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# The Role of Displaced Book Collections in Culture

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## ABSTRACT

SHOULD RARE BOOKS TAKEN during times of war as “trophy” by the enemy be restored to their original owners? This is a controversial but increasingly important issue for special collections libraries worldwide. Attempted restitution brings about a new set of losses and problems. Any rules or policies for such restitution will, at least for the time being, include complex legal and political considerations. It is important to consider that while the value of an individual book might not be so high, the same book as part of a collection might be very valuable. The German book trade and libraries, and their relation to the Soviet Union after World War II, is a major case study in the problems surrounding restitution of cultural property—in particular, the lack of bibliographical citations for much of the material. Librarians should consider the creation of a bibliographically sound, all-European register of rare books.

As strange as it may seem, the problem of cultural valuables displaced as a result of war holds a very low ranking among the cultural issues discussed. Yet, the very roots of this problem are related to basic cultural archetypes, compared to which all legal and political aspects are secondary. Originally, victors treated captured “cultural valuables” (as we call them now) as material valuables and, at the same time, as sacral ones. In modern civilization cultural and sacral values have merged in many ways: the fruits of other people’s spiritual culture are their sacred objects, so to appropriate such objects means, consequently, to defeat the enemy’s spirit. That is why the issue of “trophy” objects of art and books is so important to the tolerant mentality that will not stand either victory or defeat in the spiritual sphere.

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Although in practice museums of international significance can hardly get established without violating the property rights of defeated peoples, in theory the thesis stated in the international law about the inadmissibility of forced removal of cultural valuables undoubtedly prevails—at least, it is universally recognized that they should not be treated as purely material valuables. On the other hand, a full-scale physical restitution of the war trophies accumulated for centuries and particularly after World War II is hardly possible without new losses and offense. But, this burning issue has recently been the subject of wide speculation so often that it is not worth discussing it here in detail.

It is far less that another specificity of the issue of displaced valuables is recalled and, no matter from which side it is approached, it remains contingent: it is finite. It is finite and the number of the valuables is calculable, so that, compared to the entire cultural wealth of humankind, it is not so large. Even if it includes unsatisfied claims of the previous centuries, the share of indisputable valuables will greatly exceed the number of controversial ones. And, if the number of disputable items is finite and limited, the solution of the connected problems is possible. Of course, it will take time to work out such a solution. Obviously, it will be framed not by a simple and unambiguous formula, but rather by a more or less (it is desirable, certainly, not excessively) complex system of rules. After all, it will come to the point when legal and political aspects will stop being the problem of interest to humankind as a whole. Private disputes will remain and will be settled in legal form, and probably there will be new findings to which—in one way or another—the existing system of rules will be applied, while the political objectives, which are currently being tackled in connection with the issues of the displaced valuables, will cease to exist. What happened will not change, but the topicality will stay in the past, and this certainly is wonderful.

However, before all this happens, there is reason to study the issue from another angle: What role do the displaced collections, as they are at present, play or will they play in culture? This time we shall talk about book collections: First, because it is natural for a librarian, and secondly, because in some sense they are more indicative than artworks. In the case of artworks, there are very valuable objects that are few in number, and in all or most cases there is a possibility to come to an agreement on a certain form of compensation (ideally—on a return). Books, however, are very rarely as valuable as masterpieces of fine art, so that only large collections are valuable, while the value of every separate volume is relatively low. The collections as a rule split, thereby losing their value, and since simple and barbarous decisions like “leave everything” or “immediately return all,” as it is already obvious to everyone, are not possible. All negotiations become much more complicated.

Thus, the major value of displaced books is in the fact that they previously were and virtually remain the constituent parts of *collections*. Since, with reference to World War II, the matter mainly concerns libraries of the Ger-

