

## *The Book Thieves: The Nazi Looting of Europe's Libraries and the Race to Return a Literary Inheritance*

BY ANDERS RYDELL. TRANSLATED BY HENNING KOCH  
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THIS TITLE is the first attempt, in a popular account, to describe the process of and understand the motivations behind the Nazi looting and destruction of libraries, private book collections, and archives before and during the Second World War. The subtitle (an add-on by the marketing department?) attempts to add a dramatic note that is unnecessary, since the stories told have sufficient drama and emotion of their own. (In any event, the “race to return a literary inheritance” proceeds, in reality, at a snail’s pace.) Though sometimes repetitive, this book is gripping as well as compelling.

Anders Rydell is a Swedish author who directs the coverage of arts and culture for 14 newspapers in a major Swedish media group. The book is translated from the original *Boktjuvarna: Jakt på de försvunna biblioteken* (Norstedts, 2015).

The author sets the scene by describing how, in 1932, the Nazi party newspaper published a declaration by 42 German professors demanding “that German literature be protected against ‘cultural Bolshevism’” (p. 3). It followed this with the publication of a blacklist of authors to be banned when the party came to power. Once it was in power, allies in the Deutsche Studentenschaft revived a student practice from the 1920s of organizing book burnings of “un-German” literature.

So began the purge of libraries, bookstores, and private book collections in Germany, especially those associated with Hitler’s political opposition: Pacifists, Jews, Freemasons, Socialists and Communists. A disturbing aspect of the story is that many booksellers and librarians, as well as students and professors, cooperated in these intellectual purges. One large student raid was against the Institute for Sexual Studies in Berlin, which had worked to promote the rights of women and sexual minorities; here the library

and archive were carted away and the building vandalized. Also attacked were popular libraries established by workers’ organizations and trade unions; they lost more than a million books.

The author’s conclusions from this phase are particularly interesting given the evidence he has presented. “Nazis were not, properly speaking, the sort of ‘cultural barbarians’ they were purported to be, nor were they anti-intellectual. They intended to create a new sort of intellectual being, one who did not base himself on values such as liberalism and humanism but rather on his nation and race” (p. 12).

The next chapters show a transition from the period of power consolidation to Germany’s war on and occupation of its neighbours, and the destruction and systematic looting of their libraries that followed. Poland is estimated to have lost 15 million out of its 22.5 million library books, and in Russia up to 100 million library books were destroyed or looted. Book thieving was only a part of larger looting operations that included art collections. The Nazis made efforts to separate out the most valuable books for special treatment.

Responsibility for the thefts was divided between Alfred Rosenberg, the minister for the occupied Eastern territories as well as the Führer’s Representative of All Spiritual and Ideological Research in the NSDAP, and Heinrich Himmler, chief of German police including the Gestapo (Geheime Staatspolizei, or Secret State Police), which operated an “in-depth mapping activity of the enemies of the state” (p. 22). Himmler now defined the enemies of the state as pacifists, Jews, Bolsheviks, Freemasons, Catholics, Poles, homosexuals and Roma, among others.

Both men paid particular attention to Jewish libraries, for they realized that the theft or destruction of libraries is also the destruction of historical memory and thus an attack on a whole

people. One of the intentions of the looting operations was to establish research centres that would in due course provide evidence of a much-imagined Jewish-Communist conspiracy that was an obsession of the Nazi leadership. Hence archives of both groups were avidly sought out.

In succeeding chapters Rydell undertakes a study of the looting of libraries on a city-by-city basis: Amsterdam, The Hague, Paris, Rome, Thessaloniki, Vilnius, Prague and others. The stories vary from place to place according to local circumstance and personalities, and in each case Rydell supplies enough background to provide excellent context. He shows how local librarians or scholars were forced to participate in the destruction of their own collections, and also how they succeeded in resisting by hiding or spiriting away valuable archives or books. Also shown is how the transported libraries and collections were in some cases gathered up, and in some cases disbursed, in Germany. But for the most part millions of books were not catalogued at their new intended locations, or even unpacked until the war's end. Books of lesser value were sometimes sold by the German state to public or academic libraries whose administrators were aware that the monies paid would go toward "the solution of the Jewish question" (p. 287).

At the end of the war, some of the book collections and archives were found in safe locations. Some of these were "confiscated" by the Western Allies. Rydell notes: "Almost a million books were sent to the Library of Congress in Washington. Several large American

libraries sent delegations to Europe to top up their collections" (p. 274). Larger quantities were subject to "plundering" by Soviet forces and arrived in Stalin's archive or in Soviet libraries large and small. Other collections had been entirely lost, some to fire, neglect or bombs, or had been scattered to German institutions.

The author could have provided more background at the outset to show that the looting and theft of cultural artifacts is as old a human practice as it is a regrettable one. It is of course not limited to the Nazi or even fascist regimes. The looting or destruction of libraries and other cultural institutions goes back at least as far as 213 BC and has been undertaken by emperors (to wit, Xianyang Palace), religious fanatics (the libraries of Alexandria and Ephesus, as well as in the wars of religion in early Reformation Europe), and armies (British forces at the Summer Palace in Beijing during the Boxer Rebellion). It continues to the modern era with the shelling and destruction of the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina by Serbian forces in 1992 and the looting of the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad when U.S. forces failed to protect the building in 2003.

The book is indexed and footnoted but has no bibliography. It is not an easy read, but it is a compelling one.

~ REVIEWED BY RALPH STANTON

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## EX LIBRIS

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### *Golden Boy*

AS A DIGITIZATION volunteer working with bookplates in Rare Books and Special Collections at the University of British Columbia, I've seen my fair share of bookplate designs. However, while flipping through the collection recently, something caught my eye. Between the pages, I saw a splash of gold and a baby. Intrigued, I

paused and took a closer look at the bookplate of Alton Goldbloom.

Though the collection is heavily centred on 19th-century bookplates, Goldbloom's bookplate is clearly more modern. Printed in the 20th century, the bookplate features a stylized vertical print of a baby extending from a flower with an