

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Richard Z. Chesnoff. *Pack of Thieves: How Hitler and Europe Plundered the Jews and Committed the Greatest Theft in History*. New York: Doubleday, 1999. 325 pp. \$27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-385-48763-4.

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## If you want to understand the invisible, look carefully at the visible. The Talmud

Albert Camus once said that behind National Socialism's murderous intention there lay a metaphysical resolve to crush any humane and moral outlooks remaining after the catastrophe of World War I.[1] Enlightenment concepts of decency, honesty, trust between people, and hope for mankind must (if references to them were permitted to exist) become quaint reminders of what people once thought possible. Although Hitler failed to make Germany the most powerful nation in the world and Jews an extinct people, he may have succeeded beyond even his imaginings smashing European idealism. Richard Chesnoff raises this possibility in a book about spoliations of European Jewries during the years of the Third Reich and about post-World War II attempts by survivors to recover assets.

Chesnoff writes that postwar justifications for wartime thieveries began immediately after the war ended, on both sides of what later became the Iron Curtain. At the Nuremberg war crimes trials, prosecutors made clear that National Socialist strategy before and during the war was to simultaneously confuse and terrorize Jews, so that resistance, let alone the possibility of Jews destroying their property rather than handing it over, never threatened the system's smooth functioning. Postwar, liberated French Jews found that "The Vichy Office for Jewish Affairs, the CGQT, ceased to exist and was reconstituted as a restitution-claims office—with many of the same bureaucrats who'd administered Aryanization...." (p. 149.) In Eastern Europe, Jews heard warnings from Polish nationalists that full investigations of

expropriations and demands for assets now in the hands of non-Jews could have even more serious repercussions, meaning renewed anti-Semitic violence.

This was no exaggeration. In one instance, when survivors returned to Poland, in July 1946, "forty-two Jewish survivors were set upon and slaughtered by a mob who [sic] attacked a refugee hospice and accused the Jews sheltered there of ritual murder (fifty others were wounded)." (p. 179) Similar incidents occurred in this country, which once had a population of 3.3 million Jews.

Chesnoff begins his book with the disclaimer that "This book is not intended to be an encyclopedic record of what was arguably the greatest theft in history." (p. 2) He continues, "But while I believe that this book is authoritative and accurate, in the end it is a journalist's report, an attempt to provide as wide an audience as possible with some sense of the massive injustice that was spawned by the worst single crime of this century: the Holocaust." (p. 3)

These are reasonable positions for Chesnoff to take, and not just because the literature on spoliation during World War II expands almost by the month. The subject is, in fact, far more complex than can be described in a book limited to Jewish experiences. Bluntly put, fascists found it difficult not to loot each other, even when they they joined forces to loot Jews. Thus while Vichy's French fascists robbed Jews, Berlin performed virtuoso feats of spoliation taking control of French industries. Bratislava possibly noticed the degree to which Berlin

exploited Slovak agricultural and forest resources, but Slovakia's clerical-fascist regime concentrated on what it could best comprehend and deal with, how to steal from Jews. While Nazi forces in the Soviet Union turned loose native racists on Jews, Berlin forcibly imported millions of disposable Slav laborers.

Nor was official Washington unduly concerned (Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau, Jr., being the exception) that William McKittrick, the American who headed the Bank for International Settlement, based in Switzerland, consorted with Reichsbank officials to launder stolen gold – from the national treasuries of occupied countries as well as from Jews. McKittrick continued his despicable activities to finance the Nazi war effort after the United States entered the war. That hundreds of thousands of Americans died fighting the Third Reich in North Africa and Europe seems not to have affected him.

The first country Chesnoff takes up is Germany. He provides a summary account of how Berlin developed models for spoliation, most of which is already known. There is no hint that spoliation of the Jews had something to do with the Reich's economy. But during prewar years, money for rearmament had to come from somewhere (taxes could not provide it), and in 1936, in one of the few instances in which he put pen to paper, Adolf Hitler looked for cash influxes to "A law making the whole of Jewry liable for all damage inflicted by individual specimens of this community of criminals upon the German economy, and thus upon the German People".[2]

Chesnoff is more original in discussions of seven countries allied with or occupied by Germany, five neutral countries, and the Vatican. (In connection with the last, he quotes Father Andrew Greely with devastating effect: "The ancient principle of Catholic moral theology applied then, as it does today: silence presumes consent"[p. 249]). Chesnoff argues that whether among communist atheists in Poland or the faithful in Rome during the postwar era, ideology might be dead, but greed was very much alive, life was about cynicism, and receivers of stolen property or property left for safekeeping held tight to what they had. Not only former neighbors of Jews but entire governments offered up every conceivable excuse not to satisfy rightful claims.

In sheer tragi-comic ingenuity, no other group matched Swiss bankers, who repeated, like parrots, that searches of account records yielded little information on Jewish deposits. The Swiss further required documentation that an individual who might have had an account had actually been put to death in a gas chamber.

Finally, Swiss officials, dedicated to social stability and businesslike efficiency, counseled that attempts to learn more about accounts opened by murdered Jews would only cause friction between Jewish and non-Jewish populations within the country.

On the other hand, what was to done in the 1990s when senior members of the United States government and Edgar Bronfman, who had enough dollars to engage battalions of lawyers and lobbyists and thus keep the issue before the public indefinitely, entered the fray? Who knew what actions financiers in New York City or the State of New York might take that could demolish Swiss banking activities in America? Berne and Zurich might even lose business and their own francs.

For the Swiss, it turned out to be the wiser policy to settle, which they eventually did for 1.25 billion dollars. They had earlier stated firmly, unequivocally, without question, based on their reputations for integrity and their disdain for falsehoods, and on their historic dedication to human rights, that at best only 32 million dollars could and would be paid survivors.

In a chapter that can only be characterized as distressing in the extreme, Chesnoff describes internecine Jewish struggles over prospective restitutions from Swiss banks, German insurance companies, French museums, and whatever can be recovered from a rabble in Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia that continues to hold on to what it acquired. Attorneys, secular Jewish organizations, religious Jewish organizations, and survivors have eagerly sought (and still do) to elbow each other out. Chesnoff quotes retired Israeli Supreme Court Justice Moshe Bejski: "I'm ashamed to admit that [a "War of the Jews"] has already begun". (p. 281)

Again, Chesnoff nowhere suggests that his is the definitive work on the subject of spoliation during World War II. There are Nuremberg documents, documents in the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library, documents in the Harry S. Truman Presidential Library, and documents in the National Archives of whose existence we know but whose contents have not been fully analyzed. They go unmentioned in this book. Unanswered questions also remain about Operation Safehaven, the American operation "charged with tracking the flow of contraband Nazi money into Switzerland and other neutral countries."(p. 224)

Nor has enough attention been paid non-Jews who would not stoop to stealing from desperate people or to denying heirs properties of murdered persons. In the

Catholic countries of Eastern Europe, some people believed in Catholicism to such an extent that, whatever their parish priests might have said to do or not to do, they judged for themselves what constitutes moral behavior. All honor to their memory.

#### Notes

[1]. Primo Levi also commented on this phenomenon in *The Drowned and the Saved* (p. 106). Levi observes, “useless violence, as an end in itself, with the sole pur-

pose of inflicting pain, occasionally having a purpose...” characterized Europe during the years of National Socialism.

[2] See *Documents on German Foreign Policy* series C. Volume V, No. 490.

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