

German Society for the Promotion of Underwater Archaeology (DEGUWA) Statement on the Illegal Salvage of the Wreck of U 16

The wreck of the German Imperial Navy submarine U 16 (built in 1911; sunk in 1919) was raised on August 31, 2025, by the Waterways and Shipping Office (WSA) Elbe-North Sea off the North Sea island of Scharhörn, which belongs to Hamburg. During the improper salvage, the submarine broke into two pieces. On September 4, 2025, the second part was raised. Both recovered sections of the historic vessel are currently stored in Cuxhaven and, according to the WSA's plans, are to be scrapped.

The salvage was carried out in connection with the deepening of the Elbe River, citing the removal of hazards from the shipping channel. However, the competent heritage authorities of the affected federal states were not involved in this long-planned project (in the case of submarine U 16, the City of Hamburg, where a museum already exists for the WWII submarine U 434).

The submarine is the property of the Federal Republic of Germany, represented by the Federal Agency for Real Estate (BImA). Neither the BImA was informed of the operation nor did it authorize the operation. Likewise, the German War Graves Commission, which is responsible for naval war graves, was not consulted.

DEGUWA, which has been committed for more than 30 years to the protection of underwater cultural heritage, the promotion of underwater archaeology, and the long-overdue ratification of the 2001 UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage by the German Bundestag, is appalled by this incident. Not only was an archaeological monument thoughtlessly and severely damaged with complete destruction intended, but all laws and regulations for the handling of cultural monuments were also violated.

The competent State Office for the Preservation of Monuments in Hamburg was not informed and did not authorize this salvage. Construction measures and other projects that could destroy or damage archaeological monuments are always subject to authorization. Thus, the salvage—despite being carried out by a state authority—was illegal.

For underwater cultural monuments, the priority is preservation and protection *in situ*. Salvage always involves considerable effort for conservation, storage, and presentation. The requirements for underwater archaeology and heritage protection are outlined in the 2019 guideline of the Leopoldina – National Academy of Sciences “*Traces Under Water – Researching and Protecting Cultural Heritage in the North and Baltic Seas.*”

U 16 is one of the earliest German submarines, launched in 1911 at the Germania shipyard in Kiel. After the war began, it carried out several combat patrols until October 1915 and then served as a training boat in Kiel. In February 1919, it sank while being towed to England. At that time, there were probably no people on board. It is therefore one of the rare monuments of the submarine fleet of World War I and has significant heritage value for the technology and history of that era.

The only German WWI submarine exhibited in a museum today is UB 46, built in 1915 and sunk in the Black Sea in 1916. It is in considerably worse condition than U 16 and can be viewed in the garden of the Naval Museum in Istanbul.

DEGUWA demands that the planned scrapping—and thus irreversible destruction—of this cultural and technological monument has to be stopped immediately. The financial responsibility for the now necessary proper conservation and storage of this cultural monument lies with the WSA, which is responsible for the improper salvage and damage to U 16.