



WHO STOLE HILDA OF BADEN'S TIARA?



*In 2017, a thief walked away with
a \$1.2 million tiara. I bet they
didn't even know who Hilda was.*

FILE UNDER: **GRAND DUCHESS HILDA OF BADEN**

ON THE NIGHT OF APRIL 21, 2017,
someone walked into the Badisches Landesmuseum
in Karlsruhe, Germany and walked out with a tiara worth
\$1.2 million. Museum officials called the police right
away, but the news didn't break for 17 more days. I saw

the first headline later that May: Grand Duchess Hilda of Baden's tiara had been stolen.

The thieves didn't touch the eight-pronged Crown of the Grand Dukes of Baden, topped with a diamond-studded cross. They didn't take the golden mirror and candelabra that had belonged to Grand Duchess Stéphanie, the adopted daughter of Napoleon Bonaparte.

Instead, they opened a locked display case, removed the small diamond tiara inside, and closed the case as if they'd never touched it.

THE TIARA

HILDA'S TIARA IS CALLED A KOKOSHNIK, after the traditional Russian headdress. It's flat on the bottom, with an arched top. Some kokoshnik tiaras fill the space between the top and bottom of the frame with a wall of diamonds, enamel, or metalwork.

This one isn't like that.

The base consists of three distinct rows of diamonds: one with rectangular stones, one with a laurel wreath motif, and one with intricate scrollwork. The middle of the tiara

is open. The arched top frame anchors a series of symmetrically draped garlands with diamond drops hanging between each. Those diamonds would have swung and swayed as the wearer moved, sparkling with every step. The classical garlands are intersected by a wavy horizontal line, a never-ending sine graph that, to me, looks out of place.



IMAGE BY GRYFFINDOR, LICENSED VIA CC BY-SA 4.0 VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

Overall, the tiara contains 367 diamond brilliants set in platinum and yellow gold (Source: [Tiaras](#) by Diana Scarisbrick). If you had seen it in real life, the stones

would have looked extra-super sparkly. That's because they're mounted between metal strips, rather than onto metal strips, letting as much light through as possible. Jewelers call this setting *à jour*.

A REAL-LIFE HEIST MOVIE

IF YOU'RE LIKE ME, your heart skipped a beat when you saw that headline. *A real-life heist? With a tiara as the target?* It sounds like the plot from a 1960s caper flick. I can imagine Cary Grant closing the door of a safehouse, peeling off a black cap and holding up a black bag. In the dim light let in by a crooked shutter, the tiara sparkles for the camera before Cary Grant bags it up and puts it in a wall safe behind a shitty fake Monet.

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It's almost romantic.

Almost.

Then my inner Indiana Jones kicked in. This tiara belongs in a museum, and someone ruined that for all of us.

Once my anger had processed, a new emotion took hold of me. I tilted my head and said, "Wait...who is Grand Duchess Hilda of Baden?" I'd never heard of her, and I spend a fair amount of time reading about European royal history. Who was she? What role did this tiara play in her life? What role did she play in history? I had no idea.

So I Googled her.

That's when shit got interesting.

HILDA, HEIMAT, AND HITLER

MY FIRST RESEARCH STOP WAS...you guessed it...Wikipedia. Malign it if you must, but it's a useful starting point to figure out what people already know, what they used for sources, and who else is connected to this person.



I found a few interesting tidbits:

- Hilda's father inherited the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg.
- Hilda and her husband were dethroned in the German revolution immediately following World War I.

I've studied the Romanovs as a hobby for years. The words "dethroned" and "World War I" struck an

immediate chord. Anyone whose experience I could compare to the Russian royal family's seemed worth a second look. Plus, my married name is Wiltz, and there's a county in Luxembourg named Wiltz.

I can take a cosmic hint. This story literally has my name all over it.

