

REZENSION

**Elisabeth Gallas: »Das Leichenhaus der Bücher«.  
Kulturrestitution und jüdisches Geschichtsdenken  
nach 1945**

*Elisabeth Gallas: »Das Leichenhaus der Bücher«.  
Kulturrestitution und jüdisches Geschichtsdenken  
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*Reviewed by Amir Engel.*

**Redistribution or Reconstruction? To Elisabeth Gallas's book**

Elisabeth Gallas's book, *Das Leichenhaus der Bücher*, concerns one of the forgotten, terrible, yet curious episodes in the history of the Holocaust. It tells the story of books, Torah scrolls, and other Jewish ceremonial objects that were shipped during World War Two from the German-occupied lands to Germany for the use of an institute for the study of the so called "Jewish question" in Frankfurt am Main.<sup>1</sup> The National Socialists must have realized that only by preserving the memory of the Jews - a wildly distorted one, to be sure - it could justify its brutal actions. This is therefore the cruel dialectic of Nazi ideology in action: as Jewish lives and entire communities were destroyed, their cultural heritage was preserved.

So it came to be that after Germany's capitulation in 1945, many hundred-thousands of books and other cultural possessions, which were robbed from Jewish learning institutions, private owners, and community centers, were piled up in massive heaps in the American zone, not far from Frankfurt. For the Americans, this was hardly the most pressing issue on the agenda, but it nevertheless had a special significance. General Lucius D. Clay, the top administrator of the American occupation intervened personally in the matter. Jewish organizations from around the globe vied to control the destiny of the books and the process of their redistribution. By the mid-1950's this project was complete. Many of the books, Torah scrolls, and ceremonial objects found a new home, mostly in Israel and in the United State, but also in South Africa, in Europe and in Latin America. Some were returned to their original owners.

The ultimate objective of Elisabeth Gallas's book is to describe this process of redistribution and discuss the intellectuals who lead it. Both avenues of the study present novel findings. The work undertaken to obtain the Jewish books and their redistribution is largely unfamiliar. Gallas's perspective on the work of the intellectuals in question offers fresh insights. Taken together, the book adds depth to our growing understanding of postwar Jewish and German Jewish history.

<sup>1</sup>See for example, Juliane Wetzel, "Institut zur Erforschung der Judenfrage," ed. Wolfgang Benz, Hermann Graml, and Hermann Weiß, *Enzyklopädie des Nationalsozialismus*, Stuttgart 2007.

As Gallas shows, committees in France, Britain, Mandatory Palestine, and the United States were formed in order to assume responsibility for the Jewish books and other cultural possessions. One of the influential and interesting groups was “The Committee for the Treasures of Exile” [Va’ad Ozrot Hagola], which was based at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and led by some of its most distinguished scholars, including Gershom Scholem, Martin Buber, Ben Zion Dinur, and Samuel Hugo Bergmann. (p. 192) The name of the committee elucidates its vision of Jewish culture and as such it perfectly exemplifies the ideology of the project as a whole. As is made clear by its name, this committee effectively argued that the Jewish cultural possessions were indeed treasures to be coveted, even if their real value was not monetary but spiritual. Thus, with an unconscious nudge to the German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder, the committee asserted that the treasures belong, not to a specific person or institution, nor to humanity, but to the nation that gave them life, to the Jewish nation. Moreover, by designating these treasures as exiled, the committee was making another unapologetic and rather radical claim. It essentially claimed that the temporary sojourn of Jews in Europe and elsewhere was a thing of the past and that homecoming has already begun.<sup>2</sup> This was the case not only for the Jews but also for their cultural possessions. Like the Jewish people, their coveted cultural objects, their books, priceless Torah Scrolls, and ceremonial objects were also to be extricated from their exile and brought “home,” to where they “truly belong”, to the Land of Israel. Other Jewish organizations made similar claims and indeed, by the end of the redistribution project, many of the stolen books and other objects were shipped to the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and to the National Library of the young Israeli state.

In order to legitimize their claim, however, Jewish organizations needed to overcome several serious legal obstacles. Most significantly, their demands contradicted some of the most intuitive principals of restitution, namely, the notion that governments negotiate not with the citizens of other countries but with their governments. According to this principle, books that were, for example, stolen from Polish civilians in Poland should be returned to the Polish government at the end of the war, not to any citizen or organization. The notions that a certain Jewish organization may represent the Jews everywhere required some maneuvering. Gallas clearly describes how the different Jewish organizations, for example, The Committee for the Treasures of Exile, sought to overcome these difficulties. Essentially, she shows that they hoped to trump the legal complications with a moral argument. Thus, in his letter to the British High Commissioner to Palestine, the first Chancellor of the Hebrew University, Judah L. Magnes, wrote the following. “We feel that it is a requirement of historic justice that the Hebrew University and the Jewish National and University Library be made the repository of these remains of Jewish culture.” (p. 192) In this case, Magnes in other words argued, “historic justice” was to counter legal procedure.

