230 on January 30th for Kiel and Flensburg in western Germany. There were over 6,000 passengers--more than three times above capacity. Most were women and children, elderly men and about 1,200 wounded soldiers. Last to come aboard was the mayor of Gotenhafen and his family. Hitler had never stepped aboard the ship, and they were given the suite that had been reserved exclusively for him. It had never been occupied in the ship's seven-year history.

Normally, the GUSTLOFF would have been able to outrun any sub but she had been used as a hospital ship for years and was poorly-maintained. With a maximum speed of only 12 knots she was vulnerable. Although some Soviet sub activity had been reported in the Baltic, the danger was not thought to be significant. Nevertheless, with over 6,000 lives in the balance, the torpedo boat LÖWE and the TF-1, a small torpedo boat, were assigned as escorts.

On the bridge of the GUSTLOFF there was an animated discussion about the ship's course. A course hugging the coastline increased the danger from mines, while the deep-water northerly course, Emergency Route 58, posed more of a danger from subs. Captain Petersen minimized the danger from mines but pointed out that British planes had been active in the coastal area around Danzig. They would sail the northerly route. The idea of sailing a zigzag course was briefly considered but was quickly discarded on two accounts: Route 58 had been swept free of mines but was too narrow to permit zigzagging. Also, the tactic would consume far too much time.

One thing the GUSTLOFF had in its favor was the weather forecast. The worse the weather, the better the chances for a safe transit. It called for snow and poor visibility. But two hours into the voyage the weather suddenly started to clear somewhat. Another ominous sign: The TF-1 suddenly developed a leaking seam and radioed that it would have to return to port. Simultaneously, radio reports on sudden sub activity in the southern Baltic were broadcast from the naval radio station in Gotenhafen. Whether they were picked up by the GUSTLOFF is not known, but the LÖWE was capable of receiving transmissions only from its headquarters further west in Swinemünde.

Just before nightfall, Captain Petersen made his second critical error. He ordered full illumination, reasoning that the danger from collision in the low visibility was greater than any danger from subs. His executive officer had argued that the standard blue lights would give sufficient warning to passing ships. But the captain prevailed, and the GUSTLOFF was lit up like a cruise ship gaily enroute to Majorca.

Petersen did have some justification for what in retrospect seems like a risky tactic. For most of the war, the Nazis had kept the Soviet fleet bottled up in Kronshtadt by a blockade and by mining the Gulf of Finland. But after the Russo-Finnish armistice on September 19, 1944, the Soviet Navy was finally able to break out. However, Russian naval activity in January, 1945 was still fitful. Still, the armistice agreement awarded the Russians important military bases on Finnish territory, including the strategic Hangö peninsula.

In fact, it was from Hangö that Captain Alexander U. Marinesco of the 780-ton Soviet sub S-13 sailed on the morning of January 11th. During nineteen days at sea he encountered only civilian small craft in the frigid waters off Lithuania. He was receiving radio dispatches from his home port describing the fall of Memel (present-day Klaipeda, Lithuania) and Königsberg (now Kaliningrad, Russia), so he reasoned that naval transports might be evacuating troops to the west. Hugging the coastline, he saw no activity where he expected it most.

At 2035, Marinesco raised his periscope for a final look before surfacing for the night. Blackness all-around. After giving the order to surface, he turned to the paperwork that even sub captains were wedded to--bringing the boat's log up to date. Duty officer Lt. Yuri Yefremenkov was first to emerge from the hatch. Visibility had improved further but there still were no potential targets in sight. After several minutes he suddenly noticed a slight glow on the horizon--just barely perceptible. He thought it might be the Hela lighthouse at the tip of the narrow peninsula enclosing the Bay of Danzig. He yelled "Captain to the bridge" into the hull. Submariners know that this call, as often as not, precedes a call to battle stations. Marinesco knew his exact position and was too far north to be in sight of Hela. It had to be a ship. He told Yefremenkov, "I'll take over. You go below and plot the attack." Then came the order that brought the S-13 to life. "All men to battle stations. Right full rudder, steer two-three-zero. Both engines ahead full."

Aboard the GUSTLOFF, Captain Petersen had just asked his duty officer for the ship's position. The response was delivered with Germanic precision: "At 1945 we passed Rixhöft. At 2430 we will be 12 miles off Stolpmünde. At approximately 0400 we will be just off Swinemünde."

