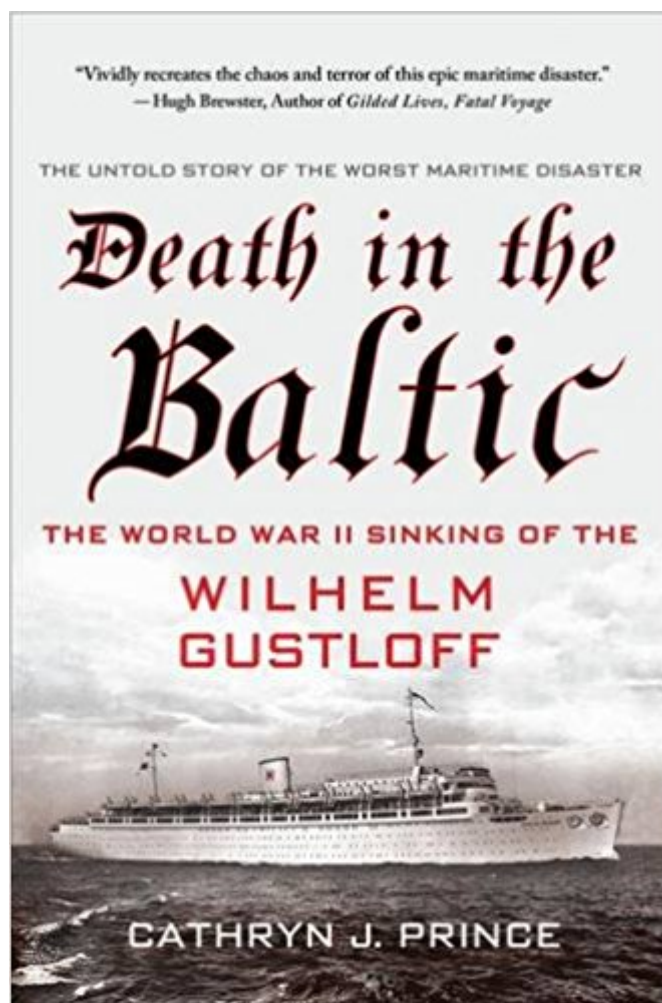


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Death In The Baltic: The World War II Sinking Of The Wilhelm Gustloff



Synopsis

January 1945: the outcome of World War II has been determined. The Third Reich is in free fall as the Russians close in from the east. Berlin plans an eleventh-hour exodus for the German civilians trapped in the Red Army's way. More than 10,000 women, children, sick, and elderly pack aboard the Wilhelm Gustloff, a former cruise ship. Soon after the ship leaves port, three Soviet torpedoes strike it, inflicting catastrophic damage and throwing passengers into the frozen waters of the Baltic. More than 9,400 perished in the night—six times the number lost on the Titanic. Yet as the Cold War started no one wanted to acknowledge the sinking. In *Death in the Baltic*, by drawing on interviews with survivors, as well as the letters and diaries of those who perished, award-winning author Cathryn Prince reconstructs this forgotten moment in history. She weaves these personal narratives into a broader story, finally giving this WWII tragedy its rightful remembrance.

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Customer Reviews

“Based on German and Russian records, as well as material gained from interviews with survivors, author Prince has written a gripping account of one of the least-known human disasters of World War II. *Death in the Baltic* Military History Magazine “In describing the experiences of survivors, whom she has been adept in tracing, the journalist Cathryn Prince gives voices to extraordinary people who suffered during extraordinary times’ -- and does so with scrupulous empathy. *Death in the Baltic* The Spectator “A must-read for anyone wanting to examine the effects of the War on both sides. *Death in the Baltic* Warfare magazine “The story of the worst maritime disaster in history | Prince has scoured the planet for survivors, treating their

harrowing stories with gentle empathy, from the first sickening bolts of the torpedoes to the chaos and terror of the ship's swift sinking as passengers fell into the freezing water, clambered for lifeboats and watched loved ones disappear in the tumult.

—An engaging study of a shocking tragedy.

—Kirkus Reviews

“If you think that the sinking of the Titanic was the worst maritime disaster ever, then you're wrong.

—Amazing and harrowing story, well written and documented.

—Jean-Paul Adriaansen, Water Street Bookstore

“The sinking of the cruise liner that was once the pride of Hitler's Strength Through Joy program has long been overlooked by maritime historians. Yet when the Wilhelm Gustloff disappeared beneath the freezing waters of the Baltic in January of 1945, she took with her more than six times the number of people lost on the Titanic. Through careful research and interviews with the few remaining survivors, Cathryn J. Prince vividly recreates the chaos and terror of this epic maritime disaster.

