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Session 5: “War and Post War fate of stolen library collections”

Prospects for further research on the fate of Nazi-looted book collections A report from Belgium

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Introduction

At the **conference in Paris in March 2017** on Nazi-looted libraries I stated in my conclusion that our knowledge regarding book confiscations in Belgium during WWII is fragmentary.¹

The information about restitution is evenly limited. On the whereabouts of publications we can only provide an overview with assumptions and an indication of opportunities for further investigation. Such declarations were echoed in other contributions for other countries. Often concluded with a call for cooperation.

Today these words still stand. The answer to the question on the whereabouts of the Belgian looted book collection only provides a rough sketch that leads us to Moscow, Minsk, Warsaw, Poznan and some other places:

- In Minsk the presence of French-language books in the **Belarus National Library in Minsk** was already reported in the 1990's.² At the occasion of a "**practical-scientific seminar**" in September 2016 Belarusian colleagues had undertaken considerable provenance research on the foreign library materials.³ The names of about 20 Belgian library owners

¹ International Colloquium “Where are the libraries that were looted by the Nazis? Identification and restoration: work in progress”, Paris, 23 & 24 March 2017. For the proceedings, see Martine Poulain (ed.), *Où sont les bibliothèques françaises spoliées par les nazis ?* Paris, 2019 - only contributions on France. All contributions can be consulted via: <http://www.akadem.org/sommaire/colloques/ou-sont-les-bibliotheques-spoliees-par-les-nazis/>

² 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,” in: *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).

³ 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.

were revealed.⁴ 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. In the autumn of 1945 a convoy of over 50 freight wagons arrived there, 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). 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 or **Osobyi Archive in Moscow** (now part of the Russian State Military Archive - RGVA) were not included among archives returned to Belgium.⁵ Urgent and explicit demands by Belgian researchers and diplomats were rejected. Later requests for restitution of this library material from Moscow has been unsuccessful until today.
- At the 2017 Paris Conference, the director of the **State Public Historical Library in Moscow**, reported on the presence in his institute of 31 books from a Masonic lodge in Liège plundered by the ERR. Such an example suggests 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.⁶ These examples clearly illustrate the complexity of locating dispersed library materials in the former Soviet Union and suggest there may be many more to be found.
- 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). The origins of this large collection goes back to the activities of the Reichsicherheitsamt, which looted-

⁴ Among others we mention: Emile Vandervelde, Paul Van Zeeland, Paul Hymans, Olympé Gilbert, Jacques Errera, Niko Gunzburg, Henri Grégoire, Paul de Sturler, Alice Pels, Jean Comte de Paris and his son Henri Duc de Guise. There were also indications to the Grand Orient de Belgique and the Ecole des Hautes Etudes in Ghent.

⁵ 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.

⁶ 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>.

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. Norway (Masonic Grand Lodge) succeeded in restitution in 2010, after five years of negotiation.

- Also in Poland, printed material confiscated in Brussels at the office of the Socialist International was discovered in 2001. The publications were discovered in **Warsaw** in the **Library of the Polish Parliament** (Sejm). This institute acquired around 1990 a special social history collection.⁷ Numerous books and journals in this collection bear clear indications of provenance, but in many cases the origin was hidden by newly added stamps on the same pages. These discoveries raised additional questions.

It emerges from these findings that Belgian library material got scattered in the course of World War II and many questions remain on the fate of these cultural assets.

Documenting ERR Looted Libraries

The repeated call for further investigation on the matter is not always followed by concrete initiatives. But in this respect we can announce an **online publication** about library plunder in Belgium, which is about to be launched and was presented last week at a workshop on the subject in Brussels.⁸ It is a fine example of a joint research effort initiated by the Claims Conference and the Holocaust Museum and supervised by Pat Grimsted. As a result of years of ongoing interaction in research the webpage on the 'ERR project' website features new findings about the unique procedures of the **Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg** (ERR) in Belgium, which has emerged from research based on ERR files now held at the Central State Archive of the Highest Agencies of Power and Administration of Ukraine (Tsentral'nyi

⁷ Michel Vermote & Wouter Steenhaut, *Verdwenen archieven 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).