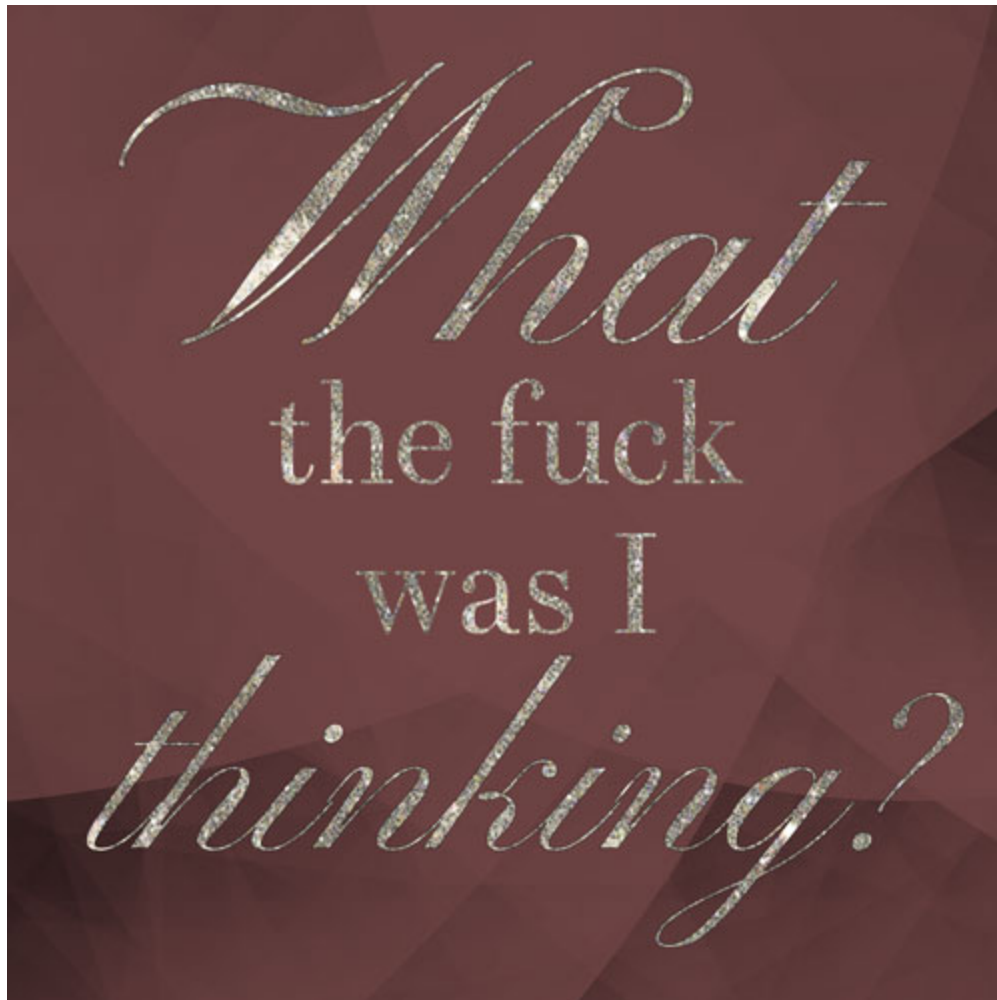
**I can take a cosmic hint. This story
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So I kept researching.

And I kept falling into rabbit holes.

Non-stop life-absorbing rabbit holes that required me to read books written in German.

I don't speak German. I don't read German. What the fuck was I thinking?



But I couldn't turn away from this story once I started unraveling it. Like a swirling galaxy, it enveloped me, expanding to occupy all the space in my head. Every question led to hours of creative Googling and a lot of book buying, which led to hours of translating, which gave me tiny answers that led to bigger questions.

Some questions were easy: what does "heimat" mean? Others were harder: what does a "landesmutter" do? Why was the German revolution nearly bloodless when

the Russian one was so different?

I was glued to Google Translate, agonizing over German idioms, dreading going to work the next day because I was SO CLOSE to getting another piece of the puzzle.

Before long, I realized you couldn't explain who Hilda was without talking about her family. This story was about three generations:

- **The Patriarch:** Adolph of Nassau (later Grand Duke of Luxembourg)
- **The Tiara Owner:** Hilda of Nassau (later Grand Duchess of Baden)
- **The Tragic Niece:** Antonia of Luxembourg (later Crown Princess of Bavaria)

One of them built the German version of the Taj Mahal. One of them lived in the shadow of a domineering woman, never able to step into her own light. And one of them was almost killed by personal order of Adolph Hitler.

Yeah. I told you this was an interesting story.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

YOU'VE PROBABLY NEVER HEARD of Adolph, Hilda, or Antonia.

