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Tentatives d'identification et de restitution, un chantier en cours »

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# The Nazi looting of books in Belgium and their partial restitution. A status quaestionis

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## ***The Nazi looting of books in Belgium and their partial restitution. A status quaestionis***

Michel Vermote, Gand

The fate of **library material** from Belgium can be considered a **forgotten episode** in the story of confiscation and restitution of cultural goods during and after the Second World War.<sup>1</sup>

Similar to the plunder in other European countries, German occupation forces looted cultural goods on a **massive scale** in Belgium. Confiscation of public and private collections was carried out systematically by several competing Nazi organizations throughout the war years.<sup>2</sup>

While the Nazis also targeted **art**, aside from archives and libraries, the relatively few major Belgian art collections seized have been documented long ago.<sup>3</sup> Yet looted art remains a burning issue. In the beginning of 2017 a list of 78 paintings with ‘inconclusive provenance’ in Belgian museums, was published.<sup>4</sup>

With respect to **archives**, major research efforts started in the early 1990s, when Belgium first learned about the extensive captured Belgian archives that were long-kept secretly in Moscow, since their second capture by Soviet authorities at the end of the war. Since they included important military and other high-level government records, to say nothing of Jewish, Masonic files and newspaper records, it became a high-level state priority to retrieve them. In 2002, following ten years of research and negotiations with the Russian Federation, about 40 fonds of Belgian provenance returned to Brussels.<sup>5</sup>

Fewer details have been known about the identity and fate of the large libraries that were seized from individual Belgian citizens and important non-governmental organizations, some of which also included significant archival materials and personal papers.<sup>6</sup> **Library losses** have never seemed to attract much government interest, despite the fact that the robbery of books in the occupied **Belgien und Nordfrankreich** was committed in the same way as in the other occupied territories, by several competing German plunder agencies.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See the Belgian chapter by Jacques Lust and Michel Vermote, “Papieren Bitte! The Confiscation and Restitution of Belgian Archives and Libraries (1940–2003),” in *Returned from Russia: Nazi Archival Plunder in Western Europe and Recent Restitution Issues*, ed. Patricia Kennedy Grimsted, F.J. Hoogewoud, and Eric Ketelaar (Great Britain: Institute of Art and Law, 2007 and 2013), pp. 190–239.

<sup>2</sup> Belgium, Services du Premier Ministre, *Les biens des victimes des persécutions anti-juives en Belgique: Spoliation, Rétablissement des droits, Résultats de la Commission d'étude. Rapport final de la Commission d'étude sur le sort des biens des membres de la Communauté juive de Belgique spoliés ou délaissés pendant la guerre 1940–1945* ([Brussels], 2001; also issued in Dutch); at: <http://www.combuysse.fgov.be/hoofdframemenufr.html> (headed by Lucien Buysse, the Commission was familiarly named the Buysse Commission).

<sup>3</sup> See [Jacques Lust], “Les biens culturels et les oeuvres d’art,” in the Buysse Commission *Report*, especially pp. 132–38. Annexes in the *report* of the Buysse Commission for a survey on cultural assets of Jewish and unknown origin in Belgian musea: “Aperçu des biens culturels localisés par la Commission d’étude au sein des musées”, annexe 26, pp. 237–252 and: “Rapports de la 2e enquête au sein des institutions culturelles”, annexe 27, p. 253.

<sup>4</sup> Geert Sels, “Kunst voor das Reich. Het wedervaren van schilderijen in onze musea” in: *Openbaar Kunstbezit in Vlaanderen* (Ghent, 2017), pp. 1–40 (thema); *De Standaard*, 21 February 2017, DS2, pp. 2–3.

<sup>5</sup> Michel Vermote, “Back from Nowhere. The Restitution of Looted Belgian Collections (1991–2001)”, Paper for the Seminar. “Russia, Archives and Restitution,” at the Internationaal Instituut of Social History, Amsterdam, 2001: <https://socialhistory.org/sites/default/files/docs/projects/vermote.pdf>; see also the more detailed account in note 1 above.

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Lust, “De Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg en de bibliotheekroof in België (1940–1943)” (Brussels, 2000 internal paper for the Study Commission on Jewish Property).

<sup>7</sup> The Military Administration in Belgium and Northern France included present-day Belgium and the French departments Nord and Pas-de-Calais. It was established in 1940 on military considerations (the invasion of Britain), but remained in existence until July 1944 for political reasons (pressure on the Vichy regime). See: [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deutsche\\_Besetzung\\_Frankreichs\\_im\\_Zweiten\\_Weltkrieg](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deutsche_Besetzung_Frankreichs_im_Zweiten_Weltkrieg).

## Nazi looting of books in Belgium

The most active Nazi agencies engaged in plunder of libraries were the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (ERR) and the Security Service (Sicherheitsdienst - SD). It is not within the scope of this contribution to provide a comprehensive overview of all the Nazi agencies involved, nor to reconstruct their distinct motives and often conflicting responsibilities. In fact, the *Kompetenzkampf*<sup>8</sup> (an important principle of the Nazi State) resulted in the presence on site of several competing cultural robbery organizations.<sup>9</sup>

Questions on the quantity and the content of the library losses are more relevant in order to tackle the key issue of this colloquium as to the whereabouts of the library material.

The **quantification** of the confiscated publications is a speculative exercise, rendered more difficult as a result of involvement of different Nazi agencies. Accurate data are available only for the ERR, following retrieval in Kyiv in the early 1990's of key original ERR lists of confiscated private libraries and archives in Belgium.<sup>10</sup> With respect to other services (including the SD), it is a journey into the unknown, because similar SD reports have not surfaced.

