The politics of cultural destruction: *The Rape of Europa*

Nancy Hanover
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The unprecedented use of bankruptcy courts to enable the large-scale seizure of public art in Detroit is a fundamental attack on the rights of the working class everywhere.

The city's bondholders—including Wall Street banks, hedge funds and credit insurers in the ever-growing financial industry—are demanding payment. The London-based auction house Christie's is pricing the priceless collections of the Detroit Institute of Arts for sale. The threat to sell Detroit's artistic and historical patrimony to pay off the banks has been set into motion by an unelected emergency manager, a transparent front man for the financial aristocracy.

This attempt to deprive the population of access to art and culture and seize works of art for the personal pleasure of the rich recalls the greatest art plundering in history: the looting of occupied Europe by the leaders of the Nazi party. The classic work on these tragic events is The Rape of Europa*, written by Lynn H. Nicholas in 1994.*

Except where noted, this review draws entirely upon Nicholas's detailed research. In 2006, a deeply moving film based on the book was produced as well.

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The Rape of Europa begins in 1939 with a Christie's auctioneer selling off masterpieces gathered from Germany's leading public museums: Munich, Hamburg, Mannheim, Frankfurt, Dresden, Bremen and Berlin's Nationalgalerie. These works, denounced as "degenerate art" by the fascists, included Picasso's *Absinthe Drinker*, van Gogh's *Self-Portrait* from Munich, Chagall's *Maison bleue*, and Gauguin's *Tahiti*. The auction was used to raise foreign currency for the Nazi war industry.

Shortly after Hitler became chancellor, the Nazi-affiliated Combat League for German Culture had set forth the regime's outlook on culture, which indicated what was to come: "It is a mistake to think that the national revolution is only political and economic. It is above all cultural. We stand in the first stormy phase of revolution. But already it has uncovered long hidden sources of German folkways, has opened paths to that new consciousness which up till now had been borne half unawares by the brown battalions: namely the awareness that all the expressions of life spring from a specific blood…a specific race!… Art is not international.… If anyone should ask: What is left of freedom? He will be answered: there is no freedom for those who would weaken and destroy German art…there must be no remorse and no sentimentality in uprooting and crushing what was destroying our vitals."

Within months of taking power, Joseph Goebbels, the minister of propaganda and public enlightenment, announced plans to create a Reich Chamber of Culture to regulate everyone connected with the arts. No museum director, artist or art dealer could work without being a member. Among those not accepted were Jews, Communists and eventually all those whose style was considered incompatible with Nazi ideals.

Those museum directors who cooperated with the government played major roles in promoting fascist ideology. "Exhibitions were a form of propaganda for the regime, and they articulated the ideological tenets of nationalism, ethnocentrism, racism and conformity," writes Jonathan Petropoulos in his book, *The Faustian Bargain: The Art World in Nazi Germany* .

On the other hand, left-leaning or modernist artists were removed from their posts as teachers and members of public institutions, including Paul Klee in Dusseldorf; Kathe Kollwitz and Max Beckmann in Berlin; and Otto Dix in Dresden. "Degenerate" painters were forbidden to buy art supplies, and when the Gestapo visited their homes, the smell of turpentine in the air was sufficient cause for arrest.

Banned artist Ernst Kirchner ultimately committed suicide in June 1938, shattered by the expulsion of his life's work from German museums.

After Hitler's infamous exhibition of "degenerate" art in 1937, featuring 113 artists including Dix, George Metzinger, Willi Baumeister and Lovis Corinth, "total purification" began in earnest. Nazi confiscation committees removed nearly 16,000 works of art from German public collections.

Hermann Goering was the first to seize on the money-making potential of such troves, claiming paintings by Cézanne, Munch, and van Gogh after the exhibition. Several months later, Hitler signed an order freeing the government from all claims for compensation for artwork "safeguarded" by Nazi officials. This euphemism for theft became the byword throughout Europe, and opened the way to the plundering of art across the continent.

Other works were destroyed outright. In March 1939 alone, Goebbels oversaw the burning of 1,004 paintings and sculptures and 3,825 drawings, watercolors and graphics, as part of the "purification" of German art.

The industrial-scale looting began with the German annexation of Austria, the Anschluss, in March 1938. The borders were sealed, and the SS imprisoned thousands of Austrian Jews, first at Dachau and later at Mauthausen. The property of Vienna's prominent families was confiscated first, most notably the extensive art collections of the Rothschilds. All Jews were required to register whatever property they owned with the Gestapo; this information was used later for confiscation.