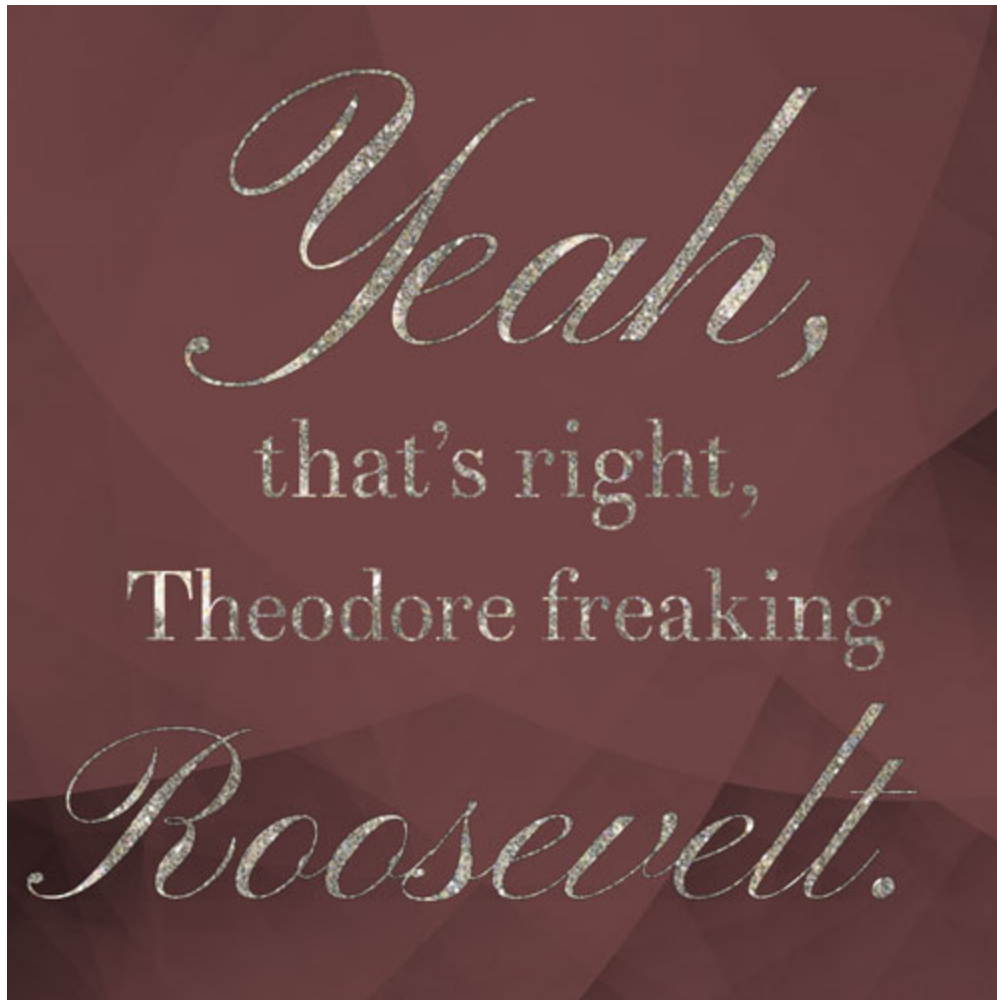
I sure hadn't.

But hot damn, you guys, this story sizzles. It has everything. Doomed love. Tragic death. War. Exile. Wine. Scandal. Gossip. Heartbreak. Nazis.

And, at its heart, people.

People who made choices to fight for the honor of what they believed in. People who survived when all the odds were against them.

Although you've probably never heard of the main characters, you've definitely heard of the supporting cast. Queen Victoria. Princess Elizabeth (Ella) of Hesse and by Rhine. Kaiser Wilhelm II. Empress Elisabeth of Austria. Clara Barton. Princess Pauline Metternich. Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria. Adolph Hitler. Theodore Roosevelt. Yeah, that's right, Team America—Theodore freaking Roosevelt.



Someone connected to this story went down on the *Titanic*. Someone else made an appearance in the Wonder Woman movie. Someone else appeared on the big screen as part of a team led by George Clooney when his story made it big.

I hope I'm able to blow your minds when I lay out the whole story for you. I'm working on it now – and you can [check out what I'm working on here](#).

BUT LET'S GET BACK TO THE ROBBERY

SO WHAT REALLY HAPPENED on the night of April 21, 2017?

We may never know.