Available ERR confiscation documents provide an indication of the dimension of library plunder, with a total of **1,223 crates** transported to Germany from 1940 to early 1943.<sup>11</sup> Using that total, the Belgian government Study Commission on Jewish Property, in its 2001 report, put forward a figure of 150,000 volumes seized.<sup>12</sup> Based on the figures in the confiscation lists the number of **150 volumes per case** is only a minimum estimate. That would appear to be an underestimate, and besides it does not include 350 crates for two major 1942 seizures missing from the list used in calculation. In many cases (for which we have data: number of crates as well as quantity of books), the outcome would be higher, averaging up to 357 volumes per crate. However, this estimate is made difficult because of the heterogeneous content of the confiscated material consisting of both publications, archival records and museum materials. While the total of 150,000 volumes gives a lower limit, the higher estimated total would be around 300,000 volumes in using a higher average of 250 volumes per crate.

Guesses about the number of books seized by the **M-Aktion** are even more speculative. Founding curator of the Brussels Jewish Museum Daniël Dratwa suggests a figure of 400,000 volumes.<sup>13</sup> This is based on an assumed average of 50 books per Jewish family that was

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<sup>8</sup> Karl Heinz Roth, "Klios rabiate Truppen, Archivare und Archivpolitik im deutschen Faschismus," in: *Archivmitteilungen* 41 (1991), p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> For an account of events in Belgium, see: Lust and Vermote, "Papieren Bitte!," in *Returned from Russia*, 2013, pp. 190–239 (above note 1).

<sup>10</sup> More on the ERR files in Kyiv below (footnote 62) and in: Michel Vermote with Patricia Kennedy Grimsted, "Library Plunder in Belgium by the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg: Six ERR Seizure Lists of Confiscated Belgian Library and Archival Materials" (forthcoming online publication 2018 – [https://www.errproject.org/looted\\_libraries.php](https://www.errproject.org/looted_libraries.php)).

<sup>11</sup> Übersicht über die Arbeitsvorhaben der Arbeitsgruppe Belgien in zeitlicher Reihenfolge, s.l., [March 1943]. TsDAVO – Kyiv, fond 3676, series [*opys*] 1, file 164, folios 53–66.

<sup>12</sup> The Buyse Commission uses a figure of 150 publications per crate into account, see the Commission *report* (2001), pp. 141–142; see also Lust, "De ERR en de bibliotheekroof," 2000, pp. 9–10: the result of the multiplication (1223 x 150 = 183.450) is adjusted downwards to 150.000; part of the Lust paper was included anonymously in the Buyse Commission *report*.

<sup>13</sup> Daniël Dratwa, "The plunder of Jewish-Owned Books and Libraries in Belgium," in *Vitalizing Memory* (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 2005), pp. 143–145.

victimised by the M-Aktion. Since there were approximately 8,000 households affected in Belgium, simple mathematics reveal a figure that is difficult to confirm.<sup>14</sup>

The conclusion so far is that there is not enough evidence to come to a conclusive answer on the volume of library loss in Belgium during the Second World War. **Estimates could accordingly** range from 150,000 to 700,000 volumes, including the M\_Aktion estimate.<sup>15</sup>

Far more relevant are questions about the value and the significance of the lost library heritage. But even the **content of the plunder** seems difficult to determine. Documents discovered in the nineties in Kyiv provide some answers. The administrative records of the ERR HAG Belgien-Nordfrankreich held by a major Ukrainian state archive (TsDAVO) in Kyiv contain key documents: the lists of ERR seizures from August 1940 up to March 1943.<sup>16</sup> The general picture that emerges from the data listed shows the institutional proportion of seizures is 25% to 75% for personal collections. Approximate **categories** of seizures – according to ERR notations – is: Jewish: 66%, Masonic: 6%, politicians: 6%, labor movement: 6%, art: 3%.

The **geographical** spread is limited: 84% of the confiscations (126) were from Brussels, while 10% were from Antwerp (17); with both Ghent and Liège (2), Northern France (2) and Enghien (1).<sup>17</sup> The picture is slightly different when we take into account the number of crates that were sent to Germany, but the bulk of ERR confiscations clearly took place in Brussels and its surroundings.

Detailed seizure lists of plundered libraries are rare, especially for private collections. But the **general descriptions** provided by the ERR give some indication.<sup>18</sup> Materials seized concern Masonic material (9 entries), Judaica and Hebraica (15 entries), socialist, communist and Marxist literature; political and legal writings, French history, French literature, German-language philosophy, Russian literature, art history, periodicals, Belles lettres, encyclopedias, chemistry books, theosophical literature, 'Writings hostile to Germany' or 'literature forbidden in Germany', and finally music scores.

Some significant examples (based on the ERR reports in Kyiv) fill out a picture of the library material taken in Belgium:

Libraries of institutes and organisations:

- The **National Institute of Social History** (Brussels): 220 crates containing the book collection of the founding fathers of the Belgian Workers' Party. This unique

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<sup>14</sup> No figures on confiscated books for Belgium in: Kris Stabel, *De Möbelaktion. Het Duitse beheer van de in België geconfisqueerde Joodse goederen tijdens de Tweede Wereldoorlog*, Leuven, 2000; Johanna Pezechkian, "La Möbelaktion en Belgique", in: *Cahiers d'histoire du temps présent / Bijdragen tot de Eigentijdse Geschiedenis* 10 (2002), pp. 153–80; Sem Christian Sutter, "The Fate of books Confiscated in the Möbel-Aktion", in: *Restitution of Confiscated Works – Wish or Reality? Documentation, identification and restitution of Cultural property of the victims of World War II. Proceedings of the international academic conference held in Liberec, 24-26 October 2007*, Prague, 2008, pp. 102-113.

<sup>15</sup> In addition to the underestimated number of 150,000 volumes (by the Buysse Commission) or an adjusted figure of 300.000, there is the calculation of the impact of the M-Aktion of 400,000 volumes. The sum of those values results in a maximum estimate of 700.000 publications as a result of the library loot in Belgium.

