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STG 2004-2005
Russia and Ukraine

On the Trail of Displaced “Trophy” Books during World War II and its Aftermath

Topic of Research and Countries Visited

The purpose of my trip was to further investigate displaced books from the imperial Russian palaces after WWII. The goal was to find more Soviet sources in St. Petersburg and at the three palaces. Verifying details of the fate of the books in Soviet hands and working to clarify some of the misconceptions in published volumes of Russia’s Lost Book Treasures was also a priority. Research was conducted in Russia and Ukraine.

Relevance and Contribution to Field

In Moscow I gave a presentation “Western Allied Cultural Restitution to the USSR in Occupied Austria and Soviet Trophies of Austrian Provenance.” I emphasized the British library restitution to the USSR from Austria, a topic unknown previously to both Soviet and Austrian colleagues, and hence of great scholarly and policy significant impact. Since my findings impact current negotiations for the restitution of Nazi-plundered Austrian cultural treasures still in Russia, they are of great interest to those pursuing negotiations in both countries. My paper is now being published in the conference proceedings in Graz. I plan to find an English-language publication outlet as well.

In Sudak, Crimea I attended a Round Table, “Libraries - Victims of War”—with PKG report “Recent Research on the Trail of Books as Victims and Trophies of World War II in Russia.” I was specially invited to the day-long round table by Ekaterina Genieva, director of the Foreign Literature library in Moscow (VGBIL). During the conference I also had a chance for meetings with many librarians from all over Russia and some foreign countries (including Ukraine and Croatia) who had been dealing with related questions of displaced cultural treasures. My findings are pushing Russian librarians and cultural administrators to be more open about locating and describing displaced cultural treasures in Russia and Ukraine from World War II.

Summary of Approach and Research Methodology

In St Petersburg I performed two weeks of research with research visits to palaces of Tsarskoe Selo, Pavlovsk, and Gatchina. My focus here was on finding documentation and new sources revealing displaced books from the imperial Russian palaces plundered by the Nazis during World War II. In 1946 the British restituted ca. 35,000 books from the three palaces to Soviet authorities in Austria, but information to that effect had never been published in the Soviet Union or post-Soviet Russia before my two articles came out in 2004. The matter still remains politically sensitive in Russia, tied as it is to much-disputed restitution issues. Many Russians have been very reluctant to admit Western (in this case British) restitution, and have still refused to admit the books were returned, saying instead the books were all plundered and destroyed by the Nazis or taken to the USA by the Americans. One of my approaches has been to try to check and verify in the three palaces titles appearing on sample British packing lists in preparation for restitution that I had found and copied in the National Archives (PRO) in London.

In the end I was able to visit all three palaces and meet with the librarians and other curators and/or deputy directors, but results were mixed. Gatchina was the most open: I found a warm welcome and wonderful cooperation from the deputy director, Valerii Semenov and his curatorial staff. Tsarskoe Selo was extremely difficult although I had previously known the library curator and had appropriate letters of introduction. It was

only the end of my second week that I was received by the deputy director for research and allowed to visit. While in Petersburg, I gave a filmed interview to a Petersburg documentary filmmaker who has been doing a series on the palace. He now is working on a film on the wartime fate of the books on the basis of my findings and related materials. Pavlovsk brought mixed success, where I had previously also known the library curator and one of the deputy directors. At first I was well received, despite the *remont* involving the library area

My big breakthrough was in access to the extensive relevant documentation in the Hermitage archive, and together with consultations with both archivists and librarians in the Hermitage Library. I hope to continue work there in the future.

I had extensive consultations with specialists in the Russian National Library who have been working with the identification of WW2 trophy books and others involved in tracking down manuscript sales in the 1920s/30s. Most important were meetings with the editor of the “Lost Book” volumes in the Ministry of Culture on-going series. By exchanging documentation I had found abroad with their own findings, I think I have finally been able to convince them that more books were returned to the USSR than they have so far admitted, and that it is possible to trace the migration of many books plundered by the Nazis.

In Moscow my research involved a combination of extensive consultations about my research and publications and examination of relevant archival sources in the Russian State Library (RGB), the Library for Foreign Literature (VGBIL), the State Public Socio-Political Library (GPOB), the Russian State Military Archive (RGVA, trophy holdings from TsGOA SSSR), as well as the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GA RF).

Summary of Research Findings and Preliminary Conclusions

I have found extensive evidence of postwar restitution to the USSR by the western Allies, which I can much better document. I found, identified, and in some case was able to photograph, many of the books on the British packing lists had in fact been returned to the former Russian imperial palaces. All of this shows that despite Soviet and now Russian denials, British and American cultural restitution from Austria did take place. Contrary to the introductions published in the recent Russian Ministry of Culture series, I have now been able to document at least preliminarily that the books came back to suburban Leningrad in 1946. It now appears that those books not currently held by the palaces, including some the Russians are claiming are still lost, were dispersed by Soviet authorities to other libraries after their return to the USSR.

Since I have found more documentation regarding Soviet withdrawals from the palaces and transfers to Antikvariat and Mezhdunarodnaia kniga during the First Five Year Plan, I am also beginning to document that the mechanism of transfers and sales during the 1928–1933 period. By collecting images of book markings and registration data used in different periods, I am able to determine more about the route of Russian imperial palace books now in the USA, and show many of those taken by the Nazis were returned to the USSR after the war by the Western Allies.

In the Austrian case, by documenting U.S. and British postwar restitution, I am able to suggest precedents for the Russian restitution of Nazi-plundered cultural treasures from Austria. By tracing migration routes, my research is leading to more possibilities of location and identification of lost and displaced cultural treasures resulting from the revolution and World War II.

Suggestions for Research Agenda for the Scholarly Community

We need more collaborative research and publications with Russian colleagues in various countries regarding displaced (trophy) cultural treasures resulting from World War II and the Holocaust and more general attention to legal issues involved in cultural restitution. My own research and publications in several countries are opening previously taboo topics and restricted sources in Russia and other former Soviet republics, and are providing new data and understanding of many related issues, but I still need more research and writing time with funding to pursue.

I already planned a AAASS 2004 session on this subject with leading US librarians and a panel at the ICCEES conference in Berlin in 2005. We now need to expand coverage before projected publication, but already have a proposed publication outlet.

Recommendations for the US Policy Community

Because Russia has been so slow to admit and to identify foreign displaced cultural treasures brought to the USSR after World War II, we need more funding for collaborative research and publications with Russian colleagues, together with those from in various affected foreign countries, and especially those affecting victims of the Holocaust that are still in Russia.

Many relevant international archival issues came up with my participation in the International Congress on Archives (ICA) in Vienna in August 2004, and I am encouraging colleagues with whom I participated there (from Russia, Poland, and other western countries) to reconsider many of these issues. The United States was represented on my related panels by the Hoover Institution. Guidelines for resolving claims and restitution issues are still lacking on the international level, and I am trying to encourage others to work in that direction. We need more general attention to legal issues involved and to international guidelines that would assist cultural restitution.

More follow up is needed from the US State Department-sponsored 1998 Washington Conference on Holocaust Cultural Assets, and cultural restitution issues generally. The Commission on Art recovery under the World Jewish Congress needs to be commended for its efforts in this area, but needs encouragement to keep up its website (closed down in 2004) with translated texts of international (including Russian) legal instruments.