## The Theft:

## The Greatest Robbery of Cultural Property in History

Pursuant to their racial ideology, in 1933 the National Socialists began gradually to deprive Jewish citizens of their rights, seize their assets, eradicate Jewish culture, and eliminate evidence of Jewish participation in German and in European culture generally. This theft, along with the murder of millions, was carried out by Germans, who looted rapaciously in Germany and in countries they annexed and occupied, as well as by the governments and nationals of countries throughout Europe that were allied and in collaboration with Nazi Germany. Thus, Austria, Belgium, Croatia, France, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Romania, Slovakia, were also involved. [1] [2] [3] [4]

For Alfred Rosenberg, the founder of the pseudo-scientific Institute for the Study of the Jewish Question, the theft served to collect information about the Jews and Judaism, while Otto Kümmel, head of the German museums, sought the return of German art to Germany. But ultimately simple greed prevailed.

Top art and museum experts identified major Jewish collections in countries the Nazis planned to occupy in preparation for looting raids in the homes of Jewish collectors to take place parallel to the invasions. In addition to outright property confiscation, in the wake of persecution, large numbers of Jews were forced to sell cultural property to finance flight and/or emigration plans for their survival. Cultural property was also seized by Nazi officials after Jews were deported to concentration and extermination camps. The Nazi government auctioned some of the most valuable pieces of art, both within Germany and elsewhere in Europe, to obtain foreign currency, while distributing other objects to government offices and public institutions. Adolf Hitler and Hermann Göring amassed huge collections of art, prompting others in the Nazi elite to collect as much as possible, thereby creating a Nazi market in looted art throughout Europe. [5] [6]

In Western Europe, the methodically executed theft was carried out principally against major Jewish private art collections and libraries, as well as Jewish institutions. With the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, the theft was performed chiefly against museums, libraries, archives, and palaces, given the already nationalized collections and the notion that Jew = Bolshevik. [7]



## **ESTIMATES OF CULTURAL PROPERTY THEFT**

The theft of cultural property such as paintings, sculptures, ritual Judaica, libraries, archives, musical instruments and scores, involved millions of objects. The Western Allied Forces returned a significant number of plundered items to their rightful owners or to their countries of origin. Nonetheless, many objects could not be recovered. At the 1998 Washington Conference on Holocaust-Era Assets, art historian Jonathan Petropoulos estimated that approximately 650,000 paintings were seized throughout Europe, of which around 200,000 remain missing. However, this is only a guess. Greater accessibility to archival information will help provide more accurate estimates. [8] [9] [10] [11]

## THE GEOGRAPHICALLY DISPERSED ARCHIVES OF THE THEFT

At the end of World War II, the archival records of the cultural looting were geographically scattered, due both to the enormous territory occupied by Germany and its allies, as well as efforts by the perpetrators to move their looted property away from the front lines and to hide evidence. In the immediate postwar years, the Soviet Trophy Brigades essentially took all archives and properties (cultural or otherwise) that were in their path. Documents relating to cultural looting are found today in many institutions across numerous countries. Thus, the records of the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (ERR), the main German looting agency, can be found in over 40 archives in some 10 countries. Records of the Holocaust in general are in 2,316 archives in some 60 countries, but these do not include hundreds, if not thousands, libraries, archives, auction houses, galleries, banks, etc., worldwide that contain records on Nazi cultural plunder. [12] [13]















[3] — ERR-Lager Paris, Bildermagazin (1942/1943 ca.).

in Prague, Czechoslovakia.

Members of the ERR, Kiev, Ukraine.

[5]

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Göring and Hitler admire a painting.

[6]

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[7]

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A page listing the archives confiscated by the ERR in occupied USSR territories.

Confiscation of Jewish Sabbath candlesticks,

Processing of looted cultural property in one of the

M-Aktion camps (either Austerlitz or Bassano).

Warsaw, Poland.

[9]

—
ERR personnel sorting libraries in Riga, Latvia.

[10]

—
Looted paintings at the Jeu-de-Paume Museum,

[11]
—
Miscellaneous objets d'art, ERR depot in Neuschwanstein, Germany.

Map showing the activities of the ERR in occupied Europe.

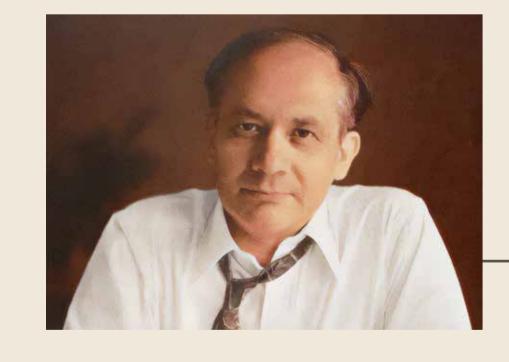
[13]

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Restitution of property after the war, postwar period.

[14] — Raphael Lemkin, 1950.







Raphael Lemkin (1900-1959)
coined the word *genocide* in 1944
and was a key force behind the United
Nations Genocide Convention of 1948.
He recognized that attacking a culture
was a way of committing genocide,

but he failed to have cultural erasure included in the definition of genocide, even though cultural theft regularly precedes or accompanies genocides. Although the study of the Holocaust focuses on the murder of the six million Jews, cultural theft and attempts to erase the culture of the victims played an enormous role.



