

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kenneth D. Alford. *Allied Looting in World War II: Thefts of Art, Manuscripts, Stamps and Jewelry in Europe*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2011. 288 pp. \$39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7864-6053-3.

Reviewed by Seth Givens (Ohio University)

Published on H-War (January, 2012)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey

Kenneth D. Alford's *Allied Looting in World War II* builds on a historiography that focuses on the theft of cultural objects in Europe. Alford, a retired banker, has firmly planted himself in a debate among military, cultural, and art historians, as he has previously authored four works on German and American looting in the Second World War, with another due early next year. This current book adds to Alford's fifteen years of research and writing, and focuses on a new collection of cases of U.S. Army servicemen stealing priceless objects in Germany and Austria. By outlining these occurrences, Alford shows the chaos of the war's closing months and illustrates what happened when some soldiers liberated treasures "they were not supposed to touch" (p. 4). In this way, Alford's book focuses on a timeless question: who owns what at war's end?

The book is divided into six parts, each focusing on separate looting cases. Alford builds the first four around particular American servicemen and their crimes. In companion with the narrative of each theft, there are chapters on each of the four soldiers that give background to the men's character. Despite this, Alford places more emphasis on the stolen objects than the individuals' motivations for stealing. To him, the men simply stole for greed and profit, and did so in violation of "military law and American morality" (p. 4). While four of the six case studies revolve around key individuals, the last two break from the book's mold. Part 5 is a medley of looting stories, and part 6 tells of the already well-documented Hungarian Gold Train about which Ronald Zweig has already written in *The Gold Train: The Destruction of the Jews and the Looting of Hungary* (2002). The cases that Alford chooses range from dubiously small to significantly large: from the theft of a stamp collection to the disappearance and recovery of the Hungarian Crown treasure. The book, though, is not a comprehensive look at American looting throughout the war. The studies focus mainly on spring 1945, when U.S. units were east of the Rhine. Geographically, Alford offers a modest cross

section of looting cases predominately in Germany, from the border town of Saarbrücken to the dead-center city of Kassel and Berlin in the East. The majority of the cases, however, are contained to Thuringia, Bavaria, and western Austria, where many of the Nazi Party members' estates offered even the most reserved American servicemen tempting pickings.

Built entirely on archival evidence, Alford's book focuses only on soldiers "who 'appropriated' priceless hoards of paintings, sculptures, rare books, gold, platinum, and silver, and other items of great value," rather than the ordinary GI who took battlefield souvenirs, like Nazi flags and Lugers (p. 3). Because of this, Alford's book highlights the theft of cultural treasures. The average GI took only what he could carry, but the rear-echelon serviceman had no such limitations. Overwhelmingly, the soldiers of Alford's cases were officers posted to civil affairs, intelligence, or medical detachments. Given their rank, job, and ability to ship large objects home, these men had not only the opportunities to loot but also the education to know what they were stealing. In the closing months of the war, Alford's opportunists absconded with such priceless objects as Lucas Cranach, Albrecht Dürer, and Raphael paintings; the *Hildesbrandlied*, the oldest example of writing in the German language; and Frederick the Great's handwritten manuscript. Given the size of the U.S. forces in Europe, these officers took advantage of their positions and slipped between the cracks to steal for personal gain.

*Allied Looting in World War II*'s primary strength is illuminating how casualties of war extend beyond the dead and wounded. A separate war often takes place inside conflicts, and the important treasures that define a cultural past are vulnerable. While the book's tone may be one of exasperation and finger pointing, especially at the Monument, Fine Arts, and Archives Division, it offers insights outside of simple thefts. The case studies show a complex interaction between victor and vanquished, as

some Germans were complicit with American appropriations in order to curry favor. They also show the U.S. Army's elaborate mechanisms for returning cultural objects to Europe, even decades after the war. It was the depth of the army's investigations and the amount of documents they produced that allowed Alford to write such detailed case studies. Alford's main objective, then, is to add complexity to the faultless "greatest generation" narrative, and to remind readers that some of Europe's treasures remain missing.

The work is not without shortcomings, however. As the back cover claims, Alford "reveals the shocking extent of looting by Allied forces, exploring their thievery against the Germans and others." Yet the book fails to show such extent. The study presents less than twenty examples of soldiers' looting, all Americans, a deficient number of cases to argue that any such behavior was epi-

dem. If anything, Alford unknowingly proves that U.S. soldiers were not as rapacious as he implies. Had he provided context for American looting by comparing it to the other Allies—the Red Army's institutionalized pillaging, for example—the reader would have a better backdrop against which to view the cases. Alford has done well to search archives in the United States and Germany for records long forgotten, but the complete lack of secondary source material on looting, and the absence of analysis, a conclusion, or an overt argument, hurts the book's utility. The reader who is unfamiliar with the generalities of the Allied occupation and the specifics of looting will have difficulty making sense of the information provided. To that end, for those who wish to read about cases that augment research on missing cultural treasures, they have found the right book; for those who want something deeper, they will unfortunately have to look elsewhere.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

**Citation:** Seth Givens. Review of Alford, Kenneth D., *Allied Looting in World War II: Thefts of Art, Manuscripts, Stamps and Jewelry in Europe*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. January, 2012.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=34255>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.