

Archives

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DOCUMENTING LOOTED ART: PERSPECTIVES FROM THE ARCHIVES OF THE EINSATZSTAB REICHSLEITER ROSENBERG (ERR)

Adolf Hitler's ideological henchman Alfred Rosenberg was beheaded at Nuremberg, condemned to death as a war criminal; the charges against him included the looting of cultural valuables by his "Special Task Force," namely the *Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg* (ERR). The ERR was only one of the main Nazi agencies involved with looted cultural valuables during the war, and it operated only in Nazi-occupied countries, not those incorporated in the Reich (and hence not in Czechoslovakia). While French authorities may claim a figure as high as 100,000 art objects taken out of France, the ERR boasted the seizure of over 20,000 works of art from French and Belgian Jewish collections as quoted in the Nuremberg trial. As concerns us here, most important for recovery of art after the war and its return to victims or heirs in the West (some by then having taken refuge across the Atlantic), was the detail with which the ERR carefully documented their Western art loot and its destinations.

The surviving records produced by the ERR are among the most important sources for what was looted, both in the East and the

West, to say nothing of the South in the Balkans, Greece and Italy. My extensive (300-page) international survey and preliminary guide describing the archival remains of the (ERR) is soon to be launched on the website of the International Institute of Social History (IISG/IISH) with which I am affiliated in Amsterdam. Support for publication and some of the needed editorial work has come from the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany (Claims Conference). The project, long in preparation, describes remaining ERR files in twenty-nine repositories in nine countries, providing the basis for our planned virtual "reconstruction" of all remaining ERR files in cooperation with the German Federal Archives (*Bundesarchiv*). Plans call for consolidation of dispersed ERR documents in a searchable digital system as a major new component of the record of wartime cultural plunder and retrieval.¹

My Amsterdam institute (IISG/IISH), I should mention, was also a victim of the ERR, and the IISH building on the *Keisersgracht* served as the ERR headquarters in the Netherlands. The IISH loot, however, did not include art, but rather books and archives (including many important Jewish socialist collections). What looted art came into ERR hands in the Netherlands came through the *Möbel-Aktion*, the sinister ERR offshoot for stripping the homes of Western European Jews who had fled or were deported. Most specifically the ERR Neuwied Collection included hundreds of art works from Dutch Jews, many noted as having been "confiscated from Jews at the Dutch border," but after transfer from the Neuwied customs house on the Rhine to the ERR repository in Kogel to the US Central Collection Point in Munich (MCCP) for restitution to their country of origin, they

¹ See the appended flyer with list of the twenty-nine repositories covered in nine countries. That publication will more fully document other projects mentioned in this report.

were turned over to the Jewish Restitution Successor Organization (JRSO) with apparently no attempt to find their Dutch Jewish owners or heirs.

Other wheelers and dealers such as Hitler's personal agent Kajtan Mühlmann were the ones responsible for most of the looting or Nazi-style "purchases" in the Netherlands. Mühlmann had already proven his looting skills in Poland, and was the one to have snared the famous Dürer drawings from the former Lubomirski Museum in Lviv (*Polish Lwów; German Lemberg*) for the Führer, on the heels of the Soviet annexation of Western Ukraine. The German Historical Museum (DIM) in Berlin can now boast of an admirable Internet database documenting loot seized for the Linz project, although seizure details are not always explained. But more details are still needed about the seizures of treasure hunters like the *Künzberg Commandos* and other N.S. agencies. In some cases, their loot was eventually turned over to the ERR.

Much of the art loot processed by the ERR was found after the war in designated ERR repositories in Bavaria and Austria, most of which I have identified in an appendix to my ERR Survey. Often those same repositories also held loot from other agencies, and in addition, important German collections evacuated for preservation. Hence in the postwar restitution process, works of art displaced from different sources, and not all of it actual loot, became intermingled. To complicate tracing the fate of ERR art loot, many modern or contemporary paintings that came into ERR hands in Paris, especially valuable ones of French Jewish provenance, but that were deemed "degenerate" by the Nazi regime, were siphoned off to the thriving international art market in profitable sales or exchanges. Many of them were used to enrich the collections of Göring or other Nazi elites. Others were siphoned off to Switzerland, for example, to the Fischer Gallery

in Lucerne, while an estimated 500 were destroyed in the symbolic N.S. bonfire at the Jeu de Paume in July 1943, so vividly described by French curator Rose Valland.

