

Books Reviews

The Nazi looting organisation and art after the Holocaust

By Jean-Marc Dreyfus

Looted art of the Holocaust is often in the headlines, but the very structure of looting still deserves further description, and this is what the German historian Hanns Christian Löhr proposes in an exhaustive book written on an institution unique in history: the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (ERR), the special taskforce of Reichs Minister Rosenberg, created in 1940, after the fall of Paris, by Alfred Rosenberg, the "theorist" of National Socialism. It organised the looting not only of paintings, but also of any kind of cultural artefact. *Kunst als Waffe* (Art as a Weapon) is the first detailed account of a strange administration that employed as many as 350 art historians across Europe.

Rosenberg had set out in his 1930 book, *Der Mythos des Zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts* (The Myth of the 20th Century) – a publication that sold a million copies thanks to the support of the Nazi party – his argument that an artist was creative only according to his "racial soul", making cultural production a firmly structured hierarchy, with "Indo-German" art at the pinnacle. Jews were characterised as mere parasites with no right even to possess this noble art.

Rosenberg was not appointed to Hitler's cabinet in 1933, but was charged instead with creating numerous institutes, the most notorious

Hanns Christian Löhr
*Kunst als Waffe, der Einsatzstab
Reichsleiter Rosenberg*
Gebr. Mann Verlag, 208pp, €49 (hb)

Kathrin Hoffman-Curtius
*Judenmord: Art and the Holocaust
in Post-war Germany*
Reaktion Books, 400pp, £35 (hb)

1,700m-long project to be built near the Chiemsee in Bavaria. It was never built, but Rosenberg used it as a pretext to assemble "educational material": works of art, manuscripts, archives, Masonic documents and church artefacts.

Started in Paris, the ERR soon moved to a head office in Berlin, and from 1941 expanded its operations to Eastern Europe, up to the Czarist palaces near St Petersburg. In Western Europe, mostly Jewish collections were systematically looted, including the treasures of the Rothschilds. In the East, public collections were raided, sorted and dismantled. Up to 22,000 artefacts were stolen, along with two million books. Löhr provides many details about the organisation and the sheer scale of its operations. He provides less information

readers with a general interest in the Third Reich, the Holocaust, or even the history of Jewish art collections. The fate of some specific works of art is described, but more attention is given to the organisation's structure and its rivalry with other looting bodies; for example, the team in charge of building the Linz art gallery that Hitler planned.

An interesting counterpoint to the book by Löhr is *Judenmord*, a fascinating work by Kathrin Hoffman-Curtius, first published in German and now made available in English. The author brings to light the little-known works of German art made in the 20 years after the Second World War, which address the Holocaust. Hoffman-Curtius handles both West and East Germany, explaining the denial of German guilt that stifled both countries. The production of Holocaust art was impeded by politics: in the East, the struggle against Formalism and the glorification of anti-fascism were formidable barriers against representing the murder of six million Jews. In the West, the near-total hegemony of Abstract Expressionism paradoxically had the same result.

Nevertheless, many artists tackled the subject of Auschwitz – some creating works in secrecy even before the end of the Nazi regime – although their works emerged only after reunification. Seminal to this argument is the triptych *Night over Germany*, painted by Horst Strempele in 1945.

The figures are taken from widely distributed photographs of concentration camps then available, a practice that was common for artists at a time when more detailed information about the Holocaust was not yet available.

Hoffman-Curtius draws attention to the work of Lea Grundig, a Jew and a communist who had survived the Holocaust in Palestine and returned to Dresden in 1947. Her series depicts the fate of European Jews, including those of the Warsaw ghetto uprising. As with many artists whose works are described in *Judenmord*, Grundig's art is influenced by late German Expressionism.

After the first burst of activity in the late 1940s, there were few Holocaust representations in the 1950s, although some projects were developed for the international competition for a memorial at Auschwitz in 1958. Joseph Beuys was one of the competitors (his project was not chosen), the launch of his work confronting the darkest German past. In the early 1960s, works by Beuys and Gerhard Richter made the transition to the representation of Auschwitz into the most modern, but also most visible, German art

Jean-Marc Dreyfus is the Reader in Holocaust Studies at the University of Manchester and at Sciences-Po, Paris. He specialises in the economic aspects of the Holocaust and post-war reparation policies. He has published The