

British Library throws out thousands of books and historic newspapers

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The British Library has junked approximately 80,000 books and 60,000 historic newspapers over the last two years. This ends its 328-year policy of collecting every volume published in Britain. The library has collected every book published in Britain since 1662, making the British Library a nearly complete historical collection. It receives a copy of every new book published in Britain under copyright laws.

The implementation of such a policy change is an act of cultural and historical vandalism. Based purely on considerations of financial expediency, it is a telling example of the philistinism that now dominates within ruling circles. The library board left the selection of material to be junked to junior staff. The decision was never made public. The change in policy only came to light after a senior staff member acknowledged its existence in a letter to a scholar, Keith Armstrong. The discarding of books is to continue, according to a British Library spokesman.

Armstrong discovered that five books he needed for his research were marked “discarded” in the British Library catalogue. By chance he had found a copy of an important work by the psychologist Deborah Marks in a London second-hand book shop, marked “British Library—withdrawn”. Marks's book was only published last year.

Richard Cheffins, head of the British Library's social policy information service, said the library had abandoned its previous policy due to the expense this entailed. He admitted that “low use” was a criterion in selecting which books to be discarded in favour of “new stock”.

The 60,000 historic newspapers discarded by the library represent nearly a tenth of its collection. The newspapers, many irreplaceable, come from most countries in Europe, the United States and Latin

America and were collected over a 130-year period. The discarded papers were either given away free to museums overseas or offered at an unpublicised auction.

They include Russian newspapers from before the October 1917 Revolution and German publications covering the years in which Hitler came to power. The Prussian State Library in Berlin took some, while Baylor University in Texas was given the nineteenth century Italian papers *La Nazione* and *Giornale di Roma*. Other collections were broken up and sold to dealers, or simply pulped—including 37 runs of papers from France.

Offers made by the British Library to hand over the tsarist-period newspapers to Russia's leading libraries, including in St. Petersburg, went unheeded according to the ITAR-TASS news agency, which called them “the richest collection of pre-revolutionary Russian newspapers”. But this was denied by Ed King, who heads the British Library's Newspaper Library, who said that the titles being considered for disposal included only five Russian Imperial newspaper titles, and were mostly incomplete runs.

Among the American papers removed were the *New York Herald Tribune*, the *New York World*, the *Chicago Tribune* and the *San Francisco Chronicle*, from the period 1880-1950. No American library has comparable runs.

The newspaper disposals were first revealed by the American novelist Nicholson Baker, who heads a non-profit organisation dedicated to saving old newspaper runs, which spent nearly £20,000 at a British Library auction last year. Baker commented, “The foreign newspaper collection was one of the finest in the world, a national treasure. Its dispersal ought to have been publicly discussed and governed by laws designed to

protect holdings of such extraordinary historical and monetary value.”

The discarded volumes were recorded on Microfilm, but David McKitterick, the librarian of Trinity College, Cambridge, told the London *Times*, “They are getting rid of the record of the whole development of the popular press across the world since the nineteenth century”.



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