man-speaking countries, this context is even more obvious and significant. From the point of view of libraries, Germany is a very peculiar country. First of all, it is the homeland of book printing. For many decades it was “supplying” the whole of Europe with its masterpieces of book printing, and consequently it was the main center of book trade and collecting of books of the early period. In a majority of other countries (except Italy) more or less valuable book collections of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries are almost exclusively the result of purposeful effort, while in Germany they formed naturally. Besides, Germany was the country with the largest number of universities in Europe, and that is why this is where the large collections of books of more or less public character started to develop pretty early, in contrast to those of monastic or aristocratic libraries. The multiplicity of cultural centers along with the disastrous consequences of the Thirty Years’ War resulted in decentralization of the German library system. As it is well known, there is no all-Germany national library, *per se*, and previously the Bavarian Royal Library to some extent compared to the world’s largest book depositories. Other German libraries are much smaller, but then they supplement each other, each having a special feature. Not without reason the national bibliographic center of sixteenth-century books is located in Gotha, and the center of seventeenth-century books is in Wolfenbuettel; both are former capitals of small states. Lastly, in the eighteenth century the central geographic situation of Germany in Europe and the cultural hegemony of France resulted in a curious situation. The German libraries accumulated collections of both national and foreign—especially French—books, while German books were poorly disseminated in other countries. For example, what we know about the libraries of Polish magnates is that, even in the Austrian territory of Galicia, they contained a majority of French books. In the countries to the West of the Rhine, there were more readers—and consequently collectors—of German books. The increasing number of French bibliophiles were interested in books mainly due to their elegance, and German books were not remarkable in this sense. Germany again very naturally turned out to be the central depository for the all-European book culture but, to stress it once again, it was a dispersed depository. The wealth of the collected matter in various languages could only compete with the ones of the countries beginning to join the European culture—America and Russia before the catastrophe of 1917.

The defeat in World War II left the German libraries with vast, often visible to the unaided eye, breaches. But the losses were not unsystematic. First of all, parts of libraries that were recondit or strategically prepared for evacuation were moved to the USSR. The Soviet specialists from “trophy teams” had their own logic; the distribution of the books among Soviet libraries was not accidental either (this question is not properly studied yet). Thus, to the Soviet Union came not a random pile, but rather a strategically organized selection of books. Vicissitudes of their further fate to a large extent ruined this wholeness, but not completely. In any case we deal

with remarkable fragments of large collections in the aggregate modeling of the history of the European book from its emergence until at least the French Revolution.

In any case, the fact that the collections spent a considerable part of their life in Russia is culturally significant. At the same time it is important to note that their fate was very different: a lot was unclaimed and even perished, but a portion of the books, also sizable, gained a new life in Russia.

To a certain extent, the displaced books filled up the gaps that the Soviet authorities themselves had made in the culture: when books arrived by cargo carloads, censorial supervision and ideological control were less strict. Perhaps if not for the war, the scholars in this country would never have received many important theological and philosophical texts of previous centuries. This is not a justification of illegal actions, when the cases were illegal indeed, but rather a reiteration of the statement that residence in the Russian libraries is a significant detail of the biography of books and book collections.

That is why even in those cases when the necessity to return books and book collections to their previous owners is absolutely unquestionable, the matter cannot be reduced to just this fact. To return the books of the Sarospatak Reformed College in Hungary could have been possible on the basis of preliminary lists and a publication of a catalog prepared by the specialists of the All-Russia State Library for Foreign Literature. However, the creation of this catalog did not precipitate anything: the return as it was remains an event of the future. The catalog has not so much put information on these publications into scientific use as it has recorded a certain stage in the Sarospatak collection's biography. Such experience should by no means remain unique. It is regrettable that some owners when discovering parts of their former collections try to "skip" the procedure of bibliographical description, thinking that it makes no sense at all. An opportunity to return a collection is, at the same time, an opportunity to comprehend what has happened to it, and every reasonable human being should take interest in this.

If the question of the physical restitution of the collection in accordance with the Russian law cannot be on the agenda now, the necessity of presenting its scattered parts to the scientific world is only more obvious.

In other words, displacement of book collections in space, even violent and barbaric displacement, is in itself an essential fact of culture. To neglect it and pretend that it has no significance is to impoverish human culture while, on the contrary, to record and comprehend this fact means to enrich culture.

