

Actes numériques du colloque

« Où sont les bibliothèques spoliées par les nazis ?

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

23 et 24 mars 2017, Paris

# Paris-Berlin-Paris

## The retracement of one route of Nazi-looted books from France and the way to bring them back

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Les contributions enrichies concernant les livres spoliés et déposés dans une quarantaine de bibliothèques françaises sont rassemblées dans :

**Où sont les bibliothèques françaises spoliées par les nazis ?** Presses de l'Enssib, avril 2019.

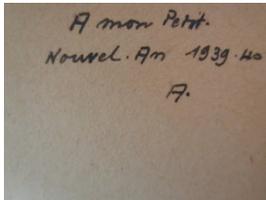
<https://presses.enssib.fr/catalogue/ou-sont-les-bibliotheques-francaises-spoliees-par-les-nazis>

Script for "Where are the libraries that were looted by the Nazis? Identification and restoration: a work in progress", Paris, 03/24/2017.

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## Paris-Berlin-Paris

**The retracement of one route of Nazi-looted books from France and the way to bring them back.**



One of my main objectives connected to this conference was the return of several Nazi-looted books we discovered in our stock. Books that were looted from several French ministries and a parish register from the village of Verpel in the Ardennes. I'll try and take the return of these books as an example to show you one way of accomplishing what the research of Nazi-looted assets of any kind is essentially all about: restitution.

The library I work at, the Central and Regional Library of Berlin, is not very big, not *very* important, at least if you compare it to the likes of the Bibliothèque National, and for many years, stretching even beyond the Washington Conference in 1998, it had perceived itself as uninvolved in the topic of Nazi-looted books.

This changed when in about 2002 a colleague of mine recognized looted books of the German Social Democratic Party in our stock, and it is thanks to this man, Detlef Bockenamm, who kept bringing the subject up to his superiors, kept digging in the archives of the library and simply did not let go of the matter, discovering more and more looted books from various sources. He uncovered for instance that in 1943 the library had bought more than 40.000 books from the City of Berlin, books that had been looted from the last homes of Berlin's Jews before they were deported to Terezin, Minsk, Auschwitz and so on. The dedication you see on the screen was found in one of these books – "A mon petit, nouvel an 1939/40 –A."

So since late 2009 the library has been trying to conducting a systematic approach to check, register, research a stock of roundabout one million books printed before 1945 for Nazi-loot and return it whenever possible to where and to whom it belongs. For this purpose two people were hired on short term contracts, the historian Peter Prölsß and myself.

The challenge for us in the very beginning was to make sense of the vast amount of data that accumulated. We had to look at each and every book individually, record the marks of provenance and keep track of the people and institutions we were able to identify as possible previous owners. There were no best-practice methods on how to actually do this so it was a process of learning by doing. We soon realized that we would need a database – so we built one. The use of the library's catalogue was out of the question for technical reasons anyway, but also because a catalogue has a different objective than what we needed. An OPAC is concerned mainly with the content of the work it describes and is aimed towards the patrons of the library while we are concerned with the provenance of the object and are looking for people who are in most cases not even aware that our library exists.

The initial approach was a relational database built with MS-Access that separated the recorded data into three groups:

- A description of the object/ the book, mainly to find it again in the stock
- Detailed descriptions of the marks of provenance contained
- Datasheets on the people and/or institutions that left these marks in the books

To publish the names we found in the books, we basically made a print-out in pdf-format and put that online.

We have since evolved this concept into a database with a fronted that is not only accessible online, but also indexed by search engines. The idea being that we publish all the marks and names that we find online in a way that enables people to easily find us and get in touch with us. We of course also actively research provenances, but it is a very time-consuming work, and we have found far too many names to be able to do this in every case - up to now we have found roundabout 8.000 different names and we are still very far from checking all the books that need to be checked. This concept is working reasonably well, in many cases we were able to return looted books to people who contacted us referring to entries in our online database.

As a result of this we have meanwhile, since early 2016, further evolved into a cooperative effort. Since many Nazi-looted libraries got scattered after 1945 or even before, the same provenances can be found in many different libraries today, so it makes sense to share research and information. To date we are six libraries all recording our data into one database. We already were able to make several joint restitutions.

Now how did we apply this practice to the books returned to France? We found them in a depot of our library, full of thousands of old books that had never been entered into the active stock of the library. When we look closely at what we found in them, we'll see how important it is to pay attention to every small detail and to record even marks that seem to be meaningless at first sight.



This residue of a label was on the back of one book, inside there were some old handwritten shelf marks, but no stamp or bookplate that would indicate the previous owner. All that's eligible is an "A". We could not make sense of it until we found this on another book:



a preserved shelf mark label of the library of the French ministry of the exterior. You can see from the size, the outline, and the 'A' that it is an identical label to the one that was removed, and now certainly also the other marks made sense.

Now if we take a look inside the books we find something else



– handwritten numbers in pencil, fifteen, scrawled quickly on one of the front pages. We found numbers like these in many books, the denomination ranging from 1 to 209. Through notes in the acquisition journals of the library we were able to prove that these numbers refer to the vendor of the books, the *Bergungsstelle für wissenschaftliche Bibliotheken* which translates to Salvaging Authority for Academic Libraries.