<sup>16</sup> Schätzung des Wertes der bisher von der Arbeitsgruppe durchgeführten Arbeitsvorhaben, Brussels, 1941 - TsDAVO - Kyiv, fond 3676, series [opys] 1, file 164, folios 36–42; Inhalt der Kisten der Arbeitsvorhaben der Arbeitsgruppe Belgien, Brussels, 1941 - TsDAVO - Kyiv, fond 3676, series [opys] 1, file 164, folios 8–12; Hauptarbeitsgruppe Belgien-Nordfrankreich, s.l., 1943 - TsDAVO - Kyiv, fond 3676, series [opys] 1, file 164, folios 46–52; Übersicht über die Arbeitsvorhaben der Arbeitsgruppe Belgien in zeitlicher reihenfolge, s.l., [March 1943]. TsDAVO - Kyiv, fond 3676, series [opys]1, file 164, folios 53–66.

<sup>17</sup> The activity of the ERR in Northern France was limited to the confiscation in May 1941 of the Freemason lodges in Lille and the seizure of a postcard album at the home of a certain colonel Tesseyre in Wimereux (Pas-de-Calais).

<sup>18</sup> Übersicht über die Arbeitsvorhaben der Arbeitsgruppe Belgien in zeitlicher reihenfolge, s.l., [March 1943]. TsDAVO - Kyiv, fond 3676, series [opys]1, file 164, folios 53–66.



collection was sent to Amsterdam in 1942 where it was integrated into the holdings of the International Institute of Social History by the ERR, before dispatch to Germany.<sup>19</sup>

- The **Jesuit convent in Enghien**: 200 crates containing 80.000 volumes (the average per crate was 400 vols.). According to the ERR, that library was a treasure trove of information about the history and cultural politics of the Jesuit Order, and the politics of Catholicism in Belgium.<sup>20</sup>

- Several **Masonic libraries**: confiscated books (and archives) were packed in over 200 crates. According to specific reports, they included extensive archives, along with “most valuable” book collections, with publications from the 17th century onwards.<sup>21</sup>

- The library of the **Ecole des Hautes Etudes** in Ghent: packed in 100 crates. Containing a scientific and a lending library. Little is known on the contents; they considered that the school was an outpost of French culture on Flemish soil and ‘unfriendly’ to Nazism.<sup>22</sup>

In sum, a broad range of organizations, i.e. ranging from a socialist research institute, a monastery, a school, and Freemason organisations.

With respect to personal libraries, we observe the same **diversity**: liberals, socialists, royalists and Catholics. All of them fell victim to confiscation. Considered most precious according to the ERR confiscation reports of personal libraries were the collections of:

- **Paul Hymans**: liberal former minister who fled with his Jewish wife to France and died there in March 1941. The ERR considered the confiscated library as “extremely valuable.” More than 4,000 books ranked first on the list of estimated value<sup>23</sup> (of personal libraries). There is little information on the content.<sup>24</sup>

- **Henri Grégoire**: the library of the professor in Slavonic studies contained many rare imprints and unique Byzantine publications.<sup>25</sup>

- **Duc de Guise**: French royalist and pretender to the French throne, who had fled the country. The ERR had its eye on the library of 20,000 books, many on the French Revolution and military history. Rare publications also on the royalist movement in France and the Action française.<sup>26</sup>

- **Olympé Gilbert**: at the home of the liberal senator 23 crates were confiscated. They included a ‘Walloon’ library, with many unique publications on regional topics since 1920.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Jacques Lust, Evert Maréchal, Wouter Steenhaut en Michel Vermote, *Een zoektocht naar Archieven: van NISG naar AMSAB* (Ghent, 1997).

<sup>20</sup> Abschlussbericht der Hauptarbeitsgruppe Belgien und Nordfrankreich für das Jahr 1943 (Hans Muchow), s.l., 1944 - TsDAVO - Kyiv, fond 3676, series [opys] 1, file 162, folio 137; Sheza Moledina, *L'histoire des bibliothèques jésuites à l'époque contemporaine, 1814–1998*, Paris, 2007.

<sup>21</sup> See TsDAVO – Kyiv, fond 3674, series [opys] 1, file 1, folios 1-32 (Grand Orient de Belgique); folios. 33–97 (Suprême Conseil); folios. 98–116 (Antwerp Freemason organizations); and folios. 191–92 (Liège Freemason organizations), Brussels, 1940.

<sup>22</sup> Hauptarbeitsgruppe Belgien-Nordfrankreich, s.l., 1943 - TsDAVO - Kyiv, fond 3676, series [opys] 1, file 164, folio 47.

<sup>23</sup> Schätzung des Wertes der bisher von der Arbeitsgruppe durchgeführten Arbeitsvorhaben, Brussels, 1941 - TsDAVO - Kyiv, fond 3676, series [opys] 1, file 164, folios 37, 42.

<sup>24</sup> Übersicht in Stichworten über Arbeitsvorhaben Hymans; Laveleye, Grégoire (de Sturler), s.l., 1940, TsDAVO - Kyiv, fond 3676, series [opys] 1, file 164, folios 3-5.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>26</sup> Bericht über die Akten des Duc de Guise und Comte de Paris (11 Mar. 1941) and Arbeitsbericht über die Bibliothek des Duc de Guise (23 Sep. 1940), s.l., 1940-41, TsDAVO - Kyiv, fond 3674, series [opys] 1, file 1, folios 140–188.

<sup>27</sup> Schätzung des Wertes der bisher von der Arbeitsgruppe durchgeführten Arbeitsvorhaben, Brussels, 1941 - TsDAVO - Kyiv, fond 3676, series [opys] 1, file 164, folio 37; Hauptarbeitsgruppe Belgien-Nordfrankreich, s.l., 1943 - TsDAVO - Kyiv, fond 3676, series [opys] 1, file 164, folios 49-50.



- **Paul van Zeeland:** the library of a former Prime Minister, who had fled to the United States, contained scholarly books and journals on economics, politics, and literature, “rich in first editions”. 21 crates were stacked on the ERR lorry.<sup>28</sup>

Based on this outline of ERR seizures 1940-1943, we can deduce that **motives** for confiscation of library material **are multiple:** nationalism, anti-Semitism, security, compensation, even pursuit of profit. But the main concern is crystal clear: tackle Jews, Freemasons and other opponents of the Nazi regime by robbing them of their past, heritage and identity. The purpose was to erase them from memory; to take control of their heritage, by controlling the source material. A pure totalitarian approach.