Never quite believing that Russian subs might be a serious threat, Petersen nevertheless felt reassured. By 0400 the most dangerous part of the voyage would be over, and besides, he figured, even assuming the worst, there was life-saving equipment for all. The twelve lifeboats held 60 people each, eighteen smaller boats would each hold 30 people, there were 380 life rafts, and there were life jackets for the rest. Then too, Petersen knew he just happened to have aboard a team of specially-trained life-saving specialists. But Petersen was in the worst form of denial. To begin with, the temperature was 4 degrees Fahrenheit above zero and the water temperature was around freezing. Even if all the lifeboats and rafts were launched successfully and fully occupied--a feat seldom achieved in the history of marine rescue--that would leave thousands of survivors in the frigid water. In addition, no one had seen to keeping the life boat davits free of ice. In fact, hindsight indicates that the lifeboats should have been swung out from their davits as the ship got underway. Petersen took this into account but reasoned that such a procedure would have caused panic among the passengers. The decision would end up costing hundreds of lives.

Aboard the S-13, Marinesco cannily decided to make his attack from the coastal side, where least expected. The danger from mines was greater there, but like Petersen, he was playing the odds, albeit more successfully. Worse than the danger from mines was the shallow depth. The sea was only 30 meters deep in places and the nearby Stolpe Banks were barely nine fathoms deep in many areas. Figuring that his target would be under the protection of a destroyer, he considered it a risk worth taking.

Marinesco narrowed his range on the GUSTLOFF to 1,000 meters before ordering all torpedoes set to run at a depth of three meters. He waited for the doomed ship to lumber into the crosshairs of his periscope and then gave the order that would be a death sentence for 5,348* hapless victims: "Fire One--for the Motherland". Three seconds later: "Fire Two". Then, "Fire Three--this one is for the Soviet People".

The first detonation struck the ship with the deadening roar that survivors described as being hit by a meteor. Duty Officer Weller's first thought was "Mines!". He lunged for the engine room telegraph and with both hands set it to "Stop". Captain Petersen was nearby in his cabin, but knew instantly that three such powerful explosions indicated torpedoes. Stunned, he hurried to the bridge, but at first could utter only three words, Das wär es. ("This is it"). His chief mate had already sent out an S.O.S. Within minutes, Naval Command in Gotenhafen put out the call to all ships in the eastern Baltic to "proceed with all due haste to rescue site GUSTLOFF 55.07 degrees north, 17.41 degrees east."



The last survivors are rescued from the doomed WILHELM GUSTLOFF as she sinks to her final resting place 181 feet deep in the soft mud of the southern Baltic.

Meanwhile, all attempts to contact the engine room failed. All lines were dead. The ship was listing badly to port, preventing the starboard lifeboats from being launched. Worst of all was his sudden realization that the forward compartments were flooded--the compartments housing his prized life-saving team! With little

supervision of the lifeboat loading, several became overloaded. The forward falls on one boat gave way with a loud snap, tumbling dozens of people into the freezing water 60 feet below. Other lifeboats were being cast off with only a few passengers. Many of the passengers appeared topside without lifejackets and, unfamiliar with the deck plan, were pushing and shoving against the flow. The scene was one so often repeated in disasters at sea. Some people responded with heroism and self-sacrifice while others displayed abject poltroonery. One deck officer was supervising the loading of a lifeboat with the standard order, "Women and children first". But before the boat was even half full he suddenly abandoned his responsibility and simply took a seat in the boat.

By now, the ship's list was making it difficult to move around on the deck and people were jumping overboard. Escort ship LÖWE was alongside within 15 minutes and the scene her captain found was one of hellish confusion--made many times worse by the frigid conditions. Survivors were taken aboard as quickly as possible, but it was not long before the LÖWE's crew were as tired, stiff and frozen as the refugees. After a half-hour in the water, many were being hauled aboard as deadweight. Desperate calls for help came from all sides. But in some instances, the survivors were not helpful. One woman, wearing an expensive fur coat made slippery by the sea water, continually slipped through the hands of the rescuers. She was last seen drifting away in the darkness.

