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Review of the book "Witnessing the Robbing of the Jews: A Photographic Album, Paris, 1940-1944," by Sarah Gensburger (Jonathan Hensher with the collaboration of Elisabeth Fourmont, Trans.)

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Sarah Gensburger, translated by Jonathan Hensher with the collaboration of Elisabeth Fourmont, *Witnessing the Robbing of the Jews: A Photographic Album, Paris, 1940-1944*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2015. ix + 216 pp. Photographs, bibliography, and index. \$85.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-253-01733-8; \$35.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-253-01744-4.

Review by Shannon L. Fogg, Missouri University of Science and Technology.

There is, in the Federal Archives of Koblenz, an album that contains eighty-five photographs taken in Paris during the Second World War. They include everything from photographs of Parisian landmarks to stacks of crates, linens, paintings, and shoes to tables filled with china and baskets overflowing with lightbulbs. Arranged in the album by a German art historian working for the Allies' artistic restitution service in Munich in 1948, the pictures in the album are without captions or identifying information, but they are clearly evidence of the Nazi looting of France. The loose photographs had been found in a Parisian warehouse that the Nazis had used to store household items looted from Jews during the Furniture Operation. There is no indication of when the photos were taken, where they were taken, or by whom, nor is it clear how they arrived in the American-occupied zone of Germany following the war. The personnel of the restitution service, however, were asked to classify the photographs and the resulting album is the object of Sarah Gensburger's study.

The book itself (originally published in French in 2010) reproduces all eighty-five photographs in the same order they appear in the Koblenz album.^[1] Despite the coffee-table book appearance (the book is roughly ten inches by ten inches or twenty-five centimeters by twenty-five centimeters), Gensburger provides more than just the images in the publication. The study is thoroughly researched and provides significant information beyond the striking black and white images of plunder. She incorporates archival research, the latest scholarly work on the subject, and interviews into the text accompanying the photographs. Her work is a welcome addition to the growing number of studies that examine the looting of private homes during the war and the connection between Jewish dispossession and the Holocaust.^[2]

The book begins with an introduction that places the photos in the context of German expropriation in Paris, including both the confiscation of art by the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (Reichsleiter Rosenberg Taskforce, or E.R.R.) and the stripping of private apartments by the Dienststelle Westen (Western Service) as part of the Möbel Aktion, or the Furniture Operation. Gensburger then turns to the Koblenz Album and its creation. She points out that the history of the Holocaust has taken a "visual turn" in recent years and, while her book fits within this context, it also differs. First, there are differences in subject matter. The photographs preserved in the Federal Archives feature looted objects as opposed to images of the extermination process itself, including images of bodies. Second, she also argues that new research related to spoliation has focused on a wider range of sources, but it has "so far paid no attention to archival images, which have been used merely for the purposes of illustration" despite the potential of photographs as sources (p. 14). Her aim, then, is not simply to illustrate the looting carried out by the E.R.R. and the Dienststelle Westen, but instead to tell the story of the

“multiple gazes” involved in reading history through the images, including our modern perspective, the viewpoint of those who took the photographs, and the staff members who arranged them after the war. She approaches the album and its images as a historical source related to looting as well as a vector of contemporary representations of the past.

The album’s photographs follow these short background chapters. Each photograph is presented with commentary that explains the way the photograph was “organized” into the album. Throughout this section, Gensburger carefully deconstructs the way the album was constructed after the war. It appears that images were arranged according to taxonomy rather than taking into account the looting process, the place the photograph was taken, or the German organization involved in expropriation. For example, all the pictures of crates are arranged together within the album whether the crates are full of art or household items. Without any kind of contextualization, postwar restitution employees did their best to organize the images. Within the commentary, then, Gensburger explains each photo’s organization in its postwar taxonomy, attempts to determine where and when it might have been taken, and further links it to the history of spoliation and the Holocaust.

Multiple themes emerge from her careful examination of the photographs. First, readers are able to see both the German and French role in the expropriation of the Jews throughout the book. While Germans initiated expropriation, it was French companies that transported the goods and Jewish prisoners who were forced to sort and pack the looted items. The reader sees French moving trucks being loaded and unloaded under the watchful eye of German authorities. Using their uniforms, Gensburger attempts to identify who was involved in the looting process. Second, she also uses background clues to determine where the photos were taken: the courtyard of the Louvre, inside a furniture store used as a warehouse, or a train station, for example. She traces the prisoner numbers sewn onto uniforms to try to name the anonymous forced laborers in the photographs. Comparing this information to prisoner lists also helps her narrow down the time frame for when the picture might have been taken. Crate numbers help identify which pieces of confiscated art were being sent to Germany. Thus each photograph is used in conjunction with careful archival research to provide a fuller picture of the complexity of expropriation in Paris.