—Hugh Brewster, author of *Gilded Lives, Fatal Voyage: The Titanic's First-Class Passengers And Their World*

“Death in the Baltic is the engrossing story of a tragedy that should never have been forgotten. With the grace of a writer who truly feels the loss of thousands in the cold waters of the Baltic Sea, Cathryn J. Prince has preserved their memory and improved our sense of history.

—Gregory A. Freeman, author of *The Forgotten 500*

“Cathryn Prince reaches into the dark corners of history, and draws attention to this unreported tragedy through the experiences of the people who lived it.

—Stacy Perman, author of *A Grand Complication*

“With *Death in the Baltic* author Cathryn J. Prince recounts an important but little known aspect of World War II. Rich in detail, drama, and tragedy, Prince's gripping narrative skillfully interweaves the traumatic events of the final weeks of the war with moving stories of survivors of a maritime disaster which claimed more lives than the sinking of the Titanic.

—Dwight Jon Zimmerman, award-winning author of *Uncommon Valor*

“*Death in the Baltic* tells a gripping, invaluable story. Out of a desire for vengeance and recognition, one Soviet submarine commander caused the deaths of thousands of refugees, deaths that the victors of World War II chose to ignore. Cathryn Prince breaks the silence around the devastation many German civilians suffered at the end of the war. Parting the curtain on the "collateral damage" the Allied Forces accepted as a necessary strategy for defeating Hitler, *Death in the Baltic* reveals that war's trauma spares no one.

—Leila Levinson, award-winning author of *Gated Grief*

“The story of the sinking of the Wilhelm Gustloff is still unknown to a majority of non-Germans.

—It is certainly a grimly fascinating story, not least because of the wealth of human interest that it contains.

—Cathryn Prince tells the story of the Gustloff briskly and engagingly,

—making good use of the eyewitness accounts of the survivors.

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Cathryn J. Prince is the author of *A Professor, a President, and a Meteor: The Birth of American Science*, for which she won the Connecticut Press Club's 2011 Book Award for non-fiction. She is also the author of *Burn the Town and Sack the Banks: Confederates Attack Vermont!* and *Shot from the Sky: American POWs in Switzerland*. She worked as a correspondent for *The Christian Science Monitor* in Switzerland and in New York, where she covered the United Nations. Prince covers the Connecticut State House for Patch.com.

I discovered the fate of the *Wilhelm Gustloff* as a child while skimming through my 1975 edition of the Guinness Book of World Records. The ship's sinking was simply noted as history's "worst maritime disaster" on a list of several other catastrophic events causing significant loss of life. While the sinking of the *Lusitania* and the *Titanic* are deemed historical events, the combined number of deaths associated with those ships is roughly 3x less than the number of deaths from the *Gustloff*. Astonishingly, most people have never heard of the *Wilhelm Gustloff*. With *DEATH IN THE BALTIC*, Cathryn Prince shines a much-needed light on the ship, its demise and the reasons why such a catastrophe is still nothing more than a historical footnote some 70 years later. In many ways, *DEATH IN THE BALTIC* underscores the huge difference between the Western Allies' war against Germany and the one the Soviet Union fought. The war in Western Europe sought to liberate while the focus in Eastern Europe was annihilation. Had it been sunk in the Atlantic by a British or American submarine, the name *Wilhelm Gustloff* and its nearly 10,000 victims likely would have been a must-discussed history topic. But, with such an incident occurring on the Eastern Front, its death toll is rather insignificant | just another atrocity in a conflict defined by more deadly atrocities. Cathryn Prince provides a nice, well-rounded perspective for readers by providing ample background prior to the ship's demise. The first several chapters of the book are designed to provide us with a better understanding of how the overall scenario developed over time. She starts by detailing the precarious situation that East Prussians found themselves facing in early 1945 | an isolated part of Germany sandwiched between occupied Poland and the unstoppable, revenge-fueled Red Army rapidly approaching from the East. The situation demanded