⁸ An organisation of Cegesoma & Amsab-ISH (Brussels, 14 June 2019), for a sneaky preview of the publication see: <http://www.amsab.be/grimsted>. A short report on the workshop can be found on the website of AMSAB – ISH (<http://www.amsab.be/en/over-ons/nieuws/655-workshop-nazi-roof-kunst-en-erfgoed>) and CegeSoma (http://www.cegesoma.be/cms/index_en.php?article=3936&pagOnbr=102&pagofs=0), including an interview with dr. Patricia Grimsted.

derzhavnyi arkhiv vyshchykh orhaniv vlady ta upravlinnia Ukraïny) or TsDAVO in Kyiv.⁹ We are posting facsimiles of **six original ERR cultural-seizure lists**, providing key information of over 150 confiscated private libraries and archive collections. The six seizure lists described, were prepared during occupation by the ERR, the most important agency of cultural plunder in Belgium.

An accompanying **article** with reference to original ERR reports and correspondence explain the context crucial to research and can help identify and document claims for restitution of books and archives still at large. This introduction to the online publication also briefly describes the organization and operations of the ERR in Belgium, its relationship with rival German agencies, and the interplay with Rosenberg's Möbel-Aktion under his Ministry for Occupied Eastern Territories (RMbO) for book and art receipts.

Brief coverage extends to postwar restitution efforts, and newly available archival sources.

This online publication also includes a **chart** (in Excel) listing the names of the 150 victims of ERR priority seizure through March 1943, with dates of seizure and shipment, materials seized, and related ERR documents available (many of which survive in two ERR fonds in Kyiv— these deserve further examination).

This whole presentation should better portray the extensive ERR library plunder in Belgium, contribute to wider knowledge of available sources (especially those in Kyiv), and stimulate further investigation and wider public research on the tragic wartime cultural loss and displacement in Belgium.

The fate of the surviving ERR records from Brussels is worth mentioning. We now know from a report by ERR officer Vogel that they were part of the final Belgian shipment of two freight cars that left Brussels on 24 August 1944.¹⁰ One freight car (with 108 crates of books) was destined for the ERR Central Library for the Hohe Schule (in Tanzenberg, near Klagenfurt,

⁹ The online presentation is a joint initiative of the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany (Claims Conference) and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The earlier publication of source material concerning France is thus completed with Belgian documents. It is the intention to make a similar web page for the Netherlands, see: https://www.errproject.org/looted_libraries.php

¹⁰ Vogel to ERR Stabsführung Berlin, 24 Aug. 1944 (with the wagon designations), BArch, NS 30/25, fol. 27; Lommatzsch to Stabsführung Berlin, 6 Sept, 1944, NS 30/25, fol. 25.

Austria), and the second including one crate of Hauptarbeitsgruppe office records went to Nikolsburg (*now Czech, Mikulov*) where they were evacuated before arrival of the Red Army.¹¹ The documents were subsequently captured by Ukrainian scouts (near Dresden in the fall of 1945) and transferred to Kyiv, which explains why they are now held in TsDAVO, along with additional ERR records captured from different sources. This also explains why there is such a large component of Belgium ERR files among the ERR records in Kyiv. Long held in secret in Kyiv, regrettably, none of these records were available for postwar restitution processing of retrieved looted cultural property in Germany and Austria, nor were they ever utilized by Soviet authorities in research to identify cultural losses and potential recovery.

The wanderings of the ERR archive material in the latter days of WWII that caused a disruption of the original organization are therefore reflected in the presentation of the files today and determine the research possibilities (difficulties). A problem that we will discuss later in the paragraph concerning intellectual access.

Prospects for further research

It is obvious that further research depends on the availability of source material. The trend to greater openness in a rapidly evolving information society has recently enabled access to a wider range of needed sources. The **Terezín Declaration**, has provided a favourable impetus for practical initiatives. The researcher has a growing range of (online) sources at disposal, such as those **ERR** records from Belgium that are now online in **TsDAVO** in **Kyiv**, as well as the many documents online in **BA Berlin-Lichterfelde**. All of which is described in Pat Grimsted's online ERR Archival Guide.¹²

In the last decade the **Belgian State Archives** also opened new source material including:

- The remaining archives of the **Office de Récupération Economique (ORE)**. These documents crucial to provenance research were only partly preserved in Brussels. From

¹¹ See more details about the German archives and their fate in Kyiv the TsDAVO coverage in Ukrainian chapter in the Grimsted, *ERR Archival Guide*: www.errproject.org/guide.php

¹² The original edition sponsored by the Claims Conference was published in 2011. For the Belgian chapter available since 2016, see: <https://www.errproject.org/guide.php>.

its creation in 1945 until its dissolution in 1967, this Belgian public agency was responsible for the recovery and restitution of Belgian properties. The office was also charged with the identification of stolen cultural assets and undertook several restitution attempts. This resulted in the creation of record series on stolen artworks, including declaration forms, various files, file cards and a collection of photographs. A detailed inventory is available (online) since 2012.¹³

- In addition to the administrative records, ORE also created files about **individual recovery claims** they handled. These files form a distinct archival fond of some 120 linear metres that was inventoried in 2007. The fond contains files dating from the 1940s to the early 1960s.
- A potentially important additional source are the archives from the **Office for War Damage**.¹⁴ Handling of all war damages led to the creation of a very voluminous file series (800.000 files) comprised in over more than 20 kilometres of archives. Several inventories have been (or are) drawn up per province. The files can be consulted at the National Archives after completing a research statement indicating the purpose of the research and confirming compliance with the legal provisions on privacy and copyright.

