

# WAR AND PEACE: EARLY ATTEMPTS AT REDRESSING NAZI LOOTING

U.S. Chaplain Sam Blinder  
examining stolen Torah scrolls  
in the basement of the Institute  
for Research into the Jewish  
Question in Frankfurt am Main  
(Photo: United States  
National Archives)



POST-WAR EFFORTS TO REDRESS THE MASS DISPOSSESSION OF ART RESULTING FROM NAZI LOOTING DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR ACTUALLY COMMENCED TWO YEARS PRIOR TO THE END OF THE WAR. THE INTER-ALLIED DECLARATION AGAINST ACTS OF DISPOSSESSION COMMITTED IN TERRITORIES UNDER ENEMY OCCUPATION OR CONTROL, SIGNED IN LONDON IN 1943, DECLARED INVALID ALL TRANSFERS OF PROPERTY CONDUCTED BY THE NAZIS AND THEIR ALLIES.

The end of the Second World War saw the implementation of two major, albeit very different, policies of recovery and restitution in Europe. The Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives program of the United States and the Western Allies handled over five million objects of art, transferring many to their countries of origin with the understanding that national governments would be responsible for returning items to the original owners or their heirs.

Under the other policy, Soviet trophy brigades swept across the newly-liberated territories of Europe and carried east vast quantities of artworks, books, and archives as reparations for the war losses of the USSR. While some restitutions were made to countries with communist regimes in the 1950<sup>s</sup> and 1960<sup>s</sup>, very few items have been returned since and little or no published provenance research has been undertaken on those collections that remain in the museums and libraries of the former Soviet Union.

Despite the various efforts made during and immediately following the end of the Second World War, a host of factors - the genocidal extermination of so many original owners, the destruction and dispersal of relevant collection records, the need of Holocaust survivors and other victims to move on, the complex issues surrounding disposition of heirless property, and the growing constraints of the Cold War - all ensured that provenance research and the restitution of cultural objects remained a low priority for many decades to come.



Dutch art treasures – consisting of paintings, drawings, and tapestries returned from Germany – are prepared for display at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam in 1950.  
(W.L. Stuijbergen / Collectie Spaarnestad)