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Once they got away from the museum undetected, the thief (or thieves) probably pried the diamonds out of the tiara's frame immediately. If there were multiple thieves, they likely split up the stones. The frame could have been hidden, melted down, or maybe snapped into multiple pieces, one for each thief. There's almost no chance the tiara will be recovered as it was.

The other option? A mastermind paid for the heist because he or she had to have this tiara. I'd prefer that, because at least it keeps the tiara intact – even if it means we never see it again. It's not probable, but not impossible.

In a year and a half since the theft, no further details have been made public.

A COPYCAT CRIME?

ON JULY 31, 2018, ANOTHER DARING jewel theft happened in Sweden. How do I remember what day it was? A wildfire broke out half a mile from my house and a roadblock kept me from going home that night. So I got drunk in a nearby brewery and watched this story on the news.

Here's what went down. Two thieves walked into a Swedish cathedral in Strängnäs in broad daylight and smashed the locked glass case that held the funeral crowns of Karl IX and Queen Kristina, created in 1611.



LIVRUSTKAMMAREN (THE ROYAL ARMOURY), PUBLIC DOMAIN
VIA [WIKIMEDIA COMMONS](#).

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The security alarms went off, but no one got to the

thieves in time. They grabbed the crowns and a golden orb, then biked their way from the cathedral to the nearby lake, where they hopped in a waiting speedboat and sped away.

The next day, Swedish police began conducting raids, but refused to confirm or deny whether they found the crowns and orb. A later [Swedish report](#) says they haven't found anything yet. One of the thieves, a man, was later identified by traces of blood he left at the scene. A few days later, police began searching the coastal area of Roslagen.

A Swedish policeman, Leif Persson, told the press he thinks someone specifically ordered the thieves to take these particular items. Why? Because they aren't particularly valuable – worth only about \$56,455 in raw materials, according to [Artnet.com](#). But it's also possible the thieves were really good at escaping and really bad at picking what to steal.

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Could this be the same crew that robbed the Karlsruhe museum? If not, were they inspired by the crew that got away with Hilda's tiara?

We may never know. A 21-year-old was arrested in Sweden on September 13, 2018, but they still hadn't found the stolen crowns and orb.

ANOTHER COPYCAT CRIME?

2018 IS THE YEAR OF THE tiara theft, apparently. On November 20, thieves broke open an armored glass case and stole the Portland tiara and a diamond brooch.

It happened on the Welbeck estate in Sherwood Forest, Nottinghamshire—the ancestral home of the Dukes of Portland. Today, that estate houses a museum called The Portland Collection, with the family's historic collection of art, jewels, and more. It also houses the pearl earring

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reasons I can't quite fathom.**

In this particular theft, the burglars committed the crime between 9:45 and 10:00 pm. The alarm on the tiara's glass case worked; the thieves were just faster than security, which arrived 90 seconds later. Two minutes later, the police arrived. Details are scarce as I write this; a burned-out Audi S5 might have been their getaway vehicle.

This tiara dates back to 1902, when the sixth duke of Portland commissioned it from Cartier. His wife, the duchess, was to be one of the canopy bearers for Queen Alexandra at the coronation of King Edward VII.

Everyone knows you can't bear a canopy for a queen without wearing a crap-ton of diamonds on your head.

To that end, the tiara included the Portland Diamond, a

stone that was part of the family's collection. You can see it in the center of the tiara here:



1THE PORTLAND TIARA, VIA [NOTTINGHAMSHIRE POLICE](#)

As with all famous tiara thefts, the thieves can't expect to sell it on the black market—it's too well known. The fear is they've already broken it up, destroying a piece of Britain's heritage in the process.

You have to wonder...why this particular tiara? I can't help but think there's an ironic message in the fact that Welbeck is located in Sherwood Forest, Robin Hood's

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BACK TO HILDA'S STORY

THERE'S STILL NO NEWS about Hilda's tiara. Not to be depressing, but a year and half after it went missing, there's next to zero chance we'll ever see it again. Either the thieves have hidden it, broken it up, or delivered it to the criminal mastermind who paid for it to be stolen in the first place.

The tiara may be lost to us, but Hilda isn't. She's all I can focus on now.

While we wait, let's learn as much as we can about Hilda and the other women who owned her beautiful tiara. I'm working on their stories right now. I'm going to piece it together right here, and you're invited to come along for the ride. I'll be talking a lot more about Hilda and her tiara in future posts. Stay tuned, world.

The End

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POST TAGS

- [theft, Germany](#)

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