Allied restitution of Nazi stolen cultural property can be called the antithesis of Nazi state-sponsored plundering. Popa’s and Farmer’s books are telling stories of great adventure into the quest to return stolen goods to rightful owners in post-war Europe.[1] The two stories complement as well as intersect each other and show a different facet of German cultural history.

The official phase of Nazi confiscations began in Austria after the March 1938 Anschluss. Art confiscations in Poland began in the fall of 1939, and shortly thereafter, Nazi bureaucratic agencies were established in the newly occupied territories for the purpose of confiscating artworks and library collections. Jews remaining in the “Greater Germany” were required to register their personal property with the local police. As a result of these Nazi actions, Jews began to liquidate their property; most were either sold or exchanged for cash in order to secure escape to other parts of Western Europe or the United States.

In order to accommodate the thousands of pieces of Nazi plundered artworks located in over 1,500 repositories in Germany and Austria found at the end of World War II, American occupation forces established temporary facilities known as collecting points in former German warehouses and Nazi office buildings. The Property Division of the Office of Military Government for Germany, U.S. Zone (OMGUS) Headquarters administered the recovery and restitution efforts at the centrally located collecting points. Additionally, a Monuments, Fine Arts, & Archives (MFA&A) branch, with assistance from Allied military staff, began to restitute the objects to its country of origin or, in some instances, to the rightful owner. Beginning in mid-1945, the Marburg, Munich, Wiesbaden, and Offenbach collecting points served as immediate safe storage repositories. Allied recovery and restitution activities related to the artworks included the implementation of a large-scale program of moving these objects from storage caves and mines to one of four collecting points.

At the collecting points, the MFA&A officers and staff identified artworks, artifacts, and library materials, and made preparations for their return to their home repositories. The MFA&A refurbished former German buildings in order to establish the collecting points for both protection and custody of the found artworks. For greater efficiency, the MFA&A assigned each collecting point with a specialty: the Wiesbaden Central Collecting Point identified and restituted German-owned materials from the former Prussian State Museums, the Staedel Institute of Frankfurt, and the local museums of Wiesbaden; the Munich collecting point restituted those artworks to owners residing in foreign countries and to the Bavarian State Museums; and the Offenbach Archival...
Depot was devoted primarily to Jewish religious items, books, manuscripts, and archives. By 1949, the Allied collecting points restituted over ten million objects including paintings, sculpture, and books to fourteen nations.

Popa writes an engaging narrative, covering five decades and involving numerous colorful characters including librarians, rare book dealers and buyers, and State Department officials. She effectively sets the story with the telling of how the manuscripts were taken out of Kassel for safety from Allied bombings, only to be stolen from its hiding place. She continues by describing the creation of Das Hildebrandslied and the Willehalm Codex in the fourteenth century, and explains the books’ respective importance in German history and German culture. The Hildebrandslied is the oldest heroic poem in German literature and tells the story of Hildebrand, a warrior hero. The Willehalm Codex is an illuminated manuscript, secular in nature, telling courtly stories. In the succeeding chapters, the story’s highlights of the missing manuscripts truly begin to unfold, from the rare book dealers and buyers in New York to rare book collectors in California to State Department investigators in Washington to the Kassel library director, Wilhelm Hopf, who continued the hunt for the Hildebrandslied and the Willehalm Codex until he died. Without giving away the ending, it is an adventure story of leads and dead ends; frustrations and excitement lasting from 1945 to the 1990s. Popa captures the intensity of the search and subsequent restitution, and effectively keeps the reader’s attention because one is not sure if the missing link was the correct one and if the item identified is the Hildebrandslied or the Willehalm Codex.

Popa’s scholarly research and ability to fit the archival pieces together is evident in her detailed text. However, at times the prose becomes too fluffy and reads more like a historical fiction or a spy novel. Many of the archival resources cited by Popa are now available at the University of California, Davis Library. Unfortunately, some factual errors do exist. For example, the first operating Allied collecting point was in Marburg and six months later Munich, Wiesbaden, and Offenbach collecting points opened. U.S. Army Captain Seymour J. Pomrenze was the first director of the Offenbach Archival Depot and solely responsible for the refurbishing and staffing of the Depot, not Captain Isaac Bencowitz. Lieutenant Craig Hugh Smyth (USNR) was the director of the Munich Collecting Point from June 1945 to April 1946, not Bernard Taper. Taper was an art intelligence officer for the MFA&A with the assignment of locating and recovering objects. Theodore Heinrich was not Walter Farmer’s direct successor at the Wiesbaden Collecting Point. Captain Edith Standen directed the collecting point from 1946-1947, followed by Heinrich. Last, Francis Henry Taylor and David Finley were the architects behind the Roberts Commission beginning in 1942, whereas William Dinsmoor consulted on archaeological issues for the Commission. The best detailed account of the Roberts Commission can be found in Lynn Nicholas’s The Rape of Europa (1994). The Roberts Commission records are available at the National Archives in Record Group 239.

