

# £20m Nazi eagle recovered from the wreck of Hitler's Graf Spee 'pocket battleship' will be sold at auction - amid fears it may end up in the hands of white supremacists

- Giant eagle found on Nazi shipwreck is worth at least £20 million, say experts
- Eagle found on the Graf Spee is set to be auctioned off to the highest bidder
- But many fear the eagle may fall in to the wrong hands when it is put up for sale

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By [CAROLINE GRAHAM IN LOS ANGELES](#) and [HEATHER BRILEY IN BUENOS AIRES FOR THE MAIL ON SUNDAY](#)

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It was once the pride of Hitler's navy but now an 800lb bronze Nazi eagle from the German 'pocket battleship' Graf Spee is set to be auctioned off to the highest bidder – amid fears it may end up in the hands of white supremacists.

The giant eagle atop a swastika was originally salvaged from the Graf Spee in 2006 but has been tied up in a bitter court fight ever since. It could fetch £20 million.

Last week, a judge in Uruguay ruled the controversial Nazi symbol must be auctioned off – a sale that could take place as early as next month – with the proceeds split between a team of international businessmen who funded the salvage operation and the Uruguayan government.



**Many fear the eagle, which was briefly displayed in a hotel in Montevideo before protests forced it to be taken down, may fall in to the wrong hands when it is put up for sale alongside a cannon and a rangefinder from the ship. The eagle is pictured being salvaged**

Alfredo Etchegaray, 63, who led the 2006 expedition to recover the eagle from shallow waters off the Uruguayan capital of Montevideo where the Graf Spee was scuttled in December 1939, told The Mail on Sunday: 'The fight has been going on in court for years.

'Finally, we have a decision that the sale can go ahead.

'We've had interest from buyers around the world including museums, the German government, wealthy private individuals and even someone who wants to put it on display during the World Cup in Doha.'

Experts say the eagle is worth at least £20 million, a figure that Mr Etchegaray says is 'on the low side', adding: 'There is nothing else out there like this. I've been told it could be worth £50 million or more to the right buyer. This is a unique piece of history.'



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However, many fear the eagle, which was briefly displayed in a hotel in Montevideo before protests forced it to be taken down, may fall in to the wrong hands when it is put up for sale alongside a cannon and a rangefinder from the ship.

Miguel Esmoris, director of Uruguay's National Heritage Commission, said: 'Who are the potential buyers of these icons if not neo-Nazis? We're not against salvagers making a profit but we cannot allow illicit trafficking in cultural and historical items.'

Ernesto Kreimerman, of the Uruguayan Jewish Committee, said: 'It must go to a museum, not into private hands.'

Mr Etchegaray says any buyer will be screened: 'The eagle must be displayed so the world can learn lessons from the past.'

‘It must be done respectfully. We are open to all offers.’

The eagle – which had pride of place on the Graf Spee which was defeated by the British in one of the first naval battles of the Second World War – has languished in a crate inside a warehouse since it was removed from public view.

## Famous battle ended in captain's suicide

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The Admiral Graf Spee sunk nine Allied merchant vessels in the South Atlantic before a British-led battle group tracked it to the mouth of the River Plate on December 13, 1939.

Royal Navy cruisers HMS Exeter and HMS Ajax – together with New Zealand’s HMS Achilles – engaged it in the Battle of the River Plate which resulted in the loss of 72 British sailors and 36 Germans.

The Graf Spee’s fuel system was damaged in the fight, forcing her captain Hans Langsdorff to head to the neutral port of Montevideo for repairs.

Under the Geneva Convention, the Graf Spee was given 72 hours to make repairs.

On December 17, the ship set sail but, believing there to be a superior British fleet waiting for him and not wanting the Allies to gain access to its more advanced technology, Langsdorff chose to offload more than 1,000 German sailors and scuttle the ship.

Two days later, wrapped in the flag of Imperial Germany, he committed suicide in a Buenos Aires hotel room.

The 1956 movie *The Battle Of The River Plate* chronicled the saga, with Peter Finch playing Langsdorff and Anthony Quayle in the role of British Commander Henry Harwood.