ABSTRACT

"Tracing Patterns of Library Plunder: Books Still not Home from the War"

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This conference bears witness to the considerable recent interest in tracing books displaced during and after the Second World War, a problem forgotten for many decades. My own research has centered particularly on “twice-plundered” books, and frequently archives with them. From analysis of library and archival plunder by the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (ERR) patterns emerge that help us trace the migration and identify the victimized books that never went home from the war. Together with earlier analysis of patterns of plunder by the Reichssicherheitshauptamt (RSHA), particularly Amt VII, we see Nazi motives for looting collections for their anti-Bolshevik and anti-Masonic research as well as anti-Semitic propaganda and library operations. We see the immediate and eventual destinations for books and archives plundered especially by the ERR and the RSHA. Newly opened and under-utilized sources make it possible to trace the fate of many individual libraries that fell victim first to Nazi agencies of plunder and then to Soviet trophy hunters especially in Silesia and the Sudetenland, often overlooked in earlier studies.

For example, now we can determine the roads to Ratibor (now Polish Racibórz) for books from both Western European collections together with those plundered from the USSR. The fact that those roads converged in the ERR Silesian centre determined the postwar road to Minsk for half a million books first confiscated from “enemies” of the Nazi regime in France and the Benelux countries. Even before the British and Americans could open their restitution operations for plundered books found in Germany and Austria, those books were plundered a second time. An echelon with fifty-four freight wagons transported them as prisoners of war to the capital of Soviet Belarus. Many remain there today and are still considered “compensation.” Two years ago, during several days in Minsk, I was able to match up book markings and dedications with close to one hundred names on ERR lists of confiscated “Jewish libraries”—my Amsterdam institute (IISH), Frederick Adler, the Rothschilds, Léon Blum, to name only a few examples. I met only one elderly professor in Minsk ready to consider the question: Can books from Western private libraries, some dedicated to victims of the Holocaust, “compensate” for Russian and Belarusian libraries destroyed or plundered by the Nazis? Minsk librarians today might answer “Yes!” especially to Marc Chagall’s autobiography with original drawings dedicated to the Turgenev Library in Paris, but my friend who heads that Paris library today never knew it survived. Besides before 1991, it was relegated to the secret spetskhran, where it certainly could not begin to serve as compensation, while other less-fortunate “degenerate” books from Western libraries were destroyed in Soviet “cleansing” operations.

Given such examples, I would like to recommend cooperative work on a database of the collections plundered from different countries based on the many ERR and RSHA library confiscation lists which I have located recently. Belgian colleagues have already established one for their libraries and archives. Paris collections could find a welcome memorial, even if restitution is never considered. Simultaneously, a database is needed with available information on the German library collections that went to the USSR, which often included “twice plundered” books from other countries.