Jewish cultural assets in the postwar period. Hannah Arendt’s report on the situation in Hamburg

SOURCE DESCRIPTION

Hannah Arendt, a Jewish intellectual who had fled to the United States in 1941, wrote this field report during her first trip back to Germany after the war. In contrast to her now famous account “The Aftermath of Nazi Rule. Report from Germany,” her field report directly mentions the circumstances which brought Arendt to Germany. She traveled as an emissary for Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, Inc. (JCR), an association of major Jewish organizations and institutions founded in New York in 1947 which dealt with the collection and restitution of looted Jewish cultural artifacts in Europe after the Second World War.

In late 1949, Hannah Arendt traveled to Germany for four months, during which time she visited the British occupation zone in order to survey restitutable cultural assets in the cities of Hamburg, Hannover, Köln, and Lübeck. In Hamburg in particular, she found numerous collections previously confiscated by the Nazis whose legal heirs had yet to be determined.

During her trip, Arendt wrote five official reports for JCR which were distributed to all its board members once they reached New York. These were internal communications not intended to be made public. They give an insight into the extent of Jewish organizations’ activities in dealing with the aftermath of the Holocaust and attest to the difficulty faced by Jewish advocates in their fight for the reinstatement of the rule of law and justice after 1945.

Hannah Arendt had supported the New York based initiative to save looted Jewish artifacts in Europe since 1944, and she became JCR’s [Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, Inc.] executive director in 1949. In February of that year, its board had succeeded in having JCR appointed as official trustee for heirless Jewish libraries, archival materials, and ritual objects in the American occupation zone. This had opened up the possibility to transfer more than half a million heirless looted artifacts to Jewish congregations and institutions worldwide. The British occupation zone, however, was outside of JCR’s jurisdiction. Yet Arendt’s efforts in this case were not only hindered by the fact that she was dealing with Germans who had little sympathy for her mission. For at the time of her visit, the question whether and when a Jewish organization would be appointed as trustee for the British zone had yet to be settled. The eventual authorization of the Jewish Trust Organization (JTC), which was to take on this task in June 1950, was delayed by opposition from both British authorities and members of the local Jewish congregations such as the one in Hamburg, which had been reestablished in July 1945 with 800 members. In her report, Arendt repeatedly points out the difficult relationship between international Jewish representatives who were convinced that Jewish life in Germany had come to an end and congregations who, while struggling to reconstitute themselves, very much hoped...
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The latter insisted on their recognition as legal successors to the Jewish communities existing in Germany prior to 1933 in order to be able to lay claim to community property and recovered looted artifacts. International organizations such as JCR and the eventually appointed JTC, in contrast, argued against acknowledging these communities as legal successors due to their small size and their many non-German members and instead proposed only leaving to them those items most essential to their needs out of the former communities' property.

Dealing with looted cultural artifacts by the Jewish side

The handling of the collections Hannah Arendt saw in Hamburg reveals various layers of conflict between the involved parties. Two examples will serve to illustrate this. The first one is the case of the Hamburg Jewish community's library, which reflects the conflict between the international organizations and the reemerging communities. Secondly, the case of the silver forced off Hamburg's Jewish citizens by the Nazis by means of the National Socialist Decree on the Confiscation of Jewish Property of 1938 [Verordnung zum Einsatz jüdischen Vermögens] and its treatment after the war represents German authorities' usual perception and procedure regarding looted Jewish property.

Throughout her report, Arendt describes the location and condition of the community library, including both those parts of its holdings confiscated by the Security Service [1] during the November pogrom of 1938 and those in the possession of the reestablished community in 1950. The confiscated holdings had been stored in Dresden during the war in order to protect them from bomb damage, thus being under Soviet jurisdiction. While significant parts of the Hamburg library had thus been saved in contrast to other community libraries, their restitution was entirely uncertain in February 1950. Cooperation between Jewish communities and JCR, which was perceived as an American organization, on the one hand and the Soviet occupation authorities on the other proved extremely difficult, and Jewish claims were mostly rejected. No trustee organization was appointed for the Soviet zone, and cultural property was often taken to the Soviet Union as reparations for the immense war damages it had suffered, regardless of the property's provenance. In the case of the Hamburg library, however, its holdings found in Dresden were restituted in 1957, long after JCR had ceased its activities and as a result of protracted negotiations between GDR government authorities, the Hamburg community, and the Central Council of Jews[2]. Out of the roughly 40,000 volumes the library contained in 1938, these holdings numbered between 10,000 and 15,000 volumes. It is unclear whether the remaining holdings were destroyed or are located in other parts of Germany and formerly German occupied areas.

