

1994: Hundreds feared dead in ferry disaster

From the BBC program 'On This Day 1950 - 2005', 28 SEPTEMBER

A car and passenger ferry, MS Estonia, has sunk in the Baltic Sea with 950 people on board.

The Estline ferry was sailing from Estonia to Sweden in bad weather and heavy seas when it sent a distress signal saying it was listing heavily.

About 30 people have been rescued, but officials say hopes of finding other passengers alive in the extremely cold waters are fading rapidly.

A crew member who survived the accident has told the BBC he had seen a loading bay door open and taking in water minutes before the MS Estonia sank.

The last message from the stricken ferry – which was carrying mainly Swedish passengers from Tallinn to Stockholm – was received by the Finnish Coastguard at 0124 BST.

Survivors reported the boat sank within five minutes

Helicopters and ships are still searching the area where the ferry went down, but the

Finnish Coastguard said weather and sea conditions were terrible and the water temperature was only 8C.

Context

- The total number of dead was finally put at 852 - about half of them Swedes.
- The wreck of the Estonia was not salvaged, but sealed, covered in sand and declared an official burial ground.
- A Swedish-Finnish-Estonian commission was set up to investigate the cause of the sinking.
- Its final report said the accident had been a combination of incompetent crew and design faults in the ferry's "visor-type" front doors.
- A rival commission set up by the Meyer shipyard who built the ship said the disaster happened because of poor maintenance and excessive speed.



Wikipedia writes:

The *Estonia* disaster occurred on Wednesday, 28 September 1994, between about 00:55 to 01:50 as the ship was crossing the Baltic Sea, en route from Tallinn, Estonia, to Stockholm. The *Estonia* was on a scheduled crossing with departure at 19:00 in the evening on September 27. It had been expected in Stockholm the next morning at about 09:30. She was carrying 989 people: 803 passengers and 186 crew. Most of the passengers were Scandinavian, while most of the crew members were Estonian. The ship was fully loaded, and was listing slightly to port because of poor cargo distribution.

According to the final disaster report the weather was rough, with a wind of 29 to 39 knots and a significant wave height of 3 to 4 metres compared with the highest measured significant wave height in the Baltic Sea of 7.7 metres. Esa Mäkelä, the captain of *MS Silja Europa* who was appointed on scene commander for the subsequent rescue effort, described the weather as "normally bad," or like a typical autumn storm in the Baltic Sea. All scheduled passenger ferries were at sea. The official report says that while the exact speed at the time of

the accident is not known, *Estonia* had very regular voyage times, averaging 16 to 17 knots, perhaps implying she did not slow down for adverse conditions. The chief mate of the Viking Line cruise ferry *MS Mariella* tracked *Estonia*'s speed by radar at approximately 14.2 knots before the first signs of distress, while the *Silja Europa*'s officers estimated her speed at 14 to 15 knots at midnight.

“The weather was normally bad, or like a typical Autumn storm in the Baltic”

The first sign of trouble onboard the *Estonia* was a metallic bang caused by a heavy wave hitting the bow doors around 01:00, when the ship was on the outskirts of

the Turku archipelago, but an inspection – limited to checking the indicator lights for the ramp and visor – showed no problems.

Over the next 10 minutes similar noises were reported by passengers and other crew. At about 01:15, the visor separated and the ship took on a heavy starboard list (initially 30 to 40 degrees, but by 01:30, the ship had rolled 90 degrees) as water flooded into the vehicle deck.

Estonia was turned to port and slowed before her four engines cut out completely.

At about 01:20 a weak female voice called “Häire, häire, laeval on häire”, Estonian for “Alarm, alarm, there is alarm on the ship”, over the public address system, which was followed immediately by an internal alarm for the crew, then shortly later by the general lifeboat alarm. The vessel’s list and the flooding prevented people in the cabins

from ascending to the deck; only those on the upper decks were able to escape. A Mayday was communicated by the ship’s crew at 01:22, but did not follow international formats. *Estonia* directed a call to *Silja Europa* and only after making contact with her the radio operator uttered the word “Mayday”. In English, the radio operator on *Silja Europa* replied: “Estonia, are you calling mayday?” After that, another voice took over on *Estonia* and the conversation shifted to Finnish. The *Estonia* crew member was able to provide some details about their situation but due to loss of power, he could not give their position, which delayed rescue operations somewhat.

The ship disappeared from the radar screens of other ships at around 01:50, and sank at 59°23'N 21°42'E, about 22 nautical miles on bearing 157° from Utö island, Finland, in 74 to 85 metres of water.

Conspiracy theories

There are a few conspiracy theories, involving secret transportation of military equipment, that try to explain the disaster.

In the autumn of 2004, a former Swedish customs officer claimed on a Swedish television program that *Estonia* had been used to transport military equipment in September 1994. The Swedish and Estonian governments subsequently launched separate investigations. Both investigations confirmed that military equipment was aboard the ship on 14 and 20 September 1994, though it remained unclear if any such equipment was aboard the ship on the night of the disaster.



The Viking Line cruise ferry ‘MS Mariella’ tracked *Estonia*'s speed by radar at approximately 14.2 knots. MS Mariella carries passengers and vehicles between Helsinki and Stockholm, in a grand way if you wish. I can think of no more attractive a route to Stockholm than by Mariella's 7pm departure from Helsinki. You see the ship nudging her way out of the Finnish archipelago during the long, Nordic summer evening; you can enjoy the superb menu and elegant service in its top restaurant; turn in for a few hours, then wake up while she quietly glides through the beautiful Stockholm archipelago, dotted with little red cottages and blue and yellow flags. Have breakfast with a glass of champagne while watching the spectacular scenery gliding past outside the panoramic windows. My skin still tingles at the memory. Ed.