

0. THE COMING ONSLAUGHT - Story Preface

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This image, from the German Federal Archives, depicts German refugees fleeing the advancing Soviet Army. The Archive provides this description (translated into English from German): "East Prussia, near Braunsberg. Trek with refugees and Wehrmacht soldiers on a forest path / country road through a forest, circa February - March 1945." Credit: Bundesarchiv, Bild 146-1976-072-09 / CC-BY-SA 3.0

Safely docked in the harbor at Gotenhafen (known today as Gdynia) the Wilhelm Gustloff was only 19 kilometers from Danzig (known today as Gdansk.) A strategically important and historically significant city at the mouth of the Vistula River, Gdansk is now part of Poland. So is Gdynia.

During World War II, Danzig was part of the German-controlled territory called Prussia. Today, as Gdansk (which was 1,000 years old in 1997), the city is famous for its shipyards and politics. It was the birthplace of "Solidarity," the Polish freedom movement.

By January 30, 1945 the Gustloff was no longer safe in Gotenhafen/Gdynia. Nor were German people who lived in Danzig/Gdansk. The Red Army, mightily upset about the suffering inflicted on the Soviet people by the Nazi war machine, was liberating territory from German control.

The Reds were not far from East Prussia. All Germans needed to flee. Thousands of displaced families traveled over treacherous ice and snow to reach a safer place or a fleeing ship.

Words written by Ilya Ehrenburg, the Soviet propagandist, highlighted what would be done to Germans if they were captured:

Kill! Kill! In the German race there is nothing but evil; not one among the living, not one among the yet unborn but is evil! Follow the precepts of Comrade Stalin. Stamp out the fascist beast once and for all in its lair! Use force and break the racial pride of these German women. Take them as your lawful booty. Kill! As you storm onward, kill, you gallant soldiers of the Red Army.

German women and children knew the Red Army would not spare them. The Gustloff would provide their means of escape.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/THE-COMING-ONSLAUGHT-Wilhelm-Gustloff-Deadliest-Shipwreck>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/THE-COMING-ONSLAUGHT-Wilhelm-Gustloff-Deadliest-Shipwreck>

Media Stream



Wilhelm Gustloff - Docked in the Harbor

Image online, courtesy the Wilhelm Gustloff Museum website.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Wilhelm-Gustloff-Docked-in-the-Harbor>



Grotenhafen - Map Locator

Image online, courtesy the kbismark.com website.

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Grotenhafen-Map-Locator>

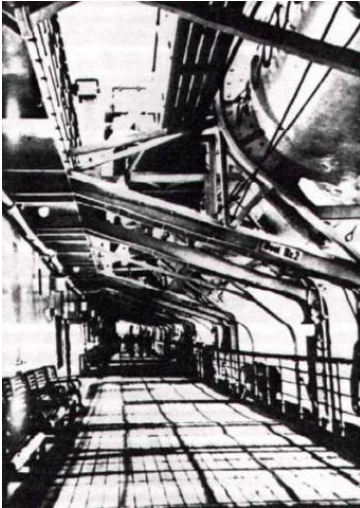


Gdynia - Aerial View of the Harbor

Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Gdynia-Aerial-View-of-the-Harbor>



On Deck of the Wilhelm Gustloff

Image online, courtesy the eksploracja.eu website.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/On-Deck-of-the-Wilhelm-Gustloff>

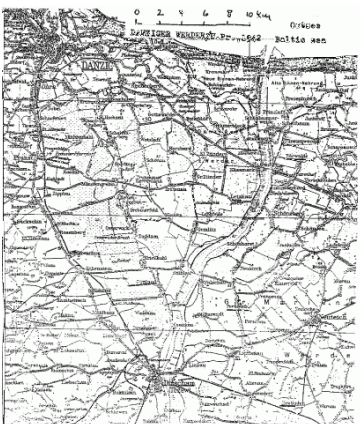


Map of Northern Europe and "Free City" of Danzig

Image online, courtesy the Boston College website.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Map-of-Northern-Europe-and-Free-City-of-Danzig>



Danzig

Image online, courtesy the Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta website.