At the same time, Arendt points out that the Hamburg community had many volumes in its possession which came from elsewhere and therefore might be subject to the jurisdiction of a trustee organization. National Socialist confiscation policy had lead to the breaking up of collections, which very rarely remained in their original location. After the war, looted books from Jewish institutions and households were found in different places all over Germany. In many cases, due to pressure from Western occupation authorities, looted artifacts stored in municipal collections or depots were handed over to local Jewish community representatives without further research into their provenance. Knowing this, Jewish trustees felt confirmed in their efforts to demand itemized lists of their holdings from communities and to make claims on relevant assets whenever possible. On the one hand, they were convinced that these treasures would be much safer
in the new centers of Jewish life than in Germany’s fragile communities. On the other hand, JCR considered itself the representative of German Jewish emigres and wanted to ensure that former users now living outside of Europe could benefit from these collections. In her report, Arendt stated that if valuable collections remained in Germany there was a danger that they “may be dispersed, or even sold, and at any rate, be lost to Jewish scholars, and the Jewish tradition in the world.” She noted the dire circumstances many postwar communities found themselves in financially, which often led to compulsory auctions of community property, and pointed out that due to the communities’ decimated membership a single person often had authority over its remaining property. Fearing further losses to an already heavily fragmented cultural heritage, members of JCR and later JTC acted according to the directive to relocate as many cultural treasures as possible to educational institutions and communities in the United States and Israel. However, this idea was opposed by most official community representatives and also—in the case of Hamburg—by British officials, both of whom wished to limit the export of cultural property. British ambivalence regarding the matter of Jewish restitution claims was a result of various political factors, yet it moved towards greater openness to claims made by international trustee organizations during the time of Arendt’s visit. Firstly, Jewish collective claims—as represented by the trustees—were generally met with reservation by the British since they perceived the presupposition that Jewish claims differed from those of other victims as a continuation of National Socialist exclusionist policies. Secondly, the British were reluctant to ship any goods to Palestine until a Jewish state had been founded as Zionist policies did not have the active support of the British Mandate government. Overall, promoting Jewish community life in Germany seemed desirable to the British, who were also considering the future development of the Federal Republic.

Dealing with looted cultural artifacts by the German side

The Germans made their argument from an entirely different perspective, yet with the same goal of preventing assets from being taken out of the country. The notorious “silver hoard” Arendt mentions in her report represents a telling example of the frankly bizarre manner in which German authorities dealt with the consequences of their crimes. The 30,000 objects mentioned, including flatware, tableware, candleholders, and other ritual objects—about 10% of the confiscated items—had escaped the usual smelting because the city of Hamburg had “acquired” them from the “Reich” government and given them to municipal museums. At the end of the war, these objects were stored in the city treasury’s [3] safe, where they were overseen by Carl Schellenberg, whom Arendt mentions by name. Schellenberg, who had been responsible for the selection and acquisition of these objects in the 1930s, remained in his position as museum director after the war. In 1950, JCR was among those who pressured the city to begin restitution proceedings. These were eventually initiated by the city’s Office for Compensation [4] in cooperation with Schellenberg. Stolen property was returned to victims who came to Hamburg and provided proof of ownership. Both the fact that these items had been looted and their rightful owners’ history of persecution remained largely unmentioned while the objects’ protection was presented as a rescue mission. As Arendt had suggested, all silver which could not be restituted was handed over to the JTC, who then sold it to the city, so that some of these silver objects are still on display at Hamburg’s Museum of Arts and Crafts[5] today.
The situation in Hamburg

Arendt’s report not only attests to the general efforts made to save looted Jewish cultural property after 1945. More importantly, it shows that the situation in the British occupation zone and in Hamburg in particular differed significantly from that in the American zone with regard to its community structure and the collections of cultural artifacts discovered there. While numerous looted objects from all over Europe were found in the American zone, the city of Hamburg in particular had stood out during the Nazi regime by keeping confiscated objects in Hamburg out of self-interest rather than handing them over to Berlin, with the result that many collections could at least be partially located and restituted, if hesitatingly. Whereas international Jewish representatives in the American zone were often dealing with reestablished congregations consisting almost exclusively of Eastern European Displaced Persons, in Hamburg they were confronted with a strong congregational representation of mainly German Jews who closely cooperated with municipal authorities. The local congregation council led by Harry Goldstein showed great commitment in its efforts to promote its rebuilding and to continue the tradition of its earlier community work. This set clear limits for the claims made by international Jewish organizations, so that JCR’s board decided to withdraw from all negotiations in the British zone in October 1950.

Select Bibliography


Selected English Titles


Notes

[1] Sicherheitsdienst
[2] Zentralrat der Juden in Deutschland
[3] Landeshauptkasse

About the Author

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