

Michel Vermote, The Nazi looting of Books in Belgium and their Partial Restitution. In: **The Future of the Lost Cultural Heritage. The documentation, identification and restitution of the cultural assets of WW II victims. Proceedings of the international academic conference in Cesky Krumlov (22-24.11.2005)**, Prague, Tilia Publishers, 2006, p. 118-127.

## International Conference

*Future of the Lost Cultural Heritage*

Documentation Centre for Property Transfers of Cultural Assets of World War II Victims

Ceský Krumlov, November 22-24, 2005

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

(Panel 3: *Books as the forgotten part of the confiscation and spoils of war*)

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#### Intro:

In the story of confiscation and restitution of cultural goods during and after the Second World War the looting of library material in Belgium can indeed be considered a forgotten episode. In general, publications are considered not to possess the same singularity as works of art or archives (although in the case of *curiosa* this is not appropriate). Consequently, they are not given the same historical or commercial value. This is probably part of an explanation.

Talking of the looting of library material in Belgium I would first like to mention the destruction of the University Library of Louvain (founded in 1636)<sup>1</sup>. (briefly)

The torching in August 1914 of this unique library collection of more than 300.000 precious publications, 1.000 manuscripts and several art collections caused great indignation. The pointless ravaging of the respectable University town of Louvain became the symbol of the barbaric attitude of the German army. The fate of the Louvain library obtained mythical dimensions and was even compared to that of the ancient library of Alexandria. Louvain was considered –in the words of the German historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch- the Sarajevo of the European intelligentsia.

This general indignation formed the basis for a international campaign of solidarity -led by the USA- and a unique effort of rebuilding that resulted in the inauguration on Independence Day 1928 of what was called “America’s gift to Belgium”: a new University library.

At the beginning of World War II German commandos were ordered to pay special attention to the confiscation of the book collection that had been reconstructed with considerable financial contributions from Germany in accordance with a clause in the Treaty of Versailles. Apparently the intelligence service was not aware of the fact that a few days earlier the unthinkable had happened: the new university library with its 900,000 volumes had caught fire and was still burning at the time that the recommendation reached the Sicherheitsdienst in Brussels.

This is not a case of plunder, but destruction by war. But we should note that after the war this was seen as the main assault on libraries in our country. It caused great indignation again and actions of support and restoration were initiated. It became part of our collective memory.

### Nazi looting of books in Belgium

In contrast –shortly after the war- little was known on the activities of Nazi-plunder organisations such as the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (ERR). Compared to The Netherlands and France the cultural plunder and the itinerary of the ERR in Belgium were not well documented.<sup>2</sup> This had its effect on the activities of the Belgian restitution office (ORE - Office de Récupération Economique) and consequently on restitution to our country.

This situation of ignorance would only be recognized in the mid nineties after the reappearance of at least part of the confiscated archives in Russia, but most important by the discovery in Kiev of the missing ERR archives on activities in Belgium.<sup>3</sup>

It is on the basis of this archival material –revealed to us by Patricia Grimsted- that we were able to present a list of libraries looted by the ERR, even make a general overview of confiscations in Belgium and to join the research on the subject that was initiated on an international level in de nineties.

Ever since the restitution of an important package of archival material from Moscow in May 2002, it has been our ambition to continue to contribute to that research.

In this sense I would like to present a summary on the library plunder in Belgium considering the following points:

- The quantification of the confiscated publications is speculative. A number of 150.000 publications looted from Belgium may be considered a realistic estimate. This is based on the fact that approximately a thousand cases of archival and library material found their way to Germany. From an analysis of the description of the content of a number of these cases an average figure of 150 publications per case was put forward as realistic by the Study Commission Jewish Goods in a report published in 2001.<sup>4</sup> I would like to put a question mark on the methodology, but see no other possible approach.
- Also the content of the plunder is difficult to determine: catalogues of plundered libraries are rare, and totally lacking for private collections. The general descriptions made by the German services are the only indications. In that sense the general list made up by the ERR in 1943 of all their interventions is a useful tool.<sup>5</sup> Related documents also indicate the estimated value of the different confiscations<sup>6</sup> (a clear indication of the fact that we are talking of pure and simple plunder, notwithstanding the ideological pretensions of the ERR)  
In order to draw the picture I would like to mention some significant examples:
  - As most important (and valuable) I indicate the following libraries of institutes and organisations:
    - The National Institute of Social History (Brussels): 220 cases containing the book collection of the founding fathers of the Belgian Workers' Party. This unique collection was sent to Amsterdam where it was integrated by the ERR in the holdings of the International Institute of Social History.
    - The Jesuit convent in Enghien: 200 cases containing 80.000 volumes (here, average per case is 400). The ERR described the library as a treasure trove of information on the history and cultural politics of the Jesuit Order and linked to the politics of Catholicism in Belgium.