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<sup>2</sup>It should be interesting to compare this concept of Exile to the one discussed in Yitzhak Baer’s famous book, which carries the word in its title and originates from a similar context. See, Yitzhak Baer, *Galut*, New York 1947.

Much to the chagrin of the leaders at the Hebrew University, the Office of Military Government of the United States (OMGUS) chose the New York based committee, titled “Jewish Cultural Reconstruction inc.” (JCR inc.) as the representative organization for the purpose of handling the looted books and other cultural objects. The JCR was backed by all the most important American Jewish organizations of the time. It was founded and led by Salo W. Baron, the first professor of Jewish history in the United States. Hannah Arendt was the executive-secretary of the organization and Lucy Dawidowicz was a key figure in its operations in Germany. Like other organizations, The Committee for the Treasures of Exile quickly teamed up with the JCR once they received formal recognition from the American government. A testimony for the intense and productive collaboration between these organizations is clearly evident in the published correspondence between Gershom Scholem and Hanna Arendt.<sup>3</sup> It is also discussed in detail by Gallas.

OMGUS had very specific reasons to cooperate with the JCR. For one, it seems that the American government was not especially inclined to recognize a Zionist organization from Mandatory Palestine as the legitimate heir of the murdered European Jews. As an incorporated organization under American law, on the other hand, the JCR seemed to be a much more natural element in the American postwar effort on the continent. Thus, ironically, even though it was supposed to represent the Jewish people as a whole, the JCR was chosen precisely because it was an American organization. Nevertheless, this choice was understood as a Jewish victory. For, whether the Americans wanted it or not, with this decision they recognized the Jewish people, perhaps for the first time in history, as a legitimate international entity.

The bulk of the JCR’s operations took place in a large storage facility on the outskirts of Offenbach am Main, which was confiscated from the chemical conglomerate I.G. Farben. This facility, known as the Offenbach Depot, was ran by the American Army and commanded by a Jewish American officer of Eastern European background by the name Seymour Pomrenze. As the central Allied collection point, it is estimated that 3 million books and other movable objects that were looted by the German army across Europe were brought to this facility. These books were identified in Offenbach, sorted, and then shipped to destinies across Europe in what must have been one of the most complex restitution projects in history.

To a certain degree, this was also the case with the Jewish books, manuscripts, Torah Scrolls and Ceremonial objects that were found in the American zone. They too were brought to the Offenbach Depot identified and some were sent to their original owners, especially in Western Europe. However, for the most part, the Jewish books were heirless. Especially in Eastern Europe, there was no person or institution that could claim these books for itself. The Communist governments of the Eastern Block, furthermore, were hostile to the notion of private property and

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<sup>3</sup>Marie Luise Knott, ed., *Hannah Arendt / Gershom Scholem Der Briefwechsel: 1939-1964*, 1st ed., Berlin 2010.

suspicious of religious artifacts. The quickly emerging tension between the blocks would not have made negotiations easier. Thus, beyond the considerations of historical justice, it was on this point that the JCR was of service to the American authorities. By recognizing an organization as the legitimate representative of the Jews everywhere, the American government could relieve itself of the responsibility for many hundreds of thousands of unclaimed books and other objects, whose original owners were murdered or destroyed and whose governments were deemed hostile.

As Gallas keenly observes, one of the things that made this operation unique in postwar history was the fact that it was led and operated by trained scholars, most of whom were university professors. To a certain degree, this is to be expected. Scholars have the expertise required in order to sort books that were shipped to Germany from all the corners of Europe and piled in violent disarray in underground bunkers. However, it is important to note that scholars have also a vested interest in books. For scholars of Jewish history, this cache of books was a grim reminder of terrible atrocities but it was also an opportunity to obtain rare and special materials that may otherwise be lost. No less importantly, the scholars in question, as Gallas shows, understood this project as a struggle to preserve Jewish heritage in the aftermath of the catastrophe. Thus, whether consciously or not, the leading scholars working on this project placed themselves as the custodians and directors of Jewish history, which is, probably, the position all historians would like to assume but only rarely do.