Eighty thousand Jews were eventually allowed to leave Austria, buying their way out by liquidating their property and possessions. The Nazis, enamored of legalities, required the signature of release for all items. Reams of paperwork, multiple notarizations and visits to various agencies were required to render oneself penniless and eligible for an exit visa. Baron Louis Rothschild was held in prison for a year while the paperwork was executed for his art collections and other assets.

After the bloody pogrom in Germany on November 9-10, 1938, known as Kristallnacht ("The night of the broken glass," as pro-Nazi paramilitaries smashed Jewish shops and homes), German Jews faced similar mass confiscations. Simply keeping track of all the stolen artwork was difficult, as the SS, Gestapo, Finance Ministry, Reich Chamber of Culture, local Nazi organizations, museums and others all were carting things away.

Next was Czechoslovakia, one year after the Anschluss. The Nazis didn't confine their looting to Jews, considering the Slavic people also to be subhuman. The seizures included the contents of the library of Prague University, the Czech National Museum, the palaces of the Hapsburg Archduke Franz Ferdinand, Count Colloredo and Prince Schwarzenberg, and the Lobkowitz collections of armor, coins and paintings.

Needing places to hoard all his pilfered art, Hitler set about planning a complex of museums in Linz, Austria, his childhood home. A sum of 10 million RM (Reichsmarks) was allocated in 1939; by 1944, the appropriation had grown to 70 million RM.

The Nazi invasion of Poland in September 1939, which led to the outbreak of World War II in Europe, followed Hitler's directive: "act brutally…be harsh and remorseless…kill without pity or mercy all men, women and children of Polish descent or language" in the "invasion and extermination of Poland."

Nicholas writes, "For Poland was to become Germany's creature totally. Its culture and people were to be eliminated and replaced by Hitler's 'New Order.' " That order was to be based on the conception that "the Poles shall be the slaves of the Greater German Reich."

The invasion was accompanied by the destruction of Polish monuments and a detailed cataloguing of the locations of works of art. As the German army crossed the countryside, homes were looted, bank vaults opened and emptied. Later, the Nazis would legalize this, authorizing the taking of "the entire range of objects of art…in the public interest" including state, private and church holdings. All Polish universities, institutes and schools were closed and staffs dismissed, making their holdings easier to steal.

Those items not seized in the first sweep were sought out again later in 1941, when the SS combed the annexed territories "village by village, castle by castle, estate by estate" for every possible work of art.

Nazi forces crossed the Dutch border on May 10, 1940. Continuing on through Luxembourg, around the Maginot line, they entered France. By June, Hitler controlled western Europe.

Both the book and the film movingly chronicle the struggles of French museum workers to prepare for the war. Collections had been moved to châteaux as far as possible from the anticipated battle zone around the Maginot Line. The *Mona Lisa*, resting on an ambulance stretcher in a sealed van, had been moved to Louvigny. When the van arrived, the curator inside was semiconscious and had to be revived, but the portrait was fine.

The Louvre's most famous statuary—the *Venus de Milo*, *Winged Victory* and Michelangelo's *Slaves* —were packed up with tremendous difficulty and transported to the Talleyrand domain at Valençay. Truckloads of art were dispersed throughout the countryside.

However, when Hitler's invasion route unexpectedly circumvented the Maginot Line, the *Mona Lisa* had to depart with a few other hastily packed works from Louvigny for the Abbey of Loc-Dieu. More than 3,000 paintings would end up at this location, as a result of the extraordinary efforts of the French curators. The last convoy crossed the Loire River on June 17, only hours before the bridges were blown.

In France, Gestapo teams began by removing items from abandoned Jewish shops and homes. Then they stole whatever could be found at the premises of the 15 leading Jewish art dealers in Paris. However, the German Wehrmacht resisted the orders to violate the Hague Convention, which specifically forbade the removal of private property. The Nazis therefore empowered the *Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg* (ERR, Task-force of Reichsleiter Rosenberg) to transport "cultural goods." The ERR would play the pivotal role in the theft of French art.

France's ever-cooperative Vichy government, for its part, declared that French nationals who had fled the country were no longer citizens, so that their property could be seized.

So much art was collected that the ERR was given the Jeu de Paume, a small museum, for storage. Hermann Goering soon arrived and began picking out paintings for his collection, including Rembrandt's *Boy with a Red Beret* and van Dyck's *Portrait of a Lady*. The Führer always had first choice of the looted art, then Goering, and then the Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg was permitted to choose samples for anti-Semitic purposes. A fourth group was reserved for German museums or put on the market.

Goering would return to the Jeu de Paume and collect paintings 17 more times, taking a total of 600. To keep things legal, Goering "purchased" the art works after they were appraised by a minor French artist, whose pricing varied according to Goering's desires.