- The result of the confiscation of several Masonic libraries was packed in more than 200 cases. They were described in the separate reports as most valuable book collections with publications from the 17<sup>th</sup> century on.
- The library of the Ecole des Hautes Etudes in Ghent: packed in 100 cases. Containing a scientific and a lending library. Little is known on the content; apart from the fact that the school was considered an outpost of French culture on Flemish soil and ‘unfriendly’ to Nazism.
- The lack of information is even more obvious for personal libraries. I mention some considered most precious according to the confiscation reports:
  - Paul Hymans : no information on the content. But the ERR considered the confiscated library of the late minister Paul Hymans (liberal who fled with his Jewish wife to France and deceased there in June 1940) as extremely valuable. The more than 4,000 books ranked first on the list of estimated value (of personal libraries).
  - Henri Grégoire: the library of the professor in Slavonic studies contained rare publications and exclusive Byzantine publications.
  - Duc de Guise : French royalist and pretender to the throne, who had fled the country. The ERR eyed 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.
  - Olympe Gilbart: at the home of the liberal senator 23 crates were confiscated. They included a ‘Walloon’ library, with all publications on regional topics since 1920.
  - Paul van Zeeland: the library of former Prime Minister Paul Van Zeeland, who had fled to the United States of America, contained scholarly books and journals on economics, politics, and literature, “rich in first editions”. 21 cases were stacked on the ERR lorry. The only trace of this seizure is the separate fond established for his (very few) papers in Moscow (RGVA, fond 248; 16 files).

### Partial restitution

- The undocumented and rather belated action of the official Belgian restitution service ORE led to a meagre result on book recovery after the war. In the cultural field the main attention of the ORE went to the restitution of stolen art. Archives and libraries of private origin were of lesser consideration.<sup>7</sup>

When the Belgian Government returned from exile in London in 1944, it tried to adapt itself quickly to the realities and consequences of a country economically devastated during occupation. It started rebuilding and reorganising its future. Local services and national ministries were engaged in compensating for the war victims, resettling refugees, and mapping war damages.

The international awareness of cultural plunder was reflected in Belgium, but the public opinion was focused on headline-grabbers such as the theft of the painting the *Mystic Lamb* by the brothers Van Eyck. In accordance with international agreements Belgium created operational services to trace and recover war losses on economic, financial and also cultural levels. But the ORE –that operated between 1944 and 1967- was not only responsible for the discovery, identification, and the restitution of cultural goods on an international level. A clearly defined aim, but as such an immense undertaking.

In Germany the main objective for the ORE was the restitution of ships and trains plundered at the end of the Second World War and the search for important stocks of valuables taken from Belgium, such as diamonds and financial assets, including the Belgian gold reserves. Research efforts for cultural losses had to be integrated with these economic and financial operations. The entire staff of the ORE cultural service amounted to a maximum of five

persons, only two of whom were trained art historians.

From the Allied restitution authorities in Germany and Austria, through cooperation with the French and Dutch services, ORE recovered a mere 198 crates of archival material and books; a disappointingly low amount in comparison with our neighbouring states of the Netherlands and France. A prudent estimate leads us to assess the total recovery at probably around 20% of the books plundered by the ERR in Belgium.

The explanation for this outcome is multiple: shortage of German documents. Lack of experts; in casu librarians who were given the opportunity to do 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 the economic and financial affairs. Within the cultural sector most attention went out to works of art, and there was also a distinction made between private and State owned goods.

- Even in the case of recuperation or repatriation there was no guarantee for restitution to rightful owners by ORE.

Frans Baudouin was one of the famous ORE art-historians and the only all-around cultural specialist personally visited Tanzenberg which had fallen in the British Zone of Occupation in Austrian Carinthia. Here, in excess of half a million books plundered by the ERR for the future Central Library of the Hohe Schule was discovered after the war. He witnessed on the lack of information concerning persons whose books had been looted in Belgium. He could not identify most of the names in Tanzenberg. “Their card file contains 7,700 names” he reported. He noticed several names of well known Belgian families, like Eviera, Tolkowski, Seyffers, Van Hulthem, de Blauwe, Stern and Oppenheim. He enquired Brussels: “Can you identify these names in Brussels?” Positive identification of who had been looted in Belgium never came from Brussels, and hence the ORE did not return a single book to Stern, Seyffers or Tolkowski. The potential restitution operation was completely unsuccessful.<sup>8</sup>

The ORE undertook neither investigation in the Netherlands nor closer cooperation with France. We know for example, of a consignment of fifteen crates dated 16<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> February 1949, for which the French had specified the content. Although these books had first been sent with a restitution shipment to France, and then forwarded from Paris to Brussels, ORE undertook no further investigation to return them to their private owners in Belgium.