Note that the research potential of these records is determined by the purpose of their creation. The information in the war damage declaration forms is usually not relevant in the context of provenance research. With a view to obtaining financial compensation, it was sufficient for the applicant to submit a declaration of the number of books with their estimated value. But in case a restitution was intended a bibliographic description was needed. This means that the ORE files contain interesting information with descriptive book lists, while war damage files rarely contain that sort of data.

Intellectual access

Physical access to archives is not always accompanied by adequate **intellectual access**. It is not within the scope of this contribution to present a progress report on accessibility of

¹³ Filip Strubbe, *Inventory of the archive of the Department for Economic Recovery and Legal Predecessor 1940-1968 (1997)*, 121, Brussel, 2012.

¹⁴ For an introduction to this fond, see: François Antoine, *De individuele dossiers 'Oorlogsschade aan private goederen' (Tweede Wereldoorlog)*. Zoekwijzer 7, Algemeen Rijksarchief (2011).

WWII source material. I limit myself to indicating some concrete examples that illustrate the rapidly changing situation regarding source material concerning Belgium.

TsDAVO (PDF)

The files of the Brussels ERR office are fragmented and scattered across two fonds in TsDAVO (fonds 3674 and 3676). 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 1943.¹⁵

The ERR collection in Ukraine (containing 250 files) was never appropriately processed according to the ERR creating offices and still today lacks German (or English) finding aids, continuing to make research tedious.¹⁶ Of special relevance to Belgium, Soviet Ukrainian archivists arranged three files from Arbeitsgruppe Belgien, in a separate fond (TsDAVO, fond 3674), with documents through December 1942.¹⁷ However, many more additional documents from the ERR Brussels office records (some extending through March 1943), are intermixed in many jumbled files from other ERR sources all over Europe including the Soviet Union in the main ERR fond (TsDAVO, fond 3676). Other files with additional ERR Belgian reports and related documents (through March 1944) would appear to be of ERR Berlin or Ratibor provenance – the ERR central office. Regrettably these fonds were never properly reprocessed before scanning in Kyiv. Despite these limitations, it is an important advantage to research that the TsDAVO ERR collection can be downloaded in PDF files. These

¹⁵ For detailed explanation, see: Michel Vermote with Patricia Kennedy Grimsted, *Library Plunder in Belgium by the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg: Six ERR Seizure Lists of Priority Confiscations*, <https://www.errproject.org/guide.php>.

¹⁶ This problem was considered at some length when the Claims Conference ERR project was initiated in the mid-1990s in Berlin and Kyiv, but Ukrainian archivists were not prepared to undertake rearrangement of the German records, and besides, they were already preparing an extensive *Guide-Index* for these fonds. Bundesarchiv archivists were not in a position to perform that task, because Germany considered the records of German provenance and which should have been repatriated to Germany. Accordingly, the Claims Conference initiated an attempt at 'virtual' reprocessing, which would have combined the digital files with other ERR documents held elsewhere; that attempt proved much too complicated and costly, and in the end, TsDAVO opted to digitize their own holdings as currently arranged.

¹⁷ This interpretation is based on the fact that the files contain predominantly in-coming original documents on Berlin letterhead, and out-going copies of communications addressed to the Berlin ERR Headquarters, as well as correspondence with German occupation authorities in Belgium.

documents already proved their key importance in documenting the official Belgian claims submitted to the Russian Federation in the 1990s for restitution of the archival material of Belgian provenance transferred to Moscow at the end of the war.¹⁸ Selected Kyiv files were also used extensively by the Buysse Study Commission for Jewish Assets (1997-2001), as evident in many of the references given in the final Report.¹⁹ During the past decades, in connection with other research efforts, further analysis of the Kyiv records continued. But access based on a search through (unidentified) PDF files is time consuming and surely not best practise in online accessibility.