a solution to save some 2 million German lives by sea-born evacuation (Operation Hannibal). Similar to the British/French evacuation at Dunkirk in 1940, a variety of suitable vessels were needed, including the luxury liner *Wilhelm Gustloff*. Prince provides several first-hand accounts to accentuate the experience faced by East Prussians essentially cutoff from the German homeland. The accounts include those of young children whose lives were both enjoyable and "normal" when the war was far from their doorsteps. We are also informed of the dangerous situation in the Baltic Sea, where the escape vessels are forced to contend with mines (some 60,000) and a re-invigorated Soviet Navy, including a submarine commander needing a heroic deed to save his career from insubordination. By including all these angles, Prince sets the table for the night of January 30, 1945. Although we essentially know what happens shortly after the *Gustloff* sets off into frigid abyss that January in 1945, the book does a good job maintaining suspense as we are given an idea as to what it was like on board the overcrowded vessel, with civilians and soldiers alike feeling they had escaped certain death or captivity by leaving East Prussia. When the S-13 fires 3 torpedoes into the *Gustloff*, chaos and survival are evident, but there is also an element of order. When the torpedoes strike, the story gets a little confusing as each survivor's account is told after another (giving the impression of multiple attacks), but these accounts eventually "even out". While the ship sinks in relatively short order, the ordeal of those in the water is dramatic and miserable (think of the movie *Titanic* x 10). Life and death decisions on the surviving, yet overcrowded life boats in the icy Baltic make it difficult to believe there were almost 1,000 survivors, including children. The accounts of surviving in the water are some of the more dramatic moments in the book. I found one of the book's most interesting attributes to be the aftermath of the ship's sinking; how survivors and the sub-commander fared and how history views the incident. For the most part, everything was forgotten | survivors wanted to avoid the shame of Germany's Nazi past and the Soviet Union did not want to draw attention to the sinking of a civilian ship (which was carrying military passengers as well). The S-13 actually sank another vessel shortly after the *Gustloff*, making the sub responsible for another 3-4,000 deaths. The details of S-13's commander (A. Marinesko), his wartime service and life, is an interesting story by itself. Mysteriously, modern-day explorations of the *Gustloff*'s wreckage have oddly found "no trace of human existence", indicating the Soviet Union was

involved in "cleaning up" the wreckage (possibly in search of valuable military or historical cargo). Essentially, the sinking of the "Wilhelm Gustloff" and the lack of information following its demise (from survivors and German/Soviet records) shroud this story in mystery. While the book sufficiently encapsulates events, we are still left with the feeling that there are questions that can or won't be answered. I found DEATH IN THE BALTIC to be both informative and interesting to read. It is astounding that the sinking of the "Titanic" garners so much attention, yet the fate of the "Gustloff" is relatively unknown. This book provides an excellent overview of the before-during-after aspects of a significant tragedy that is still quite mysterious.

There is a family connection to this historic story so it was a very personal read. My late husband's family lived in East Prussia and lost everything to the Russians. His uncle was seriously injured and was supposed to get on this ship but was not physically able to so he escaped an early death by not getting on the ship. It is a gripping true story.

A good story in search of an editor! I really wanted to enjoy this book but through the first half I began to see statements repeated - often word for word - two or three pages apart. This was so distracting that I found myself losing interest. The story of the terrible disaster deserves to be told and perhaps it will be if an editor is found to work with an author. Sorry - I was really hoping to learn more than I did.

This is an absorbing tale of a true story that has been hidden by history. Knowing the politics of war, it is understandable, but the sinking of the Wilhelm Gustloff caused a great loss of life, more than the Titanic certainly. History buffs will enjoy it, and some will be shocked. I have friends who are survivors of this tragedy, and it is a true tale of the tragedy.

I was familiar with the history of this event because my uncle perished on this ship! Nearly everyone I mention this disaster to, whether German or American has never heard about it. The author has devoted much time and commitment to telling this story in an interesting and accurate way. Her meticulous research is evident. First hand accounts are touching and often heart-breaking. I commend the author for a worthy historical account which honors the dead and brings this tragedy to light.

Good book, very tragic, but good. Imagine sitting in twenty five degree water in the middle of wintertime with nine thousand people mostly women and children, and waiting to die by drowning. You get the picture?

I feel like this book was written by a journalist, not a historian. A good portion of the book was about the current survivors back story and post sinking stories. I just felt that the meat of the story was lacking. There was also a good deal of editing errors and a lack of maps, perhaps the book was written on a short deadline. Despite this if you want to learn about the worst maritime sinking in history this book will do that.

Exactly the book for which I was searching. Weaves the story of several different survivors through the details of the destruction. My son is researching for a term paper, and this story is fascinating, and usually not known by many people. Organized and interesting.

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