

Naval War College Review

Volume 33
Number 3 *May-June*

Article 12

1980

The Cruellest Night

Edwin F. Cummings Jr.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Cummings, Edwin F. Jr. (1980) "The Cruellest Night," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 33 : No. 3 , Article 12.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol33/iss3/12>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

press, the labored and painful official inquiries, some unusually inflated war stories, and the questions that still remain unanswered. Additionally, Coles traces the careers of many of the British officers and midshipmen that were involved in the catastrophe that took 1500 lives. Weddigen's later career is followed as well as that of his second in command, Johannes Spiess, who was one of a handful of German submariners who survived in U-boats until their surrender to the British later in the war.

Three Before Breakfast is a classic example of little known naval stories that can be dredged up years later to fascinate, enlighten, and perhaps instruct.

J.P. MORSE

Lieutenant Commander, U.S. Navy

Dobson, Christopher, et al. *The Cruellest Night*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1979. 223pp.

Stamp out the fascist beast once and for all in its lair. Use force to break the racial pride of these Germanic women. Take them as your lawful booty. Kill. As you storm onwards, kill, you gallant soldiers of the Red Army.

This injunction by the Soviet war correspondent Ilya Ehrenburg, quoted by the authors of *The Cruellest Night*, states well the reality that the over 7,000 German civilians, Women Naval Auxiliaries, wounded soldiers, and submariners were fleeing in late January 1945 when they boarded the former Nazi Party "Strength Through Joy" passenger liner *Wilhelm Gustloff* in the East Prussian port of Gdynia. Unfortunately, most of these citizens and warriors of the nearly defeated Third Reich did not escape the fury of Soviet revenge, inspired by a half decade of cruel Nazi occupation of Russia. Most of the passengers and crew of the *Wilhelm Gustloff* perished when Soviet submarine captain Alexander Marinesko fired three torpedoes into its

hull—causing what the authors claim to be "the biggest sea disaster" in history. Nearly five times the number of people died that night as had died in the *Titanic* sinking.

The sinking of the 25,484-ton *Wilhelm Gustloff* was the most spectacular event in the history of "Germany's Dunkirk," the monumental evacuation of eastern Germany orchestrated personally by Admiral Doenitz and which ultimately saved over two million Germans from Soviet revenge and subjugation. Fortunately, the authors of *The Cruellest Night*, British journalists, refuse to let WW II or cold war politics obscure the essential fact of that drama: that wars are fought by frightened human beings who are capable of great cowardice and great bravery. Consequently, Dobson, Miller, and Payne cram full their narrative with eyewitness accounts from both sides. They tell of the panic to get aboard. "Babies were used as tickets, being carried on board and then thrown down again to be used as a passport to safety for another family member. Some fell between the ship and the quayside. It seemed not to matter. All that mattered was to get away from the Russians." The authors also tell of great courage after the liner had been torpedoed. "Then Max Bonnet appeared still apparently wearing his white jacket. With enormous difficulty he carried his tray. 'A final cognac, gentlemen,' he said. They drank and threw down his glasses."

We also see events through Russian eyes as well. We meet Captain Marinesko of Soviet submarine S-13 who, although by sinking the *Wilhelm Gustloff* had scored the largest kill in Soviet submarine history, would later be stripped of his commission, declared an "un-person," and sentenced to the Gulag—all for having returned late once from a shore leave weekend in Turku, Finland (The NKGB accused him of making contact with allied

114 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

intelligence). But the Soviets sent him and others like him to the Gulag only after the Nazi menace had been defeated. The captain was reinstated to rank and citizenship in October 1963, but died 3 weeks later of cancer. Such irony is a part of war, and the authors include other such ironic accounts.

On February 6th, as [Marinesko] was running on the surface past the Hela lighthouse while banks of fog rolled across a calm sea, a German U-boat suddenly emerged from the fog and passed by the S-13 only five meters away. Yefremenkov, who was on the conning tower, stared in amazement at the German watch officers as they sailed past with the conning towers almost touching. He heard the sound of a machine gun being cocked. But by the time the gunners had recovered from their surprise, the two submarines had disappeared from each other's sight, slipping into the fog.

Questions about the sinking of the *Wilhelm Gustloff* remain. How many people actually were on board on 1 January 1945? Was the target a refugee ship with red crosses on the funnels, and thus an illegal target? What about the anti-aircraft guns? Had they been removed? All good questions for historians to ponder. What the authors are far more interested in exploring in their dramatic narrative, however, is how "every survivor watched with horror, for the end of the *Wilhelm Gustloff* seemed to anticipate the end of the Nazi regime itself."

EDWIN F. CUMMINGS, JR.
Captain, U.S. Air Force

Dorwart, Jeffery M. *The Office of Naval Intelligence: The Birth of America's First Intelligence Agency, 1865-1918*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press. 1979. 173pp.

The exploits of Agent No. 94 will never rival those of 007, James Bond. Sent to Guatemala by the Office of

Naval Intelligence in 1917 to search for clandestine radio transmitters and German U-boat bases, he had the misfortune to run afoul of his superiors, apparently for mixing private gain—the purchase of arms for Guatemala—with his primary assignment. His interrogators claimed "he is not all there," placed him in an asylum for the insane, and twice thwarted his attempts to escape incarceration. At war's end, he was promptly released. More than one Director may seriously have contemplated this method of escaping from the problems and frustrations of his office.

Jeffery Dorwart's valuable study of ONI, "America's first intelligence agency," suggests several reasons for this frustration. First, neither the public at large nor the Navy could be convinced that intelligence-gathering had more than limited value at best. Consequently, ONI remained a second-level bureaucracy attached, at various times, to the Bureau of Navigation, the Office of the Assistant Secretary of the Navy, and the Office of Naval Operations. No Director ever remained long enough at the post to stamp ONI with a true sense of mission.

A second problem was the changing nature of ONI's role. In its early years it performed yeoman service in collecting and distributing information of a highly technological and scientific nature to those elements within the service supporting modernization of the American fleet. Increasing international tensions in Europe, combined with the growth of the United States own "military-industrial complex," led to the atrophy of this function. Perhaps, then, ONI could serve as a center for naval strategy and war planning. Despite a promising start in this direction prior to the war with Spain, ONI found its role progressively reduced to supplying raw information to the Naval War College and the General Board. Increasingly insulated and isolated from policymaking within