

Baltic war graves 'desecrated by divers'

Germany
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Shipwrecks containing the war graves of tens of thousands of people are being desecrated by trophy hunters who pose with skeletons, German officials have said.

Christian Lübcke, a regional managing director of the Volksbund, Germany's war graves commission, called for a crackdown on a flourishing trade in diving tours to the final resting places of passenger liners, warships and fishing boats packed with German refugees fleeing the Soviet armies in the final months of the Second World War.

"There's an increasing tourism element that offers grave plundering as

leisure entertainment. That's what I find so disturbing," Lübcke, who runs the Volksbund's regional headquarters in Hamburg, said.

He said he had heard "hair-raising" accounts of expeditions made under the guise of underwater archaeology. "We're hearing about divers taking skulls and hiding them around the ships to frighten other divers. Such juvenile pranks cross boundaries."

Wrecks protected by law as maritime war graves were being destroyed, their contents sold and bones scattered, Lübcke said. Private and commercial diving expeditions were run from Germany, Poland, Denmark and Sweden, he added, but groups in Poland appeared to be more organised than

elsewhere. Baltictech, a Polish association aimed at diving enthusiasts, says on its website that it "actively promotes the Baltic Sea as the most interesting wreck dive site in the world". It did not respond to a request for comment.

Lübcke said that almost half the wrecks on Baltictech's list of diving projects were maritime war graves.

Last year Baltictech claimed to have found the wreck of the Karlsruhe, a freighter sunk by Soviet planes in 1945. There was speculation that it may contain remnants of the Amber Room, the most valuable treasure looted from the USSR by the Nazis.

The Volksbund plans to convene a meeting next year at the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea in



Hamburg to bring together national shipping authorities and diving organisations. "We want to connect with the big diving organisations to raise awareness of the problem so that divers are taught the rules when they are trained," Lübcke said. The Volksbund, he said,

had decided to initially focus on the Baltic because some of the better-known wrecks there, described by divers as "Baltic Titans", were in relatively shallow waters that provided ideal diving conditions compared with the North Sea, where the currents are stronger and many wrecks lie deeper.

The protected wrecks include the large ships Wilhelm Gustloff, Steuben and Goya, used to evacuate wounded soldiers and civilians from East Prussia. All three were sunk by Soviet submarines between January and April 1945. The sinking of the Wilhelm Gustloff, in icy waters on January 30, 1945, is regarded as the worst maritime disaster on record. Of the estimated 10,000 people on board, only 1,000 survived.

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