But the presentation in downloadable PDF made it possible to go through many records and to discover a distinctive registration system adopted by the ERR in Belgium: each seizure operation, or 'work project' – (*Arbeitsvorhaben*), as they called them, was indicated with a unique number (as apparent in the different seizure lists and many related documents). Between August 1940 and February 1943, there were 150 named and numbered work projects. There was no such administrative system in other occupied countries.

Bundesarchiv (Invenio)

Bundesarchiv now holds the records from a main Rosenberg collection returned by the United States to Germany in the 1960s. In fond NS30, 231 files are arranged and described. Bundesarchiv published a finding aid for NS 30 including an introduction, describing the organization of the ERR and its records. The digitized full texts of all of the agency-specific group of ERR files in NS 30 are now available online through the Bundesarchiv search engine Invenio. The service includes directory research and direct access to data. Invenio is not the

¹⁸ See details in the appended lists to the Belgian chapter in *Returned from Russia: Nazi Archival Plunder in Western Europe and Recent Restitution Issues*, ed. Patricia Kennedy Grimsted, F.J. Hoogewoud, and Eric Ketelaar (Institute of Art and Law, UK, 2007; paper edn, 2013), pp. 226–39.

¹⁹ The so-called Buysse Commission, i.e. the Study Commission for Jewish Assets (Commission d'Études des Biens Juifs / Studiecommissie Joodse Goederen) was established by Belgian Royal Decree in 1997 to investigate and indemnify Jewish Community assets: Commission for the Indemnification for the Belgian Jewish Community's Assets, which were plundered, surrendered or abandoned during the war 1940–1945. The 2001 report is available online: 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], July 2001) at <http://www.combuysse.fgov.be/hoofdframenufr.htm>

most intuitive search engine and further disclosure is not provided which makes consultation time-consuming.

To illustrate the rapidly evolving range of source material the presence can be mentioned of many additional Belgian claims and restitution receipts submitted to American restitution authorities among German restitution processing records in the Bundesarchiv in Koblenz. When in 1949, the unrestituted art objects at the Munich Central Collecting Point (MCCP) were transferred to the German authorities, a special desk was set up (1952): the Trust Administration for Cultural Assets (Treuhandverwaltung für Kulturgut, TVK). The purpose of the TVK was to continue the process of clarifying ownership for the remaining unrestituted works of art and returning them to owners and rightful heirs. The administration operated till 1962. In 1992, the Bundesarchiv in Koblenz acquired the TVK records from Bavaria. Incorporated into these files is a vast quantity of original materials from the ERR and other Nazi agencies. These files were also put online via Invenio. And recently (via Invenio) a large amount of new records were added to this archival fond B323.

NARA (Fold3)

A more efficient presentation in terms of intellectual access is provided by U.S. National Archives (NARA) in Washington DC.

The records of the Belgian restitution office ORE are supplemented by documents kept at NARA. Copies of the Belgian claims submitted to the U.S. military administration (OMGUS) in Offenbach, Wiesbaden and Munich were preserved there. A number of claims and reports that did not survive in the ORE archive in Brussels can be consulted online. These OMGUS records transferred to the US are held by NARA as the Ardelia Hall Collection. Most of those records have first been microfilmed and then digitized. They are now available online. The access tool (Fold3.com) allows easy consultation of quality visual material via high-performance search options (like OCR).

That best illustrates the new context of archival research, with increasing online access, rapidly changing in terms of accessibility and availability.

And to illustrate the latter possibility I confirm the presence of many additional Belgian claims and restitution receipts submitted to American restitution authorities among German restitution processing records in the Bundesarchiv in Koblenz. They were recently put online via Invenio.²⁰

Conclusion

Opportunities for further research on looted Belgian libraries have considerably improved in the past decade. Essential archival material has been properly processed by the Belgian State Archives and archival institutions abroad contributed to a broadening of the range of sources by making available online extensive series of archive material that facilitates further fundamental research.

Crucial research questions remain. There is still much to be done in Belgium concerning provenance research. But based on newly available (online) source material researchers are better than ever equipped to reconstruct the nature of Nazi library looting in Belgium, in order to:

- document the extent of looting and name the victims,
- determine where the looted books are hiding today,
- encourage more restitution to individuals and institutions.

It is clear that access to archival documents for both claimants and scholars is an essential element for resolving questions of the ownership of Holocaust-era assets and for advancing education and research on the Holocaust and other Nazi crimes.

I conclude my contribution with these words from the Terezin Declaration (2009-). Words that are still valid.

²⁰ Bundesarchiv-Koblenz: see: Barbara Limberg (comp.) with additions by Philipp Möckel, *B 323. Treuhandverwaltung 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/> and: https://www.dhm.de/datenbank/ccp/dhm_ccp.php?seite=9