## Partial restitution

The confiscation of libraries and archives in Brussels during the Second World War had been a major operation, but in the immediate postwar years, with all the actors on the field, it was difficult for Belgian reconstruction and restitution authorities to get a comprehensive overview. The lack of documents accounted for many blank spots and explains the difficult process of postwar restitution. This was a main task for the **Service of Economic Recuperation** (Service de Récupération Économique - ORE), the official Belgian restitution agency (1944–1967).<sup>29</sup>

ORE depended largely on information provided by claims, reports by allied intelligence services, and recovered ERR reports. However, it also carried out its own investigation. Eventually, this led to the interrogation of Hans Muchow (in Vierhöfen, near Hamburg) the head of ERR office in Brussels (Hauptarbeitsgruppe Belgien und Nordfrankreich – HAG Belgien) from 1941 to 1944.<sup>30</sup> Muchow tried to defend himself in his postwar declaration, insisting on the ‘Sicherstellung’ (securing cultural assets that were left behind), emphasizing propaganda activities instead of seizures, and suggesting the ERR kept their distance from the M-Aktion. His testimony allowed ORE to gain an understanding of the organizational structure of the ERR in Belgium, but it was not helpful with respect to factual **information** on seizures.<sup>31</sup>

ORE research efforts for cultural losses were linked to their economic and financial operations. The entire staff of ORE cultural service amounted to a maximum of five persons, only two of whom were trained art historians. The international awareness of cultural plunder was reflected in Belgium, but public opinion focused on headline-grabbers such as the seizure of the *Ghent Altarpiece* (brothers Van Eyck)<sup>32</sup> and the ravaged University Library of Louvain. Newly reconstructed with international support after it was torched in WWI, it caught fire again in 1940. 900,000 volumes were lost. It caused great indignation and actions of support and restoration were initiated.<sup>33</sup> These sensational issues became part of collective memory, overshadowing other library losses, and more general restitution efforts for cultural assets.

Eventually, ORE recovered a mere 198 cases of archival material and books from Western Allied

<sup>28</sup> Hauptarbeitsgruppe Belgien-Nordfrankreich, s.l., 1943 - TsDAVO - Kyiv, fond 3676, series [opys] 1, file 164, folios 49: in Moscow (RGVA – former Osobyi archive, fond 248; 16 files) a distinct archival fond contained some of his records. No trace of library material there.

<sup>29</sup> Byusse Commission *report* - Les biens des victimes des persécutions anti-juives en Belgique, 2001, pp. 236-254.

<sup>30</sup> Report of Marcel Amand (ORE), Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg – E.E.R., Brussels, 1947 - Archives Générales du Royaume (AGR2 - depot Cuvelier), Archive DER/ORE, I-21, n°364.

<sup>31</sup> Muchow to Amand, Unterredung mit Herrn Amand am 8. Juni 1947 with annex: Bericht über den Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg in Belgien meine Zugehörigkeit zu demselben, sowie über die Sache Lindhurst, Hamburg, 1947 - AGR2, DER/ORE, I-21, n°364

<sup>32</sup> Jacques Lust, “Het Lam Gods en de nationaal-socialistische cultuurpolitiek in België tijdens de Tweede Wereldoorlog. Achtergronden bij de wegvoering van het Lam Gods”, in: *De stoutmoedige dief van het Lam Gods. Zestig jaar speuren naar de Rechtvaardige Rechters*, Gent, 1995, pp. 68-69.

<sup>33</sup> Jan Van Impe, *De Universiteitsbibliotheek van Leuven. Het verhaal van een feniks*, Leuven, 2003.



restitution authorities in Germany and Austria, through cooperation with the French and Dutch services, a mere 198 crates of archival material and books; a disappointingly low amount in comparison with our neighbouring states (the Netherlands and France).<sup>34</sup> A prudent estimate by the Buysse Commission assessed the total recovery at probably around 20% of the books plundered by the ERR in Belgium.<sup>35</sup>

The explanation for this outcome is multiple: shortage of German documents. Lack of experts, i.e. librarians who were given the opportunity to carry out thorough research on the book material on location (in the different collecting points – Offenbach, Tanzenberg). But above all – as already mentioned- a general **lack of interest in cultural goods**, compared to economic and financial affairs.

Moreover, the Nazi concept of organizing plundered libraries by language complicated matters. The confiscated Belgian libraries had been split up on a linguistic basis and books had been labelled with "FR" or "HOL", depending on the language – "französisch" or "holländisch". This left no distinct category of "Belgian" books. Postwar allied restitution attempts partly failed because of this German classification, which was mistakenly interpreted as indicating the country of origin: "France" or "Holland".<sup>36</sup>

This assumption is confirmed by the **restitution figures** from the Offenbach Archival Depot. Only some 3,000 titles were returned to Belgium, contrasting enormously with restitution from OAD to neighbouring occupied countries: some 300,000 volumes each were returned to France and Holland.

In conclusion on the activities of ORE, we can state that the **undocumented and rather belated action** of the official Belgian restitution service resulted in meagre book recovery after the war. First and foremost, ORE focused on restitution of stolen art. Archives and libraries of private origin were considered less important. Even in the case of recuperation there was **no guarantee for restitution to rightful owners** by ORE. The restitution office simply lacked information concerning persons whose books had been looted in Belgium. Unidentified material was put on auction.

With hindsight, we can feel indignant about this way of handling of Belgian authorities. But consider the **stream of book material** which made its way through Europe from West to East in the war period. With volumes from many owners getting mixed up with books from countless other sources and then dispersed over a wide area. Viewing this flow we can speak of underground streams, isolated ponds (where books were and still are), streamlets and rivers that end up in lakes.<sup>37</sup> There were three major lakes: **Hungen** near Frankfurt (Germany, ca.1,2 mln volumes), **Tanzenberg** (Austria, ca.0,7 mln volumes) and **Ratibor** (Poland, ca.1,2 mln volumes). These would become the main terminals for the looted book material at the end of the war.