Working at the Jeu de Paume was a curator named Rose Valland, who maintained a low profile but meticulously kept track of the ERR's shipments and the location of paintings. Her heroic efforts to preserve the art proved indispensable in the war's aftermath. Unfortunately, she could do nothing but record the July 27, 1943, burning at the Jeu de Paume of modern works, along with Jewish family portraits and works by Jewish artists. They included works by Pablo Picasso, Francis Picabia, Roger de La Fresnaye, Paul Klee, Joan Miró, Max Ernst, Jean Arp, Salvador Dalí, and Ferdnand Léger.

In Paris, confiscations mounted so fast that more art historians had to be brought in. An army of curators, art dealers and professors assisted the Nazis in their looting operations.

Virtually the entire Nazi leadership was seized with collector's fever, profiting obscenely from operations in country after country throughout Europe. In Holland, German government officials had access to millions of Dutch guilders in occupation money and used it to buy up art. Both Hitler and Goering had full-fledged purchasing operations in Italy and the Low Countries.

In January 1942, the ERR carried out the M-Aktion in the Möbel (furniture) Project. A house-by-house check of the entire city of Paris was begun. Thirty-eight thousand dwellings were sealed, with 71,619 dwellings raided. Everything was taken: beds, linens, sofas, and lamps alongside the art. Parallel to this astoundingly comprehensive looting was an ambitious attack on the statues and church bells of France and the Low Countries, which were to be melted down for the factories of the Reich.

The invasion of the Soviet Union was the most brutal of the war. To accomplish its "cultural, racial and ideological" cleansing, Hitler specified that Jews and Bolshevists would be executed immediately, while much of the general Slavic population would be starved to death as food supplies were diverted to the "worthier citizens of the Reich." Heinrich Himmler was put in charge of the elimination of all "Bolshevists," which he described as "a population of 180 million, a mixture of races, whose very names are unpronounceable, and whose physique is such that one can shoot them down without pity and compassion…."

Moreover, Hitler stated that his plans for *Lebensraum*, or living space, required that Leningrad (today St. Petersburg) must "disappear completely from the earth, as should Moscow".

In every part of the USSR that fell under Nazi control, special attention was given to trashing the houses and museums of great cultural figures. Pushkin's house was ransacked, as was Tolstoy's Yasnaya Polyana estate, and museums honoring Chekhov, Rimsky-Korsakov and Tchaikovsky.

But the heroism of the museum staff at the great Hermitage in Leningrad, which held 2.5 million art pieces, matched that of Soviet troops on the battlefield. Only 48 hours after they received word that war had begun, the Hermitage was hit by the first raid. Curators patrolled the roofs ready to quench fires, while their fellow citizens built trenches and fortifications around the city.

Packing of the art went on around the clock with volunteers from throughout the city. Specialists from the Lomonosov porcelain factory packed thousands of dishes and ornaments. Delicate Greek vases were painstakingly filled with crumbled cork before being wrapped. As crates were filled and sealed, relays of Red Navy sailors began to transport them.

A train of 22 boxcars containing a half-million items left on July 1 for Siberia. Another shipment was dispatched on July 20, but that was the last.

Everything else had to be carted to the basements, as the Nazi front lines approached to within 8.5 miles of the museum.

Nicholas explains, “After the rail lines had been cut, Hermitage curators continued to pack and move things into the vast cellars…and alongside the works of art in the bombproof cellars lived a colony of some 2000 souls. During the continuing siege these subterranean spaces became a center of intellectual resistance and survival. As the winter came on, half-frozen art historians, poets and writers worked on their research projects.”

Very little food could get through to the city during the siege of Leningrad, overwhelmingly the costliest siege in human warfare. In December 1941 alone, more than 50,000 died of starvation.

When spring came, thawed pipes burst and flooded the basements, forcing weakened curators to wade about to retrieve floating pieces of Meissen porcelain. The siege continued two more years. In 1943 alone, as the bombing continued, the staff removed, by hand, 80 tons of mixed glass, ice and snow from the mosaics and parquet floors with crowbars. The last bomb fell on the Hermitage only 25 days before the siege was broken and Leningrad liberated.

One cannot but be moved by the heroic determination of countless thousands, from the USSR to Germany itself, who in the face of the SS hordes devoted their strength to preserve this art for the future. This profoundly democratic sensibility animated what was in many cases a superhuman effort. *The Rape of Europa* also goes on to detail the role of the US military’s “Monuments Men” of the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives program, a small cadre of men tasked with securing the art and repatriating it where possible—another major and fascinating saga.

The film, that is based on the book, concludes with the work of German researcher Rolf Rossmeisl, who is involved in returning Torah scrolls to congregations from whom they have been looted. He tells the audience, with great emotion, what motivates him: “Art belongs to humanity. Without this, we are just animals. It is what makes us human.”