But the question can be posed more profoundly, although at the same time more practically. As it has just been stated, the displaced book collections as a whole turned out to be a *model* of the world book collection. In a certain sense the existence of such a model is a unique chance for devel-

oping a world bibliography, which is not to be missed. Currently, there are few bibliographies of historic book studies. Only in one large European country—in Germany—the basis of the national book repertory of the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries has been established. And even there, out of the number of completed publications only the united catalog of publications of the sixteenth century meets the minimal requirements of modern bibliography, although the work on the union catalog of the works of the seventeenth century is going rapidly and a large part of it is already accessible via the Internet. The national summary of old printed books described *de visu* is a pride of Hungary, and Spain and Poland possess indexes created by the great effort of the bibliographers of the old school. All the rest of old printed book production either has a fragmentary bibliography—regional, subject, etc., where the smaller the fragment the more chances for its description to come into the world—or is dissolved in gigantic catalogs—the National Union Catalogue, the British Library Catalogue, or Le Catalogue général de la Bibliothèque Nationale de France, for example. Moreover, there is no catalog or at least index of the Venetian books of the sixteenth century! The saddest thing is that all projects of creating international catalogs or indexes would stall at the early stage. The world union catalog of incunabula was started in the 1920s and stopped because of World War II; was an attempt to renew the work in the 1950s did not advance further. Index Aureliensis—a united index of sixteenth-century books—is also not completed, and the international projects on later publications are not even mentioned (if not to take into account the CERL database, which is being composed as a mosaic made of small pieces and like any electronic database will hardly ever provide a full overview). Paradoxically, the most complete bibliographic data on European books remains NUC, achieved by the cut-and-paste method, that does not set forward (also impossible for such a large-scale undertaking) any scientific objectives. Furthermore, the union catalog of incunabula and the Index Aureliensis were planned in the epoch of ideological confrontations. That is why they did not include Russian libraries, and for the Index, even the libraries of Eastern Europe were excluded. The losses of World War II distorted the picture even more. The bibliographers of the All-Russia State Library for Foreign Literature working with international catalogs not once came across the indication that the books they were holding had been marked as losses. Sometimes the situation is even worse: it is more often that the librarians at the All-Russia State Library for Foreign Literature find books that were not even introduced to the initial card file. On the other hand, it is clear that a European united catalog of at least the sixteenth century is vast and close to impossible: many hundreds of thousands of titles in hundreds of libraries should be included, and there should be a uniform description (which does not exist in NUC and CERL) that is rather in-depth to provide a reliable identification of any copy (this is missing in Index Aureliensis).

As a reminder—after the expatriation of books from German collections, in Russia appeared a new book wholeness representing the books of all Europe, and not just those of a single country. Their numbers, compared to the collections of all of Europe, are quite visible. Altogether, the USSR received, as known, about 11 million volumes—this is less than the collection of the British Library alone. Supposedly, a quarter of them were looted; this leaves us 8 million (in reality, it is probably more). About 90 percent of them are from the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century—and they can be described as provided within the parameters of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation. About 800–900 of the remaining volumes require a scientific description. Of course, in terms of quantity this is only a small share of European old printed books, but it becomes a whole, not an isolated fragment, especially when combined with the fact that among the displaced books there are a great number of books not described in the bibliography. At that they can be described in accordance with a uniform methodology, and the depth of the description will be no less profound than the set standard of describing old printed books. In short, while these books are still in Russia, there is an opportunity to cover a large lacuna in the international bibliography and in some areas to naturally start one.

Is this goal achievable? Unfortunately, there is no definite answer to this question. Yes, such a project would be tens if not hundreds of times more compact than an all-European register of old printed books, but it also will require a considerable expense. Here, at least, every step should be considered and weighed. To look into one of the sides of the objective: it is out of the question to have a go at such a task with available resources—bibliographers working in our libraries and the funds that the Russian government can currently allocate. To launch such a project, we would have to recruit—from all over Russia—a new generation of trained bibliographers who, at the beginning of their career, will do work requiring a high qualification and who will receive an adequate reward. But training a sufficient number of such specialists will in itself be akin to a revolution in Russian bibliography. After all, the course of work will be linked to certain legal questions and the destinies of people who will probably have to demonstrate their good will and postpone the encounter with their books. That is why such a project should not be abandoned halfway or extend for an indefinite span of time, which is often the issue with purely scientific projects. Thus, it is better not to give promises that might be broken; there is a strong probability that reality will offer a chance to be contented with a series of small steps, part of which will gradually merge into one whole, and some will be impossible to make. Nevertheless, the technical difficulties are not the main thing. It is essential to move forward in the right direction and remember that neither legal nor political nor even morally faultless solutions to the problem will be complete if they do not enrich the common human culture.