

The wreck of the WWII steamship *Karlsruhe* may hold lost Russian treasure

These sealed crates could hold nearly anything.

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A World War II shipwreck recently located off the coast of Poland may hold the dismantled pieces of the Amber Room, a Russian treasure looted by the Nazis and lost since 1945.

The wreck of the German steamship *Karlsruhe* lies 88 meters (290 feet) below the surface of the Baltic Sea and a few dozen kilometers north of the resort town of Ustka, Poland. It's in excellent shape after 75 years on the bottom, according to the team of 10 divers from Baltictech who located the wreck in June and announced the find in early October.

"It is practically intact," Baltictech diver Tomasz Stachura told the press in a statement.

In peril on the sea

In April 1945, the *Karlsruhe* sailed from Königsberg while carrying hundreds of tons of cargo and 1,083 passengers desperate to evacuate ahead of a Soviet military advance into Prussia and Poland. (The German civilian steamship *Karlsruhe* is not to be confused with the German cruiser *Karlsruhe*, sunk

by a British torpedo in 1940 and discovered in early September off the coast of Norway.)

Karlsruhe and the other ships in its convoy were part of Operation Hannibal, one of the largest evacuations by sea in history. In an escape that sounds ironically reminiscent of the British evacuation of troops from Dunkirk five years earlier, the Germans used a mix of warships, merchant vessels, and fishing boats to ferry about 350,000 Nazi troops and 800,000 civilians across the Baltic Sea to Germany and Nazi-occupied Denmark.

Most of the 150 troops and 913 civilians aboard the *Karlsruhe* didn't make it. On April 13, Soviet aircraft bombed the convoy, and the *Karlsruhe* took just three minutes to sink. Other ships in the convoy pulled only 113 survivors from the sea.

Baltictech divers began their search for the *Karlsruhe* in 2019, using surviving documents from both sides of the war to guide their search. The odd assortment of cargo the divers found in the wreck underscores the mixed nature of the German evacuation. "In its holds, we discovered military vehicles, porcelain, and many crates with contents still unknown," said Stachura.

And those crates are especially tantalizing. There's a slim chance they could hold whatever is left of the Amber Room, one of the greatest treasures the Nazis looted during World War II.

Taking "loot the room" way too literally

"Finding the German steamer and the crates with contents as yet unknown resting on the bottom of the Baltic Sea may be significant for the whole story," Baltictech diver Tomasz

Zwara said in the same statement to the press. (The divers named Tomasz, much like the ships named *Karlsruhe*, are not interchangeable.)

The port from which the ill-fated *Karlsruhe* and its convoy sailed in April 1945, Königsberg, is also the last known location of one of the largest and most famous treasures Nazi Germany ever had the audacity to loot: an entire room from an imperial Russian palace outside St. Petersburg. If you visit the Catherine Palace today, you'll see a stunning replica of the original room, but no one alive today knows what happened to the original.

In 1701, German sculptors and amber craftsmen built a 55-square-meter (590-square-foot) room, paneled from floor to ceiling in amber of multiple hues, with each panel backed with gold leaf or a mirror. Although the room was installed in the Berlin City Palace, home of the Prussian king, King Frederick William I gave the room as a gift to Tsar Peter I of Russia in 1716. Peter I installed it in the Catherine Palace, which he had given as a gift to his second wife, Catherine I (not to be confused with Catherine the Great, who ruled several decades later).

Despite a three-year siege that cost nearly 2 million civilian lives, Nazi forces failed to capture St. Petersburg (then called Leningrad). But in 1941, they got close enough to capture the Catherine Palace, 30km (19 miles) south of the city. Soviet curators had tried to remove and hide the amber and panels before the Nazi looters arrived—a story which played out all over Europe in the early 1940s—but centuries of drying had left the 6 tons of amber too brittle to move safely.

The Germany Army Group North didn't fall for the curators' last-ditch effort to hide the amber panels behind wallpaper. They disassembled the panels within about 36 hours and shipped them to Königsberg, where the Nazi regime planned to

reconstruct the Amber Room and put it on display.

Throughout the war, Hitler was obsessed with the idea of building a museum to display Germany's wartime art and archaeological loot. It never came to pass, and an impressive amount of that loot has since been recovered and repatriated, although many items, like the Amber Room, remain lost.

The fog of war smells just like smoke

In August 1944, British Lancaster bombers dropped incendiary bombs on Königsberg in a series of raids. Nearly half the city's residential areas and most of its historic city center, including a medieval cathedral, were reduced to charred rubble. By the spring of 1945, Soviet artillery had also wrecked large parts of the already-battered port city. And in that fog of war, the Amber Room vanished.

Of course, if the panels were destroyed during the British firebombing or the subsequent artillery barrages, we'll probably never find evidence of that. But that sort of uncertainty tends to keep hope and mystery alive. If the Amber Room did survive the bombing, its disassembled panels may have been among the looted art and historical objects Hitler ordered removed from Königsberg in early 1945.

A mix of rumor and unofficial documents has suggested that the amber and gold panels may have been hidden in mine shafts in the Ore Mountains, on the border between the Czech Republic and Germany. No trace of the panels has been found in the area so far, but the Nazis had a habit of hiding stolen cultural treasures in mine shafts toward the end of the war.

The British and American unit called the Monuments Men, tasked with retrieving looted art as the Allies reclaimed territory from the Nazis, found several stashes of art and artifacts in

salt mines in the Austrian Alps. Some of those mines had been rigged with explosives in order to destroy the treasures rather than let them be retaken. That may not bode well for the Amber Room if it did end up in a mine.

But there's still the chance that the room's panels may have been one of the last items to leave Königsberg in April 1945. The official who was supposed to smuggle the looted goods out of the city fled his post ahead of the Russian advance, so the Amber Room's departure may have been delayed. And those sealed crates aboard *Karlsruhe* could hold nearly anything.

"We don't want to get too excited, but if the Germans were to take [the Amber Room] across the Baltic Sea, then *Karlsruhe* steamer was their last chance," Baltictech wrote in a recent Facebook post announcing the find.

A dose of realism

However, that's really all the evidence there is to suggest the *Karlsruhe*'s 75-year-old sealed crates contain the priceless panels of the Amber Room: the panels haven't turned up anywhere else yet, and the steamship would have been their last ride out of Königsberg. It's not a lot to get excited about. Those crates really could contain anything: vintage household goods, weapons, documents rendered unreadable by waterlogging, more porcelain, or even a different set of looted art treasures entirely.

We won't know until someone opens them up, and at this point, no plans for an excavation have been announced.

We also won't know what condition the panels are in if they were aboard *Karlsruhe*. Were they damaged by their disassembly, transport, and storage during four years of war? Their condition was already fragile, after all. Although the deep, cold waters of the Baltic are excellent at preserving most of the artifacts humans drop into them, 75 years underwater may

not have done the panels any favors, either.

On the other hand, the *Karlsruhe* is an amazing find in its own right, with or without the Amber Room. It's a time capsule of Germany's frantic scramble in the final days of World War II, when the Nazi regime had begun to acknowledge that it was losing. It's also the final resting place of several hundred wartime casualties.

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