In a more personalised approach I would like to mention one concrete example in order to illustrate what this situation meant for the persons behind the figures:

I can refer to Alice Pels (1882-1963); secretary of the International Committee of Socialist Women and an active anti-fascist before the war. She was arrested –also because she was Jewish- shortly after the outbreak of the war and took hiding after her release in 1943.

Her library was sent to Berlin in 21 crates in 1942. It contained a lot of valuable first prints (according to German confiscation documents), books in French, Dutch, German and English on socialism, women’s rights, philosophy, history and German literature of the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. In her demand on war damage she described it herself as a library of 7.500 bounded volumes, containing publications on Belgian history, Dutch, French, German and English classical works, some 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> prints of Plantin and a great number of memoirs (Chateaubriand, Talleyrand, Goncourt, Saint-Simon, etc...). She could not provide a detailed descriptive list. The ORE would finally be able to reconstitute (through the French restitution services) 200 publications, or less than 3% of the total loss.

It appears that in most cases of personal loss of library material the percentage of restitution seldom reached the limit of 10% of the pre-war library. And in case the victims or the heirs did not formally introduce a claim to the Ministry of Reconstruction, no action or research

was undertaken by the ORE and restitution was excluded.

The ORE would –on the contrary- be engaged in the selling of unidentified objects.

- Moreover because the Nazi concept of creating national libraries meant that books had been brought together by language, there were complications. The plundered Belgian libraries had thereby been split up on a linguistic basis and books had been labelled with "FR" or "HOL", depending on the language in which they were written: "französisch" or "holländisch". There was of course no room in this conception for a separate category of “Belgian” books. It would appear that post-war attempts at restitution by the allies were confused by this German classification, which was mistakenly interpreted as indicating the country of origin: "France" or "Holland".<sup>9</sup>
- This assumption is confirmed by the restitution figures from the Offenbach Archival Depot. Some 3,000 titles (even less than the number of books returned to the United Kingdom) were returned to Belgium, contrasting enormously with restitutions to neighbouring occupied countries: France and Holland were each given back some 300,000 volumes.<sup>10</sup>
- It is significant to notice that the ORE was not involved in the most important and vast restitution of the library material of the National Institute of Social History. This operation was the result of the joined efforts of the International Institute of Social History and the Dutch restitution office under Dr. D.P.M. Graswinckel. The book collections of the Dutch and the Belgian institutes were traced back in Northern Germany in 1946 and subsequently most of the material was sent from Amsterdam to Brussels in 1947.<sup>11</sup>

### Prospects

- In search of the archives of its predecessor Amsab – Institute of Social History discovered a treasure trove of Belgian archives in 1992 in the Special (Osobyi) Archives in Moscow (now RGVA). It played an important role in the process that finally led to archival restitution from the Russian Federation in May 2002. But in this operation the book material discovered in the same repository was not included. Urgent and explicit demands by the Belgian researchers were rejected.<sup>12</sup>  
It concerns printed material which originally was a part of one of the Belgian fonds. It can be defined as ‘printed archives’<sup>13</sup> that should be reintegrated in the original context based on the principle of provenance. A lot of the material can be indicated as ‘gray literature’: reports of conferences, printed minutes, etc. Annotated issues of (rare) periodicals are also included. In all, on a total of 30.000 publications more than a 1.000 titles could be considered suitable for further research on Belgian origin. The Russian authorities (Rosarkhiv) however denied our knowledge (on the producers of the archives) and wanted us to provide proof of the provenance for every single item based on the presence of stamps and bookplates.
- This was our only attempt to the restitution of library material from Moscow. Without any result until this day, despite repeated promises to proceed with the examination of the material.  
But to be honest, for us too it was the confrontation with the complexity of library plunder and restitution. The research of Ingo Kolasa <sup>14</sup> clearly describes the distribution of war loot by the Soviet State Agency ‘Gosfond Literaturny’ to several libraries all over the country. (a practice that we could also trace back –on a smaller scale- concerning archival material. All our demands for restitution of these (non-RGVA-)materials were turned down on principle – by the way)

- Joint research on an international scale also led to the reappearance of other library collections in Warsaw, Poznan and Minsk that need further examination. They were clearly part of the Nazi war loot and contain material of mixed origin.<sup>15</sup>

- The symbolic handing over to Belgium in 1997 of some books by the Dutch authorities that had been restituted by the Russian Federation to The Netherlands confirms the necessity of further inquiry.<sup>16</sup>

These publications were part of a package of 606 books that was recuperated from the All-Russia State Library for Foreign Literature by the Dutch State in 1992. The former Rudomino Library in Moscow had been one of the depots for war loot. All publications were in Dutch, but it seemed from ex-libris and dedications that some were of Belgian provenance. The names of the owners corresponded with those mentioned on the list of ERR-confiscations.