Over a period of just a few months from the summer of 1945 to early in 1946 this small department of the newly established post-war Berlin magistrate collected and redistributed more than a million books from all over the city, without consideration or care about their provenance as part of the *Wiederaufbau*, the so called “rebuilding”. Cultural life should go on again as soon as possible in Berlin, and for this it was also necessary to restock the city’s libraries, which had relocated many of their books to Silesia or Czechoslovakia. So the magistrate determined that all assets that were either “ownerless” or belonged to the Nazi party or its members were now property of the city, and this included libraries and books.



The *Landesarchiv Berlin*, the government archive of the Federal State of Berlin, holds the files of the *Bergungsstelle* which we digitized in cooperation with the archive and published them online at [www.bergungsstelle.de](http://www.bergungsstelle.de). According to the files, the number 15 indicates books taken from Eisenacher Straße 11-13 in Berlin. At this address was a House of the Order of the Grand Landlodge of the Freemasons of Germany until the building was confiscated in 1935. Later this building was used by the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt* (Reich Main Security Office, RSHA) to store and sort looted books from all over Europe. The idea was to create a “library of the enemy” to “get to know the spiritual weapons of the ideological opponents” as Franz Six described the purpose of this library. Six was at that time head of *Amt II* of the RSHA, the department for *Gegnerforschung*, ‘enemy research’. We have found books with the number 15 in them from the libraries of Jewish communities, masonic lodges, political parties, catholic monasteries, intellectuals, artists et cetera.

Only a small percentage of the books stored in this depot were still there at the end of the war when the *Bergungsstelle* came to collect them, according to the files around 50- 60.000. Most had been relocated as early as summer of 1943 to castles in former Czechoslovakia and to Terezin. Another part of the books were destroyed in an air raid in November of 1943. (*Reference to Grimsted if she talks about it*) But many can still be found, and because many of these books continued to be redistributed again and again, they can be found all around the world, we just have to look.

I think this example shows perfectly how much we can learn from a simple handwritten number, but also that to do this properly, to unravel the history of a book's provenance, we have to pay close attention to detail. This is time-consuming work, especially if you take into account how many books have to be checked with a keen eye. It did not help at all of course that we waited more than 60 years to do something.

Now do we have a fair chance to do this right and are the efforts especially in Germany regarding the return of Nazi-looted assets sincere?

If you look at the situation in Germany regarding research in this field in libraries, you'll see that there are currently a couple of dozen institutions in the whole country who are doing provenance research in one way or the other. The people working in this field are in close contact with each other and for a couple of years now there is a working group that meets twice a year. All the researchers involved are exactly that, they are involved and therefore very dedicated to find and return Nazi-looted books.

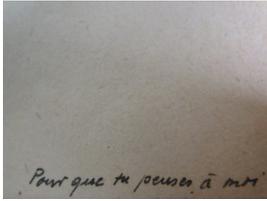
But of course, that's just the short list of positives. The fact is that most libraries are not checking their stock, and there is no legal requirement for them to do so. If they are, the people doing the work are usually there on basis of a temporary employment, restricted to a timeframe of usually around two or three years because then the external funding from the German Lost art Foundation runs out. Also, many still have not realized that this is an issue that affects them.

The head of the German Library Association *Deutscher Bibliotheksverband* Barbara Lison recently stated that German libraries are suffering from a lack of resources and could therefore not afford to do provenance research, and also said that most public libraries did not have books printed before 1945 in their stock anymore anyway.<sup>1</sup> While the first is simply a question of priority, the second claim is of course simply false. But claims like this do not raise eyebrows in a political climate that is moving further to the right again in Germany but also around the world. The notion that 'Germany paid its debts' is rooted firmly in large parts of our society, along with the thought of "Zero hour" and of course antisemitism, racism, xenophobia.

I think it is important to put the research for Nazi-looted assets of any kind in this context, because we always have to keep asking ourselves: why are we doing this? Of course the reason is one of ethics, of morality. If you have something Nazi-looted in your possession, it is not simply something that was taken from someone to deprive them of the ownership. The looting was part of planned destruction of ways of thinking, of cultures, of people. The dispossession of Jews was an intrinsic part of the Holocaust. To not make every effort to at least return these objects now is simply not an option. Especially if you take into account the positive effects restitution can bring, first of all of course for the heirs, families and also the persecuted institutions. We can enable them to connect with their history. We can return memory. And as a side note we can also allow ourselves to better understand our history and the history of the institutions involved in the looting that are still profiting from it today. We can show that we will not forget but that we will always remember.

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<sup>1</sup> Schnackenburg, Alexander: Auf den Spuren der Gestapo. In: Weser Kurier, March 4th, 2017. [http://www.weser-kurier.de/bremen/bremen-kultur-freizeit\\_artikel,-auf-den-spuren-der-gestapo-arid,1561371.html](http://www.weser-kurier.de/bremen/bremen-kultur-freizeit_artikel,-auf-den-spuren-der-gestapo-arid,1561371.html) (Retrieved 03-21-2017)



The dedication I showed you in the beginning does go on at the end of the page: "Pour que tu penses a moi" -for you to remember me.

Thank you very much.