As every nook and cranny aboard the LÖWE became full of huddled survivors, the heavy cruiser ADMIRAL HIPPER suddenly hove into view. The HIPPER was now the largest German warship in the Baltic, but it too had been ordered west and was herself carrying a load of about 1,500 refugees. She had sailed from Danzig a few hours later than the GUSTLOFF, but was moving at flank speed of 32 knots. Wild cries of jubilation broke out among passengers still aboard the GUSTLOFF. Peering through his binoculars, Captain Henigst took stock of the situation. Three empty lifeboats still hung in their davits, there were nine empty life rafts and the ship now had a 30-degree list to port.

It was now apparent to Henigst that his ship's high freeboard would be an enormous obstacle to any rescue attempt. And in their weakened condition, only the most fit survivors would be able to climb the Jacobs ladders. In addition, the time required for this type of rescue operation would take hours. Henigst was torn. But before he could decide on his next move, one of his lookouts spotted a torpedo wake 20 degrees off his starboard bow. Then a second. The captain lost no time and radioed all rescue vessels: "U-boat risk too great for us to risk ship, passengers and crew. Also, our high freeboard would hinder and slow rescue attempts. Am leaving operations in your hands. Wish you success and good luck. Henigst."

As the HIPPER pulled away, there was puzzlement and a feeling of betrayal among the survivors flailing about in the icy water. Some just gave up and drifted away into oblivion.

Today, 55.07N, 17.41E is the final resting place of the M/V WILHELM GUSTLOFF. It has been designated as a permanent war memorial site, off-limits to salvage crews. On Polish navigation charts it is ignominiously noted as "Obstacle No. 73."

Some attempts have been made to characterize the sinking as an atrocity. But Captain Marinesco had no way of knowing that his victims were mostly refugees and soldiers who would never fight again. As a military commander he was obliged to assume that the ship carried retreating troops. We do not know whether he would have launched his fatal attack had he known that the GUSTLOFF carried people offering no threat to Soviet forces. But he deserves the benefit of the doubt. Unfortunately, in wartime one shoots first and asks questions later.

*Actually, some historians consider the sinking of the M/V GOYA the greatest marine disaster of all time. But no accurate count was made of the number of refugees taken aboard and accounts even differ on how many were rescued. All that is known for certain is that in the last weeks of the war, the 5,000 ton German transport hurriedly took several thousand desperate refugees aboard from the port of Hela in what became known as

"Germany's Dunkirk". The GOYA was sunk by two torpedoes from the Soviet sub L-3 and rests today just north of the Gulf of Danzig.

A New Look: History's 10 Greatest Marine Disasters

As alluded to in the accompanying article, reporting on ship sinking's is commonly biased against losses by enemy states. But there is third world bias as well. For example, one published list of "The World's Greatest Maritime Disasters" includes the ferry ESTONIA, lost in 1994 with 913 lives, but omits the ferry DOÑA PAZ, lost earlier in the central Philippines with about 2,000! Some lists omit ferry losses entirely. But they're marine losses nevertheless. Besides, how does one define a "ferry"? In fact, many ferries plying the Pacific archipelagos today have all the amenities of a modern cruise ship.

Chauvinistic bias creeps in, too. You'd expect American media to give precedence to losses involving American passengers or foreign ships sailing from American ports. But you know something's amiss when relatively minor disasters such as those of the U.S. ship MORRO CASTLE (134 deaths) or the Italian ANDREA DORIA (47) appear on lists of "The 10 Greatest Marine Disasters in History". In its zeal to cover any given tragedy, the press tends to overlook historical perspective.

Even the following list incorporates a bias of sorts, inasmuch as warship losses are excluded. The purpose of this list is to right a few of these wrongs, but also to enable comparison of the enormous scale of the losses during Admiral Dönitz's "sea bridge" evacuation with the two better known to American readers.

<u>Vessel</u>	<u>Year Lost</u>	<u>Country</u>	<u>Number of Fatalities</u>
Goya	1945	Germany	~6,000
Wilhem Gustloff	1945	Germany	5,348 *
Cap Arcona	1945	Germany	~4,500
General Steuben	1945	Germany	~3,500
Thielbek	1945	Germany	~2,800
Woosung	1948	China	~2,750
Dona Paz	1987	Philippines	~2,000
Titanic	1912	Great Britain	1,503
Lusitania	1915	Great Britain	1,198

*Though 5,348 people were officially logged in for the voyage, in the last minutes hundreds more swarmed aboard. As a result, officials were unable to make an accurate count and some estimates go as high as nearly 8,000.

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