- Amsab - Institute of Social History was able to secure continuity in the wake of archival restitution.<sup>17</sup> It is our intention to continue research on the matter and if appropriate to play a role in restitution.

But is clear that the complexity of library restitution demands the involvement of other organisations and institutes in Belgium. It should also be based on an international cooperative approach in order to identify and to restore this part of the lost cultural heritage. I therefore sincerely thank the organisation of this conference. It provides an excellent forum to learn about initiatives in other countries and to detect prospects of international cooperation on the subject.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> On the history of the University Library of Leuven, see: J. Van Impe, *De Universiteitsbibliotheek van Leuven. Het verhaal van een feniks* (Leuven, 2003).
- <sup>2</sup> W. Steenhaut, M. Vermote, 'The Fate of the Archives and Books of the Belgian Socialist Movement', in: *The Return of the Looted Collections (1946-1996). An Unfinished Chapter. Proceedings of an International Symposium to Mark the 50th Anniversary of the Return of Dutch Book Collections from Germany in 1946*, (Amsterdam, 1997), p.75-86.
- <sup>3</sup> M. Vermote, J. Lust, "Papieren bitte! The confiscation and restitution of Belgian archives and libraries (1940-2002)" in: *Arts, Antiquity and Law* (Leicester, forthcoming 2006).
- <sup>4</sup> *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, Services du Premier Ministre, 2001), p.142.
- <sup>5</sup> 'Übersicht über die Arbeitsvorhaben der Arbeitsgruppe Belgien in zeitlicher Reihenfolge' (n.d. [March 1943]), Central State Archive of Highest Agencies of Power and Administration (TsDAVO), 3676/1/164, fols. 53-66.
- <sup>6</sup> 'Schätzung des Wertes der bisher von der Arbeitsgruppe Belgien durchgeführten Arbeitsvorhaben' 14 October 1941, TsDAVO, 3676/1/164, fols. 36-42.
- <sup>7</sup> J. Lust, *De Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg en de bibliotheekroof in België (1940-1943)* (Paper for the Study Commission Jewish Goods, Brussels, 2000), p.10, 23.
- <sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p.12-13.
- <sup>9</sup> M. 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 Millennium, Moskou, 2000).
- <sup>10</sup> P. Manasse, *Verdwenen archieven en bibliotheken. De verrichtingen van de Einsatzstab Rosenberg gedurende de Tweede Wereldoorlog* (Den Haag, 1995), p. 79.
- <sup>11</sup> M. Huninck, *De Papieren van de Revolutie. Het Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis 1935-1947* (Amsterdam, IISH, 1986), p. 154.
- <sup>12</sup> M. Vermote, 'Vozvrashchenie niotkuda. Restitutsiia pokhishchennykh bel'giiskikh kolleksiï', in: *Trudnaia sud'ba kul'turnykh tsennostei. Materialy mezhdunarodnoi konferentsii "Chastnoe pravo i problemy restitutsii peremesbchennykh kul'turnykh tsennostei". Moskva, 27 i 28 maia 2002 g. / Das schwierige Schicksal von Kulturgütern. Materialien der internationalen Konferenz 'Privatrecht und Probleme der Restitution von kriegsbedingt verbrachten Kulturgütern'. Moskau, 27. und 28. Mai 2002* (Moscou / Berlin, 2003), p.159, 161 (footnote18).
- <sup>13</sup> Cf.: Walne, P. (éd.) *Dictionary of Archival Terminology – Dictionnaire de terminologie archivistique. English and French. With Equivalents in Dutch, German, Italian, Russian and Spanish*. New-York, London, Paris, Munich, K G Saur, ICA Handbooks Series (vol. 3), 1988 (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), p. 122, item 355.
- <sup>14</sup> I. Kolasa, *Sag mir wo die Bücher sind...: Ein Beitrag zu 'Beutekulturgütern' und 'Throphäenkommissionen'* (Frankfurt, 1995); I. Kolasa and K.-D. Lehman (eds.), *Die Throphäenkommissionen der Roten Armee: Eine Dokumentensammlung zur verschleppung von Büchern aus deutschen Bibliotheken*. (Frankfurt, 1996)
- <sup>15</sup> See: P. K. Grimsted and F.J. Hoogewoud (eds.), "Return from Russia. Nazi Archival Plunder in Western Europe and Recent Restitution Issues" in: *Arts, Antiquity and Law* (Leicester, forthcoming 2006).
- <sup>16</sup> J. Lust, *op.cit.*, p.16.
- <sup>17</sup> M. Vermote, *Back from Nowhere. The Restitution of Looted Belgian Collections (1991-2001)* (Paper for the Seminar. Russia, Archives and Restitution of the Internationaal Institute of Social History (Amsterdam, 2002): [http://www.iisg.nl/archives\\_in\\_russia/vermote.pdf](http://www.iisg.nl/archives_in_russia/vermote.pdf) .IISH 2002.