Third, Gensburger carefully teases out the differences between the looting of artwork (by the E.R.R.) and the Furniture Operation (Dienststelle Westen), which focused on all “abandoned” Jewish apartments regardless of the inhabitants’ social status. The Koblenz album made no distinction between the two looting operations, combining photographs from both actions based solely upon what was represented in the photo (crates, loading and/or unloading moving vans or trains, type of item, etc.). This blending has had consequences for subsequent research. The album was originally indexed as “Photos of the E.R.R. Paris. Transport-Camps,” leading many scholars to use the photographs as examples of artistic expropriation. The album was re-labelled after Gensburger’s research to “Möbel Aktion – Paris,” which is also misleading. Throughout the commentary, Gensburger tries to point out times when this mischaracterization has led to the photographs being used erroneously as illustrations. For example, she identifies one photograph as having been used in a monograph to depict both Jewish forced labor and items sent to German bombing victims. The Koblenz archive has also put the same image online as illustrative of work within a labor camp in Paris. In other words, in both cases the photo was used to illustrate aspects of the Furniture Operation. However, Gensburger’s research reveals that it is actually a photograph of German specialists working in the Louvre with art looted by the E.R.R., which was not shipped to the general population (pp. 64–65). She carefully explains, however, “My aim here is not to point out errors or shortcomings in the work of colleagues but more fundamentally to point out the limits placed on the role of images in our contemporary evocations of the past. In some ways, then, our desire to see, and to show, seems to prevent us from looking and understanding” (p. 65).

This theme of the visual and multiple gazes is apparent throughout the book. Gensburger also has her own lens through which she viewed the album. In the mid-1990s, newspaper articles drew attention to

the existence of a concentration camp in Paris near the site of the new French National Library. It was one of three forced labor camps that the Nazis used to sort and package household items looted from Jews. Between July 1943 and August 1944, nearly 800 prisoners, mostly Jews whose status was unclear (prisoner-of-war wives, half-Jews, spouses of non-Jews) passed through these three Parisian camps. The association of the labor camps' survivors invited Gensburger and Jean-Marc Dreyfus to write an academically rigorous study of these camps that had been largely forgotten by history. [3] Her research into the camps and her personal association with the survivors colored the way she saw the images when she viewed them for the first time (p. 18). Many of the photographs were taken inside the camps and capture internees, as well as the objects they sorted, on film. Gensburger inserts her own voice into the commentary, reflecting on her meetings with camp survivors, clearly demonstrating the way that individuals approach "reading" the photographs based on their own experiences, interests, and expertise.

Gensburger successfully demonstrates how we can treat the Koblenz album as a "real historical source" (p. 194) while underlining the necessity of understanding the ways in which the archives and historical documents we rely on have been collected and arranged. [4] In her conclusion, Gensburger suggests a new way that the pictures could be arranged so they better reflect the historical record. She also tries to determine the original purpose of the collection. It seems unlikely that they were used as propaganda as much of the looting was deliberately hidden from the public's view. They may have been used in reports sent to Germany or as souvenirs. In the end, Gensburger argues that they document "the shared ideological assumption of all the actors involved. The mission was, first and foremost, one of dispossession by accumulation, irrespective of the economic gain thus realized" (p. 198). This dispossession—whether of art or household goods—was a process of destruction and anonymization. The Germans clearly aimed to "destroy all trace of the existence of the Jews" and this included all traces of their daily lives (p. 199). These pictures serve, however, to document an often-overlooked part of wartime history.

The book serves as an important source for anyone interested in the Holocaust in France, looting, forced labor, or reading images as historical sources. The only slight criticism of the book has to do with the presentation of some of the images. Most of the images span both open pages, with all the commentary appearing on the right-hand third of the two-page spread. The binding thus runs through many of the photographs. While in most cases this does not affect the clarity of the picture, in others, it makes it difficult to see key elements (pp. 46-47, for example.) Gensburger is to be commended for bringing these images and what they represent into the history of the war as well as for the careful contextualization she provides.

NOTES

[1] Sarah Gensburger, *Images d'un pillage: Album de la spoliation des Juifs à Paris, 1940-1944*. (Paris: Textuel, 2010). The English translation has been updated to include recent scholarship related to looting. The photographs are also available on the online catalog of images from the Bundesarchiv if one uses the keyword "Möbel Aktion" in the search engine at <https://www.bild.bundesarchiv.de/> [accessed March 8, 2016.]

[2] See, for example, Götz Aly, translated by Jefferson Chase, *Hitler's Beneficiaries: Plunder, Racial War, and the Nazi Welfare State* (New York: Henry Holt, 2008); Martin Dean, *Robbing the Jews: The Confiscation of Jewish Property in the Holocaust, 1933-1945* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); and Shannon L. Fogg "Everything had ended and everything was beginning again': The Public Politics of Rebuilding Private Homes in Postwar Paris." *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 28/2(Fall 2014): 277-307. My forthcoming book, *Stealing Home: Looting, Restitution, and Reconstructing Jewish Lives in France, 1942-1947*, also uses images from the Koblenz album as illustrations.

[3] Jean-Marc Dreyfus and Sarah Gensburger, translated by Jonathan Hensher, *Nazi Labour Camps in Paris: Austerlitz, Lévitan, Bassano, July 1943–August 1944* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011).

[4] This is also a growing field of study as well. See, for example, Lisa Moses Leff, *The Archive Thief: The Man Who Salvaged French Jewish History in the Wake of the Holocaust* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2015) and the recent issue of the *American Historical Review* Roundtable dedicated to the archives of decolonization (Volume 120/3 [June 2015]). Gensburger focuses primarily on the “visual turn” and reading photographs rather than the construction of archives, although both raise similar issues.

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