Popa’s footnotes are detailed, and in many instances, the English translation of the German sources and text are provided. The photographs of individuals involved and the facsimiles of the Hildebrandslied and the Willehalm Codex are clear and give a sense of importance to the manuscripts. Popa supplies the reader with bibliographical sketches of those involved in the hiding, stealing, and recovery of the missing manuscripts. The bibliography will be found most useful to those who want to read more about the restitution of stolen cultural property.

In 1945, Walter Farmer had a front row view of Allied recovery and restitution of discovered hidden loot. Farmer’s book is part biographical and part eyewitness documentary, taking the reader with him as he examines the discovered loot transported in a multitude of U.S. Army trucks. The U.S. Army assigned Farmer to the MFA&A in 1945 specifically to oversee the rehabilitation of the Landesmuseum in Wiesbaden as a temporary Allied repository for stolen cultural property. Farmer referred to his directorship of the Wiesbaden collecting point as a “personal crusade that had increasing focus and meaning” (p. 43).

The Wiesbaden Central Collecting Point held artworks from German museums, artworks confiscated from German nationals, and other artworks subject to restitution. Before the war, the Landesmuseum housed both fine arts and archaeological collections, and during the war, after the Nazis removed the fine arts collection, it housed the Luftwaffe’s barracks and machine shop. In summer 1945, Capt. Walter Farmer became the collecting point’s first director. The first shipment of artworks arriving at Wiesbaden included cases of antiquities, Egyptian art, Islamic artifacts, and paintings from the Kaiser Friedrich Museum. The collecting point also received materials from the Reichsbank and Nazi looted Polish liturgical collections. At its height, Wiesbaden stored, identified, and restituted approximately 700,000 individual objects including paintings and sculptures.
The highlight of the book is in chapter 4 when Farmer’s success at the Wiesbaden Collecting Point turned controversial. On November 6, 1945, he was ordered by the Military Government office to select at least two hundred German museum-owned artworks and ship them to the United States to be stored at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. Reportedly, General Lucius Clay had several reasons for issuing the order: to hold on to the art in exchange for wartime reparations; to hold the paintings in trusteeship for the German people and return the items once the nation earned the right to retain ownership; fear that the Soviet Union could steal the masterpieces; and entitlement of the American people to view the masterpieces. Farmer was outraged. He called this “blatant looting” and “systematic looting” of the Kaiser Friedrich Museum and the Berlin Nationalgalerie by the U.S. Army (p. 65).

Farmer contacted his MFA&A colleagues to make his grievances known, and on November 7, 1945 he penned what is now called the “Wiesbaden Manifesto.” This document states that the removal of the German museum-owned pieces violates international law, and as Army personnel, the MFA&A should refuse to take part in this plan, since it “establishes a precedent which is neither morally tenable nor trustworthy”; and “even though these individuals [MFA&A officers] were acting under military orders, the dictates of a higher ethical law made it incumbent upon them to refuse to take part in ... the fulfillment of these orders” (p. 58). Risking court-martial, twenty-four MFA&A officers signed the document.

Under the code name “Westward Ho” the 202 paintings left Germany on November 16, 1945 arriving in New York City December 6. Consisting of 45 cases on two railway cars, the “202” included works by Cranach, Drer, Raphael, Rembrandt, Vermeer, and Manet. The paintings traveled to major American art museums from 1946 to 1948 including the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, instigating public disapproval and negative publicity between U.S. government agencies (State and Treasury Departments), and the American museum community. By April 1949, the U.S. Army returned all 202 paintings to Germany.

Farmer remained as the collecting point’s director until 1946, when his colleague Captain Edith Standen took over followed by Theodore Heinrich in 1947. In his concluding chapter, Farmer focuses on the 1980s and 1990s and the speculation of many missing pieces remaining hidden in Europe and in the former Soviet Union. He recognized the increased interest in looted art, and discusses art provenance research projects in which he assisted. Additionally, Farmer in retirement campaigned against journalists’ reports that the MFA&A and the U.S. Army allegedly stole the looted artworks.

Farmer’s story ends with several intriguing appendixes including an essay discussing the political motivation of the Roberts Commission who established the MFA&A in 1943; the Wiesbaden Manifesto (typescript), a list of collecting point contents in 1946, and the custody receipt for the “202” paintings; and photos of the collecting point, 1945-1946. Today, these documents and photographs are available at the National Archives at College Park, MD in RG 239 and RG 260 (Ardelia Hall Collection).

Popa’s and Farmer’s books will appeal to a broad range of readers, especially German history students. Both books will fill the dearth of scholarly literature on the Allied effort to recover and restitute stolen cultural property.

Note

[1]. The German title of Farmer’s work is Die Bewahrer des Erbes: Das Schicksal deutscher Kulturgüter am Ende des Zweiten Weltkrieges

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