



# Monuments Men and Nazi Treasures

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Colonel-General Hans Reinhardt, commander of Army Group Center, ordered the memorial to be blown up, but not before certain things were removed. Those things were the bodies of Field Marshal and Weimar President von Hindenburg and his wife. Lt. Gen. Oskar von Hindenburg supervised the evacuation of the flags of the Prussian regiments and the coffins of his parents, which were moved to Berlin.

Thus began what a 1950 Life magazine article called “one of the most curious and complicated enterprises the U.S. Army of Occupation ever undertook.”

It was perhaps one of the most unlikely and interesting World War II German cultural property evacuation endeavors. The story involves four caskets; military flags; famous artwork; the Hohenzollern Museum treasure (from the Monbijou Palace in Berlin), including the crown jewels and the coronation paraphernalia of Frederick William I; and cultural treasures.

In March 1945, the German Army transported the caskets of the Hindenburgs, Frederick the Great, and Frederick William I, as well as the cultural items named above, to a one-time salt mine in the northern reaches of the Thuringian Forest, about 18 miles southwest of Nordhausen, that had been converted to a munitions plant and storage depot.

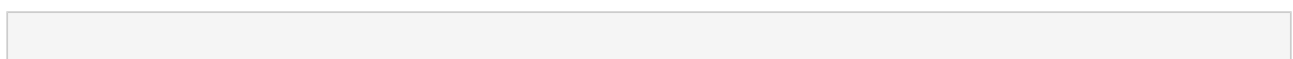
There, German Army officers supervised 2,000 Italian, French, and Russian forced laborers working in the plant. About 400,000 tons of ammunition and other military supplies were stored in the mine.

A group of large warehouses adjacent to the entrance into the shaft contained munitions, signal supplies, clothing, and other military stores. A large store of dynamite was located in relatively close proximity to the depository in the mine. Two rooms in the mine already stored records.

German officers sent all civilians out of the area in mid-March. Working with great secrecy and using only military personnel, they brought objects into the mine.

In a room measuring roughly 45 x 17 feet, they placed the caskets of Prussian kings Frederick William I (reign 1713–1740) and Frederick the Great (1740–1786), both of whom had been buried in the church of the Potsdam garrison, and of Field Marshal and Frau Gertrud von Hindenburg. Three of the caskets were made of wood; the fourth, containing the remains of Frederick the Great, was metal and larger than the others. Each casket bore a paper label fastened with cellophane tape.

In the same room the soldiers also placed treasures from the Hohenzollern Museum in Berlin. Each item had an identifying card attached. Most of the items had been made for or used at the coronation of King Frederick I and Queen Sophie in 1701. More than 200 German regimental flags, some painted and some embroidered, were hung above the coffins. They dated from the early Prussian wars and included many from the World War I era. A variety of other cultural items were placed in the room, and the entrances were sealed with brick and mortar on April 2.



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