## Dispersal

### Where are the Belgian libraries that were looted by the Nazis?

Today -in an attempt to give an answer to one of the main questions of this colloquium- we should pursue a cautious and subtle approach. Our knowledge regarding what books were taken is fragmentary, and our information about their whereabouts is, with a few exceptions,

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<sup>34</sup> Lust, *De ERR en de bibliotheekroof*, 2000, pp.10-16.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 15,23.

<sup>36</sup> Michel Vermote, "War Trophies in Prospect: the fate of the looted collections from Belgium", Paper for the *International Conference. Mapping Europe: Fate of Looted Cultural Valuables in the Third Millenium*, Moscow, 2000.

<sup>37</sup> I take the imagery of the 'flow of books' from: Sutter, "The Fate of books Confiscated in the Möbel-Aktion", 2008, p. 111.



speculative. We can only provide an overview with assumptions and an indication of opportunities. There are a lot of topics requiring further investigation.

The following is but a **rough sketch** about how Belgian library material got scattered:

- An amount was undoubtedly **destroyed** or went missing during the Odyssey.<sup>38</sup> But the part that was destroyed seems to be much smaller than assumed for a long time.
- Only a small part of the books was returned **to their rightful owners**.<sup>39</sup> Due to lack of information the books recuperated by ORE could not always find their way home.
- Concerning **restitution** there were clearly distinct approaches between the Eastern and Western zones in Germany and Austria.
  - In the **West**: books that ended up in Tanzenberg (0,7 million) or Hungen (1,2 million) formed part of a huge restitution effort led by Western Allied forces. Collection points for book material were set up in **Offenbach** by the U.S. military<sup>40</sup> and in **Tanzenberg** castle by the British.<sup>41</sup> As mentioned above, some Belgian publications were acquired by neighbouring countries due to linguistic confusion. French-language publications went to Paris, Dutch-language publications to Amsterdam. Some of the books that ended up in Paris were sent – after examination – to ORE. Thanks to the staff of the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, a large part of the NISH library returned to Brussels in 1947.<sup>42</sup>

When confronted with the poor results of book restitution, ORE asked for compensation for the losses resulting from the destruction of the Louvain library. The ORE agent in Tanzenberg insisted on the allocation of a portion of the 20,000 unidentified books remaining there. That demand was in vain – for obvious reasons.<sup>43</sup>

- The fate of cultural goods that ended up in the **East** is quite a different story – as we know. Books found by **Soviet trophy brigades** – against all international agreements – were considered ‘compensation’ for cultural losses by the Soviet Union.<sup>44</sup>

The research of Ingo Kolasa clearly reveals how war loot was distributed to several institutes across the country by the Soviet State Agency ‘Gosfond Literaturny’. All libraries in the former Soviet Union had their share of the sometimes twice-looted books.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Lust, *De ERR en de bibliotheekroof*, 2000, pp. 23.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, pp.17-23.

<sup>40</sup> For the administrative records of the Offenbach Archival Depot, see: *Records concerning the Central Collecting Points (“Ardelia Hall Collection”) - Offenbach Archival Depot, 1946–1951*, NARA, M1942, Washington DC, 2004; <https://www.archives.gov/files/research/microfilm/m1942.pdf>. For the online catalogue, see: <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/4397624#.Wgg-lh-L4-c.link>

<sup>41</sup> Regarding the Tanzenberg facility, see: Evelyn Adunka, “Bücherraub in und aus Österreich während der NS-Zeit und die Restitution nach 1945”, in: *Exilforschung – Ein Internationales Jahrbuch* (Band 22), München, 2004, pp. 180-200.

<sup>42</sup> Maria Hunink, *De papieren van de revolutie. Het Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis 1935-1947*, (Amsterdam, 1986).

<sup>43</sup> International law provides for restitution, but in no case for compensation of cultural goods for war losses. The judicial framework at the time – the of The Hague Convention of 1907 and the Interallied Declaration of London in 1943- is clear on that.

<sup>44</sup> Konstantin Akinsha and Grigorii Kozlov, *Beautiful Loot: The Soviet Plunder of Europe’s Art Treasures* (New York, 1995), pp. 43-51. Ingo Kolasa and Klaus-Dieter Lehmann (ed.), *Die Trophäenkommissionen der Roten Armee: Eine Dokumentensammlung zur Verschleppung von Büchern aus deutschen Bibliotheken*, in: *Zeitschrift für Bibliotheks- und Bibliographie*, Sonderheft 64, Frankfurt, 1996.

<sup>45</sup> Ingo Kolasa, *Sag mir wo die Bücher sind... Ein Beitrag zu ‘Beutekulturwerten’ und ‘Trophäenkommissionen’*, Frankfurt, 1995.





In the autumn of 1945 a convoy of over 50 freight wagons arrived in **Minsk**, containing more than one million books from Ratibor, where the ERR had its so-called ‘Ostbucherei’ or East European library. Half of them had been taken from libraries in the Soviet Union. But the other part had been confiscated by the ERR in Western occupied Territories (France, Belgium, Holland).

For decades the fate of these trophy books in Minsk was unknown. Even today it is impossible to determine how many books from Western European and other foreign countries remain in various libraries in Minsk.