Gallas's book is devoted also to ideological aspects of this immense cultural project. Whereas the first part of her book discusses institutional history, the second part aims to reconstruct the intellectual history of the project. Mostly, it sets to analyze its significance in the thinking of four well-known scholars that were involved in the project, namely of Hannah Arendt, Salo Baron, Lucy Dawidowicz, and Gershom Scholem. As Gallas shows, all four had unique positions over and against the events of the Holocaust. As so many other Jews lost their lives in extraordinarily cruel circumstances Arendt, Baron, Dawidowicz, and Scholem lived in relative safety. However after the war, they all came into close contact with the material evidence of the destruction. To them, the heirless books were monuments of distant communities that were all but completely destroyed. Yet their work was directed towards the future. In her book, Gallas explores the different notions of Jewish continuity, which they developed as part of their work on Jewish cultural restitution. She also discusses the ways in which these scholars negotiated the historical significance of the Holocaust. This problem was tackled mostly by Dawidowicz and Arendt, who famously devoted much of their later thinking and work to the Holocaust, its history, and its effect on western civilization.

With this dual approach, Gallas adds another fascinating perspective to our understanding of postwar developments. As she shows, Arendt, Baron, Dawidowicz, and Scholem did not operate in a vacuum. Their work on behalf of the JCR was also part of a more integral worldview; an attempt to come to terms with what had happened in Europe and to develop a vision of the future. However, it seems to me

that here, Gallas does not go quite far enough. She surveys some of the most salient aspects of her protagonists' thinking and discusses the institutions in which they worked, but she leaves the ideological and political context of the actual project mostly undisclosed.

The different parties to the negotiations, including for example Scholem, Magnes, Arendt, Baron, Clay, and Pomrenze, were motivated by different interests, were committed to specific ideologies, and were constrained by certain political realities. These variants are not fully explored in Gallas's book, and as a result the difference between historical facts and ideologically-constructed "facts" is at times obfuscated. Thus, for example, it may have been historically true that the books found in Germany were heirless. But, since the term "the Jewish People" means different things to different people, it is rather impossible to assert that, for example, the JCR represented the best interests of the Jewish people, or that the National Library in Jerusalem was truly the ultimate cultural repository of the Jewish books. For some, this was clearly the case. But others must have had a different idea about the "real location" of Jewish culture.

Gallas is aware of this complexity. She makes it clear that "the Jewish people" was represented by an entire cadre of Jewish organizations, each in a different way and towards different ends. Even among the two most influential organizations (JCR and The Committee for the Treasures of Exile) there were conflicts of interests and Gallas documents them carefully. In her book she mentions also Dr. Rafael Edelman of the Danish Royal Library, who presented the JCR and the Hebrew University with an official offer to create a center for Jewish learning in Copenhagen only to be rebuffed. (p. 172) Consequentially, the fact that the great majority of the books were shipped to Palestine and the United States reflects much less a historical reckoning than the worldviews of those who led the project and the outcome of their power struggles.

If this is so, it is imperative to critically observe the terminology used by the Jewish Cultural Reconstruction Inc. and its partners. Perhaps the term "reconstruction" does not quite describe the act of shipping books that were looted all over Europe to locations all over the globe. Rather than accepting it as a given, one could openly examine the nature of Arendt's, Baron's, Davidowicz's, and Scholem's work. In essence, I would suggest, rather than achieving reconstruction, these intellectuals were working to redistribute. In order to do so, they projected their conceptions of history onto the map of the world, and thus they created a new world-map. One might even suggest that by redistributing the looted cultural treasures of the Jews, they contributed to the creation of a new postwar order. Gallas discusses the postwar world-map of the Jews as it emerged from the redistribution of the books. However, it seems that she overlooks the fact that this world-map was more an invention of a small number of intellectuals than it is a historical reality. This possibility opens unexplored perspectives in the story of the lost, found, and appropriated books. Namely, it opens the possibility of seeing this affair not as that of a history of institutions, or of ideas, but primarily as an exemplification of the history of the struggle for a new postwar order. After World War Two, this struggle

was undertaken by unprecedentedly violent governments but not only by them. Strange as it may sound, also Jewish intellectuals took part in this struggle.

As a whole, Gallas's examination of the institutional and intellectual history of the project of cultural redistribution offers a new and fascinating glimpse into a world in transition. It shows that some people started to think and work towards continuation even at the immediate aftermath of an extraordinarily brutal war and in the shadows of an incredibly cruel extermination campaign. She also shows, ironically enough, that this project started in Germany. And her detailed analysis of the project itself also adds much to its understanding. In her work, therefore, she adds an essential layer to our understanding of one of the most decisive historical moments in recent history.

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***Author** Amir Engel is a research fellow at the Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main. He is working on a project about the construction of the notion "Jewish Mysticism" as it evolved in early 20th century German Jewish thought. His dissertation, completed at Stanford University deals with the life and work of the Kabbalah scholar Gershom Scholem. At Stanford he has also contributed to a study in Salo Baron's personal archive.*