

Germany's Forgotten OPERATION HANNIBAL

COUNTLESS MOVIES, BOOKS AND ARTICLES have been devoted to the so-called “Miracle of Dunkirk” in which an improvised armada of Royal Navy and civilian craft evacuated 338,000 trapped British and French soldiers from the coast of France in 1940 to prevent their capture by German forces. (The “miracle” moniker has come into question in recent years in light of revelations that Hitler likely ordered his generals to permit the escape as a gesture to encourage England to enter into peace negotiations, which would free him for an anticipated showdown with the Soviet Union.)¹ But few know about Germany's own WWII “Dunkirk” in which millions of German civilians and soldiers were rescued from certain death at the hands of the invading Soviet Red army. Here is the story of what the Germans called “Operation Hannibal.”

By Philip Rife

Everyone has heard of the famous British WWII “escape from Dunkirk.” In marked contrast, comparatively few people have heard of a much bigger German counterpart to Dunkirk in the closing days of the war in Europe. Known as Operation Hannibal, it rescued millions of German soldiers and civilians from East Prussia ahead of the advancing Soviet Red Army, but not without terrible cost of life.

The German civilians of East Prussia were under no illusions about the fate that awaited them when the Red Army began to overrun the territory. They'd gotten a horrific preview when the Russians made a brief incursion a few months earlier. In the words of the German commander who'd retaken the area: “Russian units had tortured the civilians. They nailed them to barn doors and then shot them. A large number of women were raped and



Above, the SS Cap Arcona and the MV Wilhelm Gustloff. Both defenseless German steamships were sunk in the Baltic while trying to rescue refugees fleeing the Soviet army. Between the two it is estimated that possibly 17,000 people perished.

then shot. During the massacre, the Russian soldiers also shot some 50 French prisoners of war.”²

If the Red soldiers needed any encouragement or license to act brutally toward German civilians, it came in the form of the following hate-filled directive by Stalin's



propaganda minister, Ilya Ehrenburg: “Kill. In Germany nothing is guiltless. Neither the living nor the yet unborn. Crush forever in its den the fascist beast. Violently break the racial pride of the German women. Ravish them as booty. Kill, you gallant Red soldiers. Kill!”³

Ehrenburg was far from alone in promoting such pathological hatred against any and all Germans. Marshal Zhukov exhorted his Red Army troops to “destroy the German breed once and for all,” and Red Army deserters reported Stalin himself had urged them to “do as they pleased” in German territory.⁴

While outnumbered German troops fought a valiant rearguard action to slow the Red advance, countless desperate civilians headed for ports on the Baltic Sea. Many of them never made it.

A Soviet air force pilot described attacking columns of civilians trying to reach waiting German ships: “There were more refugees than you could count, and we at-

May 5, 1937: In what was a proud and joyful moment for the Third Reich, Adolf Hitler (center) is shown on his way to the baptizing platform of the *Wilhelm Gustloff*. On Hitler’s right is Robert Ley, head of the German Labor Front. No one could have imagined at the time the tragedy that was to befall the great passenger liner.

“German civilians of East Prussia were under no illusions about the fate that awaited them when the Red Army overran the territory.”

tacked them from our planes. It was just a massacre. God knows how many people were killed.”⁵

German intelligence reported other ghastly details to Adolf Hitler: “Refugee columns overtaken by Soviet tanks are often machine-gunned and then crushed beneath them.”⁶

Hitler’s reaction to the atrocities committed by the Red

Army in East Prussia was recorded by his secretary in her diary: "They aren't human. They're the beasts of the Asiatic steppes. The war I am waging against them is a fight for the dignity of European man."⁷

As one 11-year-old survivor later recalled: "On the road were not only troops hurrying toward new positions, but hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing the frontier areas as the invaders approached. We thought we were lucky getting on the [escape vessels, in this case the German liner the *Wilhelm Gustloff*]. We were getting away."⁸

However, for most of her fellow refugees aboard the liner *Wilhelm Gustloff*, their reprieve was destined to be short-lived.

On the night of Jan. 30, 1945, the *Wilhelm Gustloff*—carrying perhaps as many as 12,000 German refugees—was struck by three torpedoes fired by the Soviet submarine *S-13*. The scenes that transpired during the 50 minutes before the liner sank to the bottom of the frigid Baltic were as wrenching as any witnessed in the more famous *Titanic* disaster 33 years earlier.