It was only in the 1990s that professor Vladimir Makarov could report on the presence of French-language books in the **Belarus National Library in Minsk**.<sup>46</sup> This resulted in research by the IISH in Minsk and the location of several hundred books with IISH stamps.<sup>47</sup> But there are many more, and from other countries as well. Professor Makarov noted books of Belgian provenance with dedications to eminent politicians such as former Prime Minister Paul Van Zeeland and Labour leader Emile Vandervelde, next to Olympé Gilbert, a professor at the University of Liège. There was also the library of the heir to the French throne, Jean Comte de Paris, and his son Henri Duc de Guise, who found refuge near Brussels between the wars. Much in-depth research on the spot had to be carried out. But it was not until 2016 that the initiative was taken to organize a workshop. The impetus was a lecture by our Belarus colleague Anatolii Steburaka together with one by Patricia Grimsted, at a colloquium in Paris in 2015, both of which were published by the sponsor of our present conference.<sup>48</sup>

The Minsk initiative was conceived as a **"practical-scientific seminar"**, with lectures and visits to several institutes such as the Presidential Library, the Library of the Academy of Science and the National Library, providing an opportunity to exchange information.<sup>49</sup> The major libraries presented well-documented displays and gave us a chance to examine their catalogues and foreign holdings. Belarusian colleagues had undertaken considerable provenance research on the foreign library materials. Card catalogues listing library owners, dedications and ex-libris of rare books have been compiled, and considerable data are available in the expanding online catalogue. Belgian library owner represented include, among others: Paul Van Zeeland, Paul Hymans, Olympé Gilbert, Jacques Errera, Niko Gunzburg, Henri Grégoire, Paul de Sturler, Alice Pels, and the Ecole des Hautes Etudes. In total, we could detect about 20 names of Belgian victims that occur on the ERR lists. This information can now be shared on the website of the Claims Conference

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<sup>46</sup> Vladimir Makarov, “Avtografy sud'by,” in: *Evropeiskoe vremia*, Minsk, 1993, no. 12, pp. 12–13, also published as a separate pamphlet, *Avtografy sud'by* (Minsk, 1993). Most accessible has been the English translation: Makarov, “Involuntary Journey of Books from Paris to Minsk,” *Spoils of War: International Newsletter*, Bremen, 1999, no. 6, pp. 25–27. In 2016 the brochure was reprinted: V.V. Mararov, *Avtografy i sud'by* (Minsk, 2016).

<sup>47</sup> Some notes were prepared in Minsk by the former IISG staff member Bernedine Bos, but no report was published, and Bos’s notes cannot be located at the present time. See also Patricia Kennedy Grimsted, “The Road to Minsk for Western ‘Trophy’ Books: Twice Plundered but Not Yet Home from the War,” *Libraries & Culture*, 39, no. 4 (Fall 2004), pp. 351–404; at: <http://socialhistory.org/sites/default/files/docs/libcult.pdf>.

<sup>48</sup> Anatole Steburaka, “Les fonds français de Minsk: Les archives confisquées par les nazis durant la Seconde Guerre mondiale et conservées en Biélorussie,” *Bulletin des bibliothèques de France*, no. 10 (November 2016), at [http://bbf.ensib.fr/matieres-a-penser/les-fonds-francais-de-minsk\\_67072](http://bbf.ensib.fr/matieres-a-penser/les-fonds-francais-de-minsk_67072); and Grimsted, “Livres et archives pillés en France par l’Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (ERR): La Bibliothèque Tourguéniev et les fonds français déplacés à Minsk,” *Bulletin des bibliothèques de France*, no. 10 (November 2016), pp. 90–111; online version (lacks images) at [http://bbf.ensib.fr/matieres-a-penser/livres-et-archives-pillees-en-france-par-l-einsatzstab-reichsleiter-rosenberg-err\\_67074](http://bbf.ensib.fr/matieres-a-penser/livres-et-archives-pillees-en-france-par-l-einsatzstab-reichsleiter-rosenberg-err_67074).

<sup>49</sup> International Scholarly-Practical Seminar of the Republic Institute of Higher Education (RIVSh) Department of the Historical and Cultural Heritage of Belarus of the Republic Institute of Higher Education (RIVSh), National Library of Belarus (NBB): “Lost and Displaced Cultural Valuables: the Belarusian context,” Minsk, 5-7 September 2016.



ERR Project.<sup>50</sup> This is an important step towards the identification and the reconstruction of the migration of many private libraries of Belgian origin that ended up in Minsk.

In addition to the French Masonic and other manuscripts earlier described by Anatolii Steburaka, a few manuscripts of Belgian provenance surfaced as a result of our research at the National Library. These could well be fragments of Belgian archives that first arrived in Minsk and were then sent to Moscow in the 1950s. Unless the 19<sup>th</sup> century ‘livre d’or’ of the Grand Orient de Belgique and bound manuscript (that resembles a book) were mistakenly considered library books during processing.<sup>51</sup> Minsk is probably the most important location of confiscated Belgian books.

In another important line of investigation, clear evidence was found in Moscow during restitution processing for Belgian archives in 2002: books and printed materials discovered in the repository of the former Central State Special (**Osobyi**) **Archive in Moscow** (now part of the Russian State Military Archive - RGVA) were not included among archives returned to Belgium.<sup>52</sup> Urgent and explicit demands by Belgian researchers and diplomats were rejected.

The issue concerns printed material that originally was part of the Belgian archival fonds, namely documents labeled ‘printed archives’ that should be reintegrated into the original ‘context’ based on the principle of provenance. In all, more than 1,000 titles could be thus considered of potential Belgian provenance (out of a total of 30,000 imprints).<sup>53</sup> But Russian authorities (Rosarkhiv) rejected the demand and demanded proof of provenance for every single item based on the presence of stamps and bookplates. Requests for restitution of this library material from Moscow has been unsuccessful until today.

Two decades earlier a first, but only partial book restitution from Moscow did succeed, however, with the symbolic handing over to Belgium in 1996 by Dutch authorities of some books that had been restituted by the Russian Federation to the Netherlands. They were among the 606 books recuperated by the Dutch State in 1992 from the All-Russia State Library for Foreign Literature. The **Rudomino Library in Moscow** had earlier received them from Minsk among thousands of ‘trophy’ Dutch books earlier transferred to Moscow and Leningrad because there was no Dutch-language censor in Minsk. All publications were in Dutch, but on the basis of ex-libris and

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<sup>50</sup> For the initiatives of the Claims Conference in regard to Nazi-looted books, see [https://www.errproject.org/looted\\_libraries/php](https://www.errproject.org/looted_libraries/php); and French looted autographed book holdings in Minsk: [https://www.errproject.org/looted\\_libraries\\_fr\\_belarus.php](https://www.errproject.org/looted_libraries_fr_belarus.php). The Claims Conference (Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, Inc.) is the umbrella organization of 23 national and international Jewish organizations operating from New York and committed to the victims of Nazi persecution, cf: <http://www.claimscon.org>

