

History of Technology

Biggest Ship Catastrophe of History

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As the vessel Wilhelm Gustloff – a floating town was drowned on the 30th January 1945 with several thousand human beings, an ice cold wind whistled for six to seven seconds from the northwest on the ubiquitous Gdynia shortly after 1.00pm, a dark-grey painted passenger ship left off the port to the open east sea. Officially Wilhelm Gustloff as one of the biggest vessels of the world had place for 1463 passengers and 417 members of the crew. Now crowded together more than 1000 persons in the cabins, passages gangway and halls how many people were exactly there nobody knows till today.

Overweight were women and children on board on the 30th January 1945 along with few hundred marine soldiers as also wounded German armed forces. A few months before the end of Second World War they ran away from the Soviet army.



Wilhelm Gustloff should evacuate them from the Gotenport at that time Gdynia was called at the port Kiel to evaluate them. Really 9000 from them met with death. Eight hours after taking off, the ship was drowned by three torpedoes from soviet U boat.

The sinking was considered as the worst catastrophe in the ship journey in which about eight times more passengers died in the Titanic. What exactly it was cannot be said. The publicist Heinz Schön who died in 2013 was the then living intensive researcher of the fates of different refugee ship in the east sea marked with figure the number

of the dead till 1990 as 5348 but corrected the statement later as 9343 victims. As certain finally 1252 passengers were saved from the ice-cold east sea, 1239 from them survived.

Very close to eight years previously Wilhelm Gustloff was launched from the Hamburg

shipyard Blohm & Voss. The 208.5 m long and 23.5 m wide ship was constructed as passenger vessel of National Socialistic Travel Organization “Kraft durch Freude”, where the guests on board in two and four-bed cabins were accommodated. With its exposed to the sun’s promenade deck, various dining halls and a swimming bath in accordance with the set up already in important disposition the standard of travel vessel of built in 1970s. The newly built was propelled by two MAN Diesel motors with a total output of 6987 kW, which brought the ship high speed of 16.5kn (31 km/h). The ship was first of all placed for journey to London in the middle sea and to Norway. The cabins were fitted with oxygen pipes; Wilhelm Gustloff was from the beginning conceived as military hospital ship.

Actually the ship successfully completed only 50 civil journeys: After it had served in the interim period for the Spanish civil war being placed once before as troop ship it was in September 1939 handed over as military hospital. After one year it changed to Gotenport as dwelling ship at that place stationed submarine training division. Time to time Wilhelm Gustloff carried as per international law as military hospital ship in a prescribed way painted over with a red cross on the chimney.

However before it’s as troop carrier war activity it was painted with grey drab painting, shortly before running off on the 30th January besides it was set up with antiaircraft gun. The

ship with that according to international law as considered as warship. Then for the commander-in-Chief of Navy Karl Dönitz had the provision and evacuation of wounded previously at the east sea coast trapped for the armed forces surgical dressing. But when there was extra place, the captain might take in refugees.

The circumstances which led to the sinking are also valid today as not completely clarified. As the ship Wilhelm Gustloff left the port, it was led by 4 captains. They could hardly understand the route. On a stretch at the vicinity of the coast the ship had been certainly in front of U boat. The finally chosen way on the open east sea became valid against that under the aspect of seaman like as better alternative, while the ship was heavily overloaded.

Why the ship’s command first of all got switched on the navigation light blacked out is not clear. At that time the living 4 captains of wireless message whose consequence to then German warship should come to meet and one wanted to avoid a collision. The command of the soviet U boat U-13 was through these lights on the ship mindful. Its three torpedoes met the passenger ships at the bow, midship indoor swimming pool of the sea and in the machine room. On board there was panic, after 70 minutes the ship sank.

Source: VDI nachrichten 24, January 2020, Nr. 4/5, Seite 26, ‘Technik & Kultur’ Evakuierung in den Tod –Von Wolfgang Heumer.

Greek Alphabet

α alpha	η eta	ν nu	τ tau
β beta	θ theta	ξ xi	υ upsilon
γ gamma	ι iota	ο omicron	φ phi
δ delta	κ kappa	π pi	χ chi
ε epsilon	λ lambda	ρ rho	ψ psi
ζ zeta	μ mu	σ sigma	ω omega