Recalled one surviving crewmember:

Beside me, a woman was hanging on, and next to her, two children, and next to them a man. He took out his pistol and first he shot the two little girls, and then his wife. Then he held the pistol to his own temple and it did not go off. He had run out of bullets. Then he let go and slid after his dead wife and children across the icy deck and over the side.⁹

The actual number of people lost in the sinking of the *Wilhelm Gustloff* will never be known. Because of the chaotic conditions during boarding, there was no accurate final passenger count. Most estimates are that there were somewhere between 10,000 and 12,000 passengers and crew on board that night. Of that number, there were only about 1,200 survivors picked up by rescue craft. The last survivor to be rescued was a baby discovered in a lifeboat some seven hours after the *Wilhelm Gustloff* went under. Wrapped in a wool blanket, the infant was surrounded by the bodies of the lifeboat's other occupants, who had all frozen to death.¹⁰

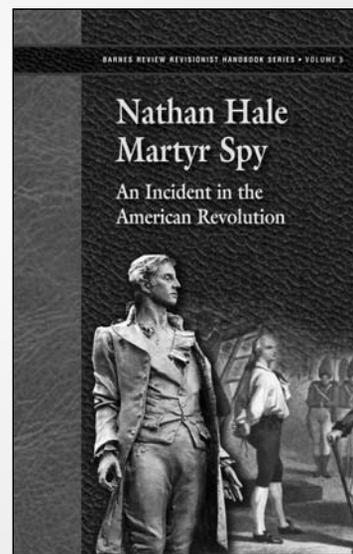
The sinking of the *Wilhelm Gustloff* easily ranks as the deadliest disaster in maritime history. The death toll of at

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least 9,000 was six times that of the *Titanic*. In fact it was more than the top three other recorded non-Baltic maritime disasters combined.

Ten days later, another liner crowded with refugees was torpedoed by the same Soviet submarine. The *General Steuben* was carrying approximately 5,200 wounded soldiers, medical personnel and civilians (including three babies born after the ship left port).

One crewman told how he and a cross-section of the *General Steuben's* other passengers survived in an inflatable life raft: "I jumped overboard with it. Two civilians, a nurse and a wounded soldier joined me. A few more people clung to the side of the raft, but they all died within minutes in the icy sea."¹¹

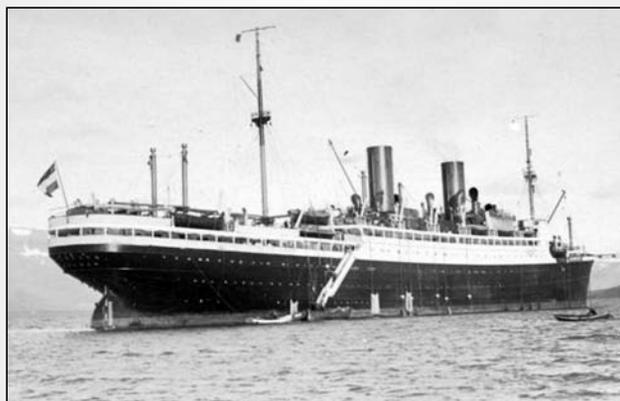
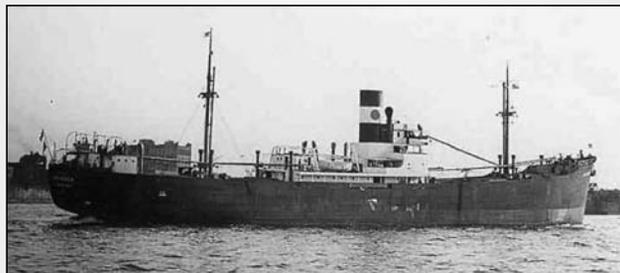
The *General Steuben* sank in less than 20 minutes. There were approximately 300 survivors.

Second only to the *Wilhelm Gustloff* in terms of loss of life was the fate suffered by the transport *Goya*. On the night of April 16, 1945, the *Goya* was torpedoed by the Soviets and broke in half. It sank in just three or four minutes, allowing time for only a single lifeboat to be launched. Of the estimated 7,000 soldiers and civilian refugees aboard, just 183 survived.

Despite the dramatic loss of the *Wilhelm Gustloff*, *General Steuben* and *Goya*, Operation Hannibal successfully transported some 2.4 million German soldiers and civilian refugees—the equivalent of seven Dunkirks—through a merciless gauntlet of Soviet troops, planes and submarines to ports in western Germany and Denmark with its hodgepodge of naval vessels, passenger liners, merchant ships and fishing boats. Operation Hannibal also evacuated some 100,000 Estonian civilians who preferred to take their chances with the retreating Germans rather than await the arrival of the Red Army "liberators."