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Danzig City Center

Image online, courtesy stamp-collecting-world.com website.

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Cathedral in Danzig

Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

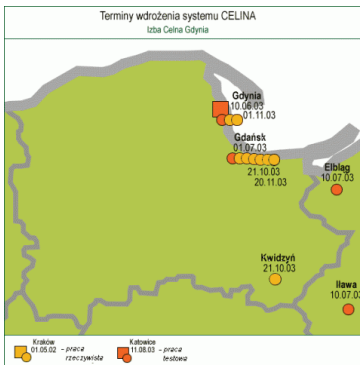
View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Cathedral-in-Danzig>



Vistula River

image online, courtesy the [Dawny Gdańsk](#) website.

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Vistula-River>



Map Depicting Gdynia

Image online, courtesy Polish-language web site.

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Map-Depicting-Gdynia>



Danzig During WWII

Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

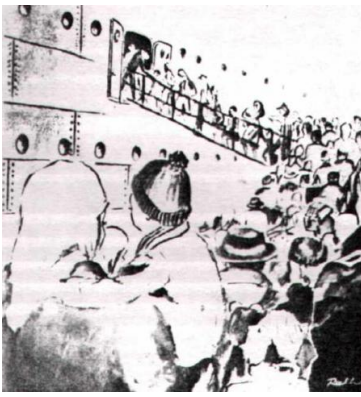
View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Danzig-During-WWII>



Fleeing the Red Army

Image online, courtesy [Die Welt](#) website.

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Fleeing-the-Red-Army>



Boarding the Gustloff

Image online, courtesy the eksploracja.eu website.

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Boarding-the-Gustloff>

Danzig in the War

Danzig, a city in German-controlled Prussia during WWII—and now, as Gdansk, part of Poland—was particularly damaged during the war.



Hitler demanded that the city be given to Germany, in 1938. When Poland refused, Hitler claimed provocation and attacked Poland on the 1st of September, 1939.

As the war neared its end, an advancing Soviet Army, rapidly moving west, caused Germans living in Prussia to panic and flee. They hoped to board ships which could take them to relative safety in Germany.

When the Soviets reached Danzig/Gdansk in March of 1945, they freed the city from German control. This image depicts a scene of chaos as the local residents endured the attacks.

Less than twenty miles from Danzig/Gdansk, the *Wilhelm Gustloff*—filled with Germans who were also fleeing the advancing onslaught of the Soviet Army—left the harbor of Gotenhafen (known today as Gdynia) for the open waters of the Baltic.

While the ship was en route to Stettin, in late January of 1945, it sank from a fatal torpedo strike (fired from a lurking Soviet submarine) with a massive loss of life. That sinking remains the deadliest in history.

Click on the image for a better view.

Photo by Arkady Shaikhet, taken in March of 1945, during the Soviet Army's attack on Danzig (then a city in West Prussia, Germany). Online via Wikimedia Commons.

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Danzig-in-the-War>



Families Fleeing the Red Army

Image online, courtesy thenewsturmer.com website.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Families-Fleeing-the-Red-Army>



Fleeing in Treacherous Conditions

Image online, courtesy the rlp.de website.

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<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Fleeing-in-Treacherous-Conditions->



Gdansk Today

This photo was taken by Pjama. Online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons: License: CC BY-SA 3.0.

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Gdansk-Today>



Gdansk on the Riverfront

Image online, courtesy the euobserver.com website.

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Gdansk-on-the-Riverfront>



Shipyards of Gdansk

Image online, courtesy darnick.com website.

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Shipyards-of-Gdansk>



Thousands of Fleeing Germans

Image online, courtesy the polandpoland.com website.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Thousands-of-Fleeing-Germans>