In terms of art looting, the ERR's most blatant claim to the status of war criminals was the seizure of over 20,000 works of art from over 200 private Jewish collections in France and Belgium. That whole process was instigated by Reichsmarschall Herman Göring in part to enrich his own collection. Significant postwar restitution of the ERR loot was possible thanks to surviving ERR documentation about the seizure and destinations of art objects processed in the Jeu de Paume in Paris, and the codes that the ERR had affixed to all of the works of art they inventoried and photographed. Today as part of the Claims Conference ERR project, an object-level Jeu de Paume database is in preparation at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) combining data from +/-18,000 ERR registration cards (US National Archives) with the original ERR inventories and photographs of those collections now held in the Bundesarchiv, Koblenz. We hope the database will also include information from shipping inventories indicating the repository to which the items were sent, and the Munich MCCC numbers (with repository numbers) for the items retrieved and processed for restitution to their countries of origin through the MCCC.

The *Bundesarchiv* in Koblenz is now finalizing an exemplary and greatly improved finding aid for the restitution records left over from the Munich and Wiesbaden CCPs that now comprise what many of us know as *Bestand B 323* (TVK). The *Bundesarchiv* plans to put the new inventory on its Internet site, linked to full text images of the entire record group, parts of which have already been digitized for the Claims Conference ERR project. But we still need to integrate and compare surviving German wartime documents

(including those created by the ERR) within that record group that are now split between Koblenz and the US National Archives in College Park, MD (NACP), because the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) still lacks a comparable finding aid for their share of the MCCP files. I hope that the example of integrating data from the *Bundesarchiv* and NACP in our Jeu de Paume database, together with the descriptions I am providing in the ERR Survey and the new *Bundesarchiv* Koblenz finding aid, could be the start of further international cooperation in bringing together sources needed for provenance research on displaced art from the N.S. regime. The increased opening of French records, as described for the first time in my ERR survey, together with French plans for digitization of key files, and the projected NARA internet access to the OMGUS (RG 260) component of MCCP and WCCP restitution records, are further steps in this direction. Much more description still needs to be done on the American side, however, to reintegrate components of restitution records, now located on opposite sides of the Atlantic.

The newly launched database on the website of the German Historical Museum, compiled by an agency of the German Federal Ministry of Finance (BADV), correlating MCCP art registration cards – known as “property cards art” – and photographs from the BADV collection, is another example of a constructive starting place for more cooperative endeavors. I am hopeful that NARA will be able to provide digital copies of the MCCP property cards and photographs held in NACP that are now missing in Koblenz and Berlin, so that they may be integrated in that new MCCP database. I have found more of the MCCP property cards art in Paris that had accompanied restitution shipments to France. The Bremen database compiled fifteen years ago on the basis of MCCP property cards in Koblenz for objects returned to the USSR might also be a candidate for integration.

Indeed, we must not neglect Soviet losses in our discussions here in Prague. Across the European continent, the ERR also plundered considerable art on the Eastern Front, but in the Soviet Union they did not find world-class masterpieces in private Jewish collections similar to those they sequestered in France. Nor did they have the same caliber of knowledgeable art specialists to identify and catalogue the Bolshevik paintings, Orthodox icons, and archeological exhibits that they plundered in the East, although they did bring out with them some Ukrainian specialists as hostages to help. We may not find the same detailed item-level inventories that the ERR prepared in the Jeu de Paume. Yet, in Koblenz (B 323), I did find some ERR inventories of Russian icons that they had shipped to Bavaria from Pskov and Novgorod. The cultural monument registration cards that the ERR prepared in the early years of the war in Soviet lands recorded entire buildings with only occasional detail about individual works of art; many remain in Moscow and I found more in Vilnius. But from the Eastern loot, we do not find any photographic albums with confiscations comparable to those they prepared for the Führer to celebrate ERR seizures from France.

Today, the Russians are understandably as concerned as the French to document their losses and locate more of their cultural treasures that might have survived the war. First, to substantiate the record of plunder in the East and South of Europe, however, we have to piece together the surviving, but widely scattered, ERR operational reports, along with the rough inventories and shipping lists for the treasures they transported to their various Bavarian art repositories. We have to realize that there were necessarily different priorities and different patterns of plunder on the Eastern Front, where the only small private or Jewish-held collections were found in western areas annexed

to the USSR in 1939. Hence, unlike in France, the ERR looted art was primarily from state institutions, where often the ERR found only less valuable remains that Soviet authorities had not been able to evacuate or destroy under Stalin's scorched-earth orders, especially in some provincial repositories.