In one of its last wartime communiques following the sinking of the *Goya*, the German navy tried to put Operation Hannibal's losses in perspective: "Personnel losses in the transports in the eastern areas have been 0.49%. These unfortunate losses seem very large every time a ship is sunk, and it is easy to forget that a large number of ships with numerous wounded and refugees reach port safely."¹²

These rescue efforts continued to the last possible moment. On May 8, 1945—the final day of the war in Europe—a convoy of 92 small vessels evacuated 18,000 German soldiers and civilians from the Latvian port of Libau. The Russians managed to intercept the last few



Above are pictured several vessels sunk in the Baltic Sea and the Bay of Lubeck by Soviet submarines or British Typhoon fighter-bombers as the Germans attempted to evacuate millions of refugees seeking to escape the advance of the rampaging Soviet forces in East Prussia. These three ships held large numbers of wounded soldiers, foreign citizens, German civilians and inmates from German-run work camps. At top is the cargo ship *MV Goya*. In the middle is shown the *Thielbek* and, at bottom, is the *SS Cap Arcona*. Most of the victims were either killed by bombing or strafing, burned alive or drowned while trying to reach the shore. According to *The Encyclopedia of the Third Reich*, "the hoisting of white flags proved useless." The British relentlessly strafed those who were struggling in the water or trying to make their way to life boats—a gross violation of international law. More than 5,000 people died on the *Cap Arcona*, 7,000 on the *Goya* and 2,750 on the *Thielbek*.

heavily laden craft. The 300 men aboard them were sent to Soviet labor camps.¹³

AFTERWORD

On May 3, 1945, with the war's outcome no longer in doubt, 40 fighter-bombers of the British Royal Air Force launched a series of bomb, cannon and rocket attacks against four non-combatant ships anchored in the harbor of Lubeck. One, the hospital ship *Deutschland*, had a large red cross painted on its funnel. Although the British had no way of knowing it, fortuitously there were no patients aboard at the time. The ship's crewmen managed to abandon ship between attacks. Most of those aboard the other vessels weren't as fortunate.

The *Cap Arcona*, *Thielbek* and *Athen* were carrying a combined total of 10,000 mostly Jewish former inmates of concentration camps in northern Germany and Poland. All three ships were flying a white flag.¹⁴

Said one later remorseful RAF pilot who believed he was attacking Germans that day: "We used our cannon fire at the chaps in the water. We shot them up with 20-mm cannon in the water. Horrible thing, but we were told to do it, and we did."¹⁵

By the time the RAF finished its bloody work, more than 7,000 former concentration camp inmates had been killed. It later emerged that the Swedish Red Cross had alerted the British beforehand that the inmates were aboard the ships in Lubeck harbor. A postwar internal RAF investigation of the incident concluded: "Primary responsibility for this great loss of life must fall on the RAF personnel who failed to pass to the pilots concerned the message received of thousands of prisoners on board these ships."

When the RAF was asked about the horrific incident by an American documentary filmmaker in the 1990s, spokesmen for the British said the case was still the subject of an "ongoing investigation."¹⁶

Some observers have noted that firing on hospital ships, ignoring white flags, strafing survivors in the water and claiming the orders demanded the actions would all have been extremely problematic at a Nuremberg-style war crimes trial. Others have argued that a 40-plane attack on four unarmed, stationary ships amounted to little more than target practice, or a last opportunity to draw more blood before peace was declared.

The fate of those aboard the *Cap Arcona*, *Thielbek* and



A painting by Klaus-Rainer Forst of the *Wilhelm Gustloff* at Gotenhafen, Poland loading refugees. Modern-day estimates indicate possibly as many as 12,000 people might have been aboard.

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Athen received little notice at the time and is virtually unknown today. A leading Israeli newspaper recently offered this explanation: "Reports of the incident were quickly hushed up. The victorious British and their American allies did not want a media disaster overshadowing their V-E Day celebrations."¹⁷ ♦

ENDNOTES:

- 1 *The Spotlight*, July 15, 1991.
- 2 *The Truth at Last*, 1997 issue.
- 3 *Ibid*.
- 4 *Hitler's War* by David Irving.
- 5 *The History Onyx*, June 30, 2012.
- 6 *Death in the Baltic* by Cathryn Prince.
- 7 *Hitler's War* by David Irving.
- 8 *Ibid*.
- 9 *The History Onyx*, June 30, 2012.
- 10 www.wilhelmgustloff.com.
- 11 *National Geographic*, February 2005.
- 12 *Journal of Historical Research* Vol. 12.
- 13 *Defeat at Sea* by Cajus Bekker.
- 14 *Journal of Historical Review*, July-August 2000.
- 15 *The Shanghai Star*, March 7, 2000.
- 16 "Typhoon's Last Storm," The History Channel, 2000.
- 17 *The Jerusalem Post*, July 23, 2013.

PHILIP RIFE earned a journalism degree from Penn State University and served in the U.S. Air Force. The author of nine books and numerous historical articles, his most recent book is *Bones of Contention: Uncovering the Hidden Truth About America's Lost Race*.