<sup>51</sup> For a Belgian ‘official’ report on the Minsk Mission, see: <https://faro.be/projectendatabank/deelname-aan-het-seminarie-verloren-en-ontvreemd-cultureel-erfgoed-de-wit-russisch>

<sup>52</sup> Aly Götz & Susanne Heim, *Das Zentrale Staatsarchiv in Moskau (“Sonderarchiv”): Rekonstruktion und Bestandsverzeichnis verschollen geglaubten Schriftguts aus der NS-Zeit*, Düsseldorf, 1992, 58 p.; Patricia Kennedy Grimsted, *Trophies of War and Empire: The Archival Heritage of Ukraine, World War II, and the International Politics of Restitution*. Cambridge (MA), 2001, pp. 303-304, 310-314.

<sup>53</sup> L’Expertise du matériel imprimé conservé aux Archives militaires de l’Etat russe: approche et procédure pratiques, 23 April 2001. Explanatory note accompanying the official list of Belgian material handed over by the Belgian authorities to the Russian counterpart in 2002, with indication of the criteria that could be handled in order to determine the origin of library material, as well as a proposal of a practical approach for the reintegration of this material into the original archival context on the basis of the principle of provenance. See also Patricia Kennedy Grimsted, “Return of captured archives from Russia: progress, but still hurdles ahead. Afterword 2013,” in *Returned from Russia*, 2013, p. A29.

dedications, Dutch librarians determined that some of the books returned to Amsterdam were actually of Belgian provenance.<sup>54</sup>

Prior to the report by the director of the **State Public Historical Library** (GPIB) in Moscow, Mikhail Afanasev, at the 2017 Paris Conference, Belgian specialists had not known about the 31 books from a Masonic lodge in Liège – “La Parfaite intelligence et l'étoile réunis” – plundered by the ERR and recently identified in that Moscow library. The library also holds a volume with an ownership stamp of the Antwerp Rabbinate, entitled *Nomenclature des israélites résidant à Anvers en 1905*. Such examples identified in one major Moscow library suggest that more Nazi-looted books from Belgium may well be dispersed in other Russian libraries. But few other Russian libraries have publicly revealed their ‘trophy’ book holdings.<sup>55</sup>

These examples clearly illustrate the complexity of locating dispersed library materials in the former Soviet Union, but suggest there may be many more to be found in other libraries.

Two additional examples also deserve mention:

- An important Masonic Collection with over 100,000 books and journals is held in a branch of the **University of Poznań Library** (Poland) in the palace of Ciężań, apparently the third largest collection of Masonic books in Europe. The origins of this collection goes back to the activities of the Reichsicherheitsamt and its component German security service agencies, which looted-book collections were evacuated to Silesia in 1943. Research has yet to be undertaken to determine the number of publications of Belgian provenance in the Poznan collection, although the majority are reportedly looted from German lodges.<sup>56</sup> France received books from this collection in 1947. Norway (Masonic Grand Lodge) succeeded in restitution in 2010, after five years of negotiation.
- Also now in Poland, material confiscated in Brussels at the office of the Socialist International was discovered in 2001. Printed material that had earlier been integrated into the archives of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers Party was discovered in the **Library of the Polish Parliament** (Sejm) – in a special social history collection, acquired around 1990.<sup>57</sup> Numerous books and journals bear clear indications of provenance, but in many cases the origin was hidden by newly added

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<sup>54</sup> See Frits Hoogewoud, “Russia’s Only Restitution of Books to the West: Dutch Books from Moscow (1992),” in F. J. Hoogewoud et al., eds., *The Return of Looted Collections (1946–1996). An Unfinished Chapter: Proceedings of an International Symposium to Mark the 50th Anniversary of the Return of Dutch Collections from Germany* (Amsterdam, 1997), 72–74; Frits Hoogewoud & Jacques Lust, Restitution of books of Dutch, Belgian and French origin. Symbol of a symbol, in: *Spoils of War. International Newsletter*, Bremen, 1996, nr. 3, pp. 61-62. [http://www.lostart.de/Content/07\\_Publikationen/DE/SpoilsOfWar/Spoils%20of%20War%203.pdf?\\_blob=publicationFile&cv=3](http://www.lostart.de/Content/07_Publikationen/DE/SpoilsOfWar/Spoils%20of%20War%203.pdf?_blob=publicationFile&cv=3)

<sup>55</sup> See M.D. Afanas’ev, “Les livres spoliés par les nazis. La piste russe”; online in webcast at: <http://www.enssib.fr/bibliotheque-numerique/index-des-auteurs?selecAuteur=Afanassiev%2C%20Mikhail%20D.#haut>. <add published reference>. His appended list, Bibliothèque historique d’État, Moscou, “Liste des livres spoliés par les nazis en France,” cites the many volumes with foreign book markings identified recently in GPIB. <add published reference>.

<sup>56</sup> See Andrzej Karpowicz, “The Masonic collection of Poznań University Library,” at <http://lib.amu.edu.pl/specjalne/masonbr.htm>. See also Pierre Mollier, “La bibliothèque maçonnique oubliée de Poznań,” *Franc-maçonnerie magazine*, September/October 2014, pp. 38–39.

<sup>57</sup> Michel Vermote & Wouter Steenhaut, *Verdwenen arbieven en bibliotheken. Het Poolse Spoor. Gent, 1999. : Michel Vermote & Wouter Steenhaut. Verslag zending Warschau 27 maart – 2 april 1999, Gent, 1999.* (report to the Flemish Ministry of Culture.



stamps on the same pages. These discoveries raised additional questions.

It emerges from our research that an overview of the whereabouts of books looted from Belgian libraries is incomplete at the moment. There are still plenty of **blank spots**. Further research should provide clarifications.