Some scattered lists and inventories nonetheless survive among ERR files and those of competing German agencies involved in cultural plunder. But the more serious problem in countries of the former Soviet Union is that the records of the cultural treasures that were found after the war or restituted from the West have long been classified, and only in the last few years have specialists had access to even a part of those records. This past February at a German-Russian conference at the DHI in Moscow (sponsored by the Dresden Gallery), was the first time I have heard a Russian scholar report any figures or details from Soviet sources for restitution of art and other valuables from American, British, and French authorities in Germany. Those newly opened sources appear to be a part of the Soviet equivalent to the US records for items restituted to Soviet authorities in the Munich and Wiesbaden CCPs. When matched up with other documents, they may provide new clues to identify looted items that survived and came back to the USSR, even if they were not always returned to the state repositories from which they were plundered. Given postwar problems in war-torn Soviet lands, and then the long Soviet denial of Western restitution, and the fact that many items returned to Soviet authorities never reached their home institutions, these new sources may suggest a scandal parallel to the French MNR collection. Much careful research lies ahead to determine accurate details regarding looted art from Soviet collections and its fate. I plan extensive research in Moscow this summer myself in that recently declassified series.

Access to archives in Eastern Europe, and especially the former Soviet Union, has improved tremendously since I started my research and compilation of archival directories there in the 1960s. In Ukraine, starting in 1990, I was among the first to appraise and report about what has turned out to be the largest surviving complex of ERR records, with files from the ERR plundering activities all over Europe, and especially with key reports about ERR operations in Belgium and the Baltic countries. Those files are now being scanned in connection with our ERR archival reconstruction project. Arrangements are underway to include a small segment of ERR files now in Moscow that came there from Minsk after the war, having been shipped with a 54-wagon train filled with over a million books collected in the ERR evacuation center in Ratibor (now Polish Racibórz) in Silesia. We also hope to include the even smaller complex of ERR files in Vilnius, although so far none of those appear to involve documentation on art looting.

Many Russian restitution-related records that do involve looted art, however, are still off limits, even to Russian government specialists in the Ministry of Culture and Academy of Sciences, which makes it very difficult to accurately assess Russian wartime losses, let alone the trophy foreign-owned art now in Russia and Ukraine. Archivists in the Russian Ministry of Defense Central Archive in Podolsk (outside of Moscow) have told me that I will never see in my lifetime the records of the Main Political Administration of the Red Army (GlavPUR), which are known to contain many documents concerning the retrieval and transport of plundered Russian cultural valuables, along with the trophy art and other treasures the Soviets plundered from Germany and Eastern Europe. Even Stalin's orders for the plunder and transport of cultural valuables by the Trophy Brigades (along with factories and wine) are still classified in the former Communist Party Archive (now RGASPI).

Growing out of my long preoccupation with archival finding aids in the former USSR – Russia, Ukraine, the Baltic, and other countries, I continue to emphasize the need for archival description. Even in countries where there are fewer problems of access, such as in the United States, there are still serious problems of “intellectual access.” Many national archives, including my own American ones, I believe, could do much more in this respect – not only in making more documents accessible on microfilm and digital copies on the Internet, but also in being sure those documents are better described in a way to facilitate their retrieval by researchers, and especially provenance researchers. OMGUS post-WW II restitution records have long been open in the United States, and are now even destined for Internet access, but as I have found in my ERR Survey, they are still not always adequately described for optimal “intellectual access” (as our Chair, Michael Kurtz, has heard me complain before).

As represented here on our panel, we now have crucial new vistas for access to long-closed French restitution records, thanks to the new 2008 French archival law that lowered the period of closure (about which we will hear today from my French colleague). I appreciate that over the past two years, in connection with my ERR Survey, I have been one of the first to be permitted to search and describe many of the ERR-related components in the *Quai d'Orsay* collections. And earlier this spring, I was one of the first to see their elegant new archival home in La Courneuve, easily accessible on the metro from Paris. Those archives still badly need more detailed finding aids, before they can be opened for researchers to benefit from what we call “intellectual access”.

Physical access and intellectual access, to be sure, always need to go hand in hand. I fear that even with our own ERR project,

our sponsors are not putting enough emphasis on providing adequate funding and staff arrangements for professional description. Government officials and private funding sources involved with archival appropriations, it appears, always want to cut corners when it comes to the production of detailed finding aids that would guide researchers, and now especially provenance researchers, to the documents they need.

Here I can comment only much too briefly on the archival experience and perspectives gained in tracking down remaining ERR files and documentation regarding the fate of the ERR loot. I hope that my monograph (still in preparation) on the ERR and the postwar retrieval of their archives and their loot will help researchers utilize the documentation we have collected. The Jeu de Paume database being compiled by my colleague Marc Masurovsky, due to be launched later this fall, will also greatly improve access to the related documentation from that appalling ERR operation.

Having become better acquainted with the most voluminous related archives and relevant research facilities in the United States, Germany, France, the Benelux countries, the UK, Russia, and Ukraine, I have many more specific recommendations for further international research cooperation. Our meetings here in Prague, together with the contacts here developed, can only be a start, because we need much more time together for discussion and planning than our panel today provides.