## Prospects for further research

One of the aims of this contribution is to provide the current status of research opportunities concerning this issue in Belgium. I hence limit myself to indicating the most relevant new source material:

- The partly preserved archives of the Office de Récupération Economique (ORE) are now held in the Belgian State Archive, where a detailed inventory is available.<sup>58</sup> The records are mostly on economic issues but the archive includes interesting files for the identification of stolen cultural assets and for information on restitution attempts. Also in **Brussels** the ORE series of individual claims concerning war damage has been processed.<sup>59</sup> An additional unpublished inventory presents a total of more than 120 meters of files classified by last name with postwar claims declaration forms and annexes (but still not publicly accessible, under privacy regulations).
- These archives are supplemented by documents in the U.S. National Archives in College Park, MD (outside of **Washington, DC**) with Belgian claims submitted to the U.S. military administration in Offenbach, Wiesbaden, and Munich. A number of claims and reports that apparently were not preserved in the ORE records can be consulted online.<sup>60</sup> Additional Belgium claims and restitution receipts submitted to American restitution authorities are found among German restitution processing records in the Bundesarchiv in Koblenz.<sup>61</sup>
- Also available online are remaining files of the ERR Hauptarbeitsgruppe Belgien und Nordfrankreich (1940-1945) that are kept in **Kyiv** (TsDAVO).<sup>62</sup> In the early 1990s we learned about the survival in Kyiv of the largest group of original ERR records anywhere in Europe. These crucial ERR files had been captured by a Soviet Ukrainian unit in the fall of 1945 and kept under wraps throughout the Soviet period in one of the major state archives of the Ukrainian Soviet Republic. Finally open for research in the late 1980s, they were first publicly reported in 1990.<sup>63</sup> Following Ukrainian independence in 1992, research became

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<sup>58</sup> Filip Strubbe, *Inventory of the archive of the Department for Economic Recovery and Legal Predecessor 1940-1968* (1997), I21, Brussel, 2012.

<sup>59</sup> Francois Antoine, *Ministère des Affaires Économiques. Archives de l'Office de Récupération Économique (ORE). Dossiers individuels*, I400, Bruxelles, 2007.

<sup>60</sup> Records concerning the Central Collecting Points ("Ardelia Hall Collection"), part of RG 260 (OMGUS) at the U.S. National Archives in College Park (NACP). Most of the records have been microfilmed by NARA and are now available via <https://www.fold3.com>. See for example.: <https://www.fold3.com/image/114/270090139> (general correspondence on Belgian claims). Other examples are presented in the Belgian contribution noted in note 48 above.

<sup>61</sup> Bundesarchiv-Koblenz: see: Barbara Limberg (comp.) with additions by Philipp Möckel, *B 323. Treubandverwaltung für Kulturgut bei der Oberfinanzdirektion München (1937–1944) 1945–1962*, 2008–2010. This fond contains an large number of ERR documents relating to art-looting during the N-S regime and documents related to the retrieval and repatriation of ERR and other cultural loot in Germany. With online access: <https://invenio.bundesarchiv.de/basys2-invenio/direktlink/354da674-59a2-477f-9c9d20da7f0840c6/>

<sup>62</sup> Op.cit. TsDAVO, Kyiv, see: <http://err.tsdavo.gov.ua>

<sup>63</sup> The ERR records in Kyiv were first mentioned publically by Patricia Grimsted and Hennadii Boriak at a conference in Kyiv in August 1990. See Grimsted's article, "The Fate of Ukrainian Cultural Treasures during World

more possible in the renamed Ukraine state archives, including the one now known as the Central State Archive of the Highest Agencies of Power and Administration of Ukraine (Tsentral'nyi derzhavnyi arkhiv vyshchykh orhaniv vlady ta upravlinnia Ukrainy), or TsDAVO.<sup>64</sup>

The files of the Brussels ERR office are fragmented and scattered across two fonds in TsDAVO (fonds 3674 and 3676). Regrettably these fonds were never properly reprocessed before scanning in Kyiv. The surviving records from Belgium include ERR daily reports of many individual library and archival seizures, some combined weekly activity reports, and also lists of library and archives seized. Although these key documents are scattered across many different files, it is possible to locate reports (Arbeitsberichte) for more than two-thirds of the ERR seizures between 1940 and 1943.<sup>65</sup>

- To conclude I can announce the **internet publication** of the key Belgian documents from these ERR files.<sup>66</sup> This online publication will present six original ERR lists of confiscated private libraries and archives in Belgium in facsimile. An accompanying chart combines the names of 105 individuals and 36 institutions, who were victims of ERR seizure, with dates, quantities and description of many of the book collections seized during German occupation, a large part of which were never returned to Belgium.

In the last decade opportunities for further research on looted libraries have considerably improved based on newly available source material. Especially for thorough investigation of individual cases prospects are better now. There is still much that can be done to document the story of the Nazi library looting in Belgium. Cooperative research efforts should be continued in order to promote 'historical justice'.

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War II: The Plunder of Archives, Libraries, and Museums under the Third Reich”, in: *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 39, no. 1 (1991), pp. 55–58.

<sup>64</sup> See more details about the German archives and their fate in Kyiv in Patricia Kennedy Grimsted, *Trophies of War and Empire: The Archival Heritage of Ukraine, World War II, and the International Politics of Restitution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press for the Harvard Ukrainian Institute, 2001), especially pp. 314–29.

<sup>65</sup> For more detailed explanation, see Patricia Kennedy Grimsted, *Reconstructing the Record of Nazi Cultural Plunder. A Survey of the Dispersed Archives of the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (ERR)*, Amsterdam, 2011. The entire original volume and individual chapters -not yet updated- are available in PDF at: [https://socialhistory.org/sites/default/files/docs/publications/errsurvey\\_ukraine-111019.pdf](https://socialhistory.org/sites/default/files/docs/publications/errsurvey_ukraine-111019.pdf). The updated and expanded version of completed chapters are available at <https://www.errproject.org/guide.php>.

<sup>66</sup> See above, note 10 ; [https://www.errproject.org/looted\\_libraries.php](https://www.errproject.org/looted_libraries.php) - forthcoming

