

Unravelling the Mesh: The ERR Survey as a Finding Aid¹

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Patricia Kennedy Grimsted's "[Reconstructing the Record of Nazi Cultural Plunder. A Survey of the Dispersed Archives of the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg \(ERR\)](#)" has now officially been published online on the website of the International Institute of Social History (IISH). The subtitle seems misleading, as this work is not a survey but covers a far broader and more varied scope. Nor is the publication about the dispersed archives of the ERR. Again, the contents are far more comprehensive and address many other areas as well.

Let me first deal with this last point.

In the [Glossary of the Society of American Archivists](#) (SAA), archives are defined as: "Materials created or received by a person, family, or organization, public or private, in the conduct of their affairs and preserved because of the enduring value contained in the information they contain or as evidence of the functions and responsibilities of their creator, especially those materials maintained using the principles of provenance, original order, and collective control."²

So where are the archives of the ERR? This question is as ambiguous as asking where the archives of a global enterprise as Royal Dutch/Shell are. The map of the ERR in the occupied territories reproduced on the [cover page of the publication](#) reveals that the ERR was a subtly interwoven spider web and an entangled mesh operating through a network of *Dienststellen* (units) across Europe, with its central hub in Berlin. The ERR was formally an operational unit of Rosenberg's DBFU (*Der Beauftragter des Führers für die Überwachung der gesamten geistigen und weltanschaulichen Schulung und Erziehung der NSDAP* [Commissioner of the Führer for the Supervision of the Entire Intellectual and Ideological Schooling and Training of the NSDAP]). The

¹ Paper presented at the launch of the online publication by [Patricia Kennedy Grimsted, Reconstructing the Record of Nazi Cultural Plunder. A Survey of the Dispersed Archives of the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg \(ERR\)](#), at the expert meeting "Cultural Plunder During the Second World War", 19 October 2011, Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam.

² Richard Pearce-Moses, *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology*. Society of American Archivists, Chicago 2005. Available at www.archivists.org.

definition of archives refers to the principles of provenance and original order. These two principles have been made famous around the world by the Dutch [“Manual for the arrangement and description of archives”](#) of 1898, translated into more than 8 languages, most recently into Estonian (in 1999).³ This coincidence is indeed remarkable, with respect to the archives of Alfred Rosenberg, who was born in Estonia. According to the principle of provenance or respect for the integrity of archives, records of different origins (i.e. provenance) are to be kept separate to preserve their context. It has been recognized by UNESCO as the prevailing principle in resolving archival conflicts.⁴ Restoring the original order entails restoring the organization and sequence of records established by the creator of these records. [This action serves two purposes:](#) “First, it preserves existing relationships and evidential significance that can be inferred from the context of the records. Second, it exploits the record creator's mechanisms to access the records, saving the archives the work of creating new access tools.”⁵

According to these fundamental archival principles, the ERR archives would be part of the DBFU archives, and, furthermore, the archives of the branches or units would be considered part of the main ERR archives, just as the archives of e.g. the Paris branch of the International Institute of Social History belong to the archives of the Institute. Moreover, restoring the original order would entail returning materials to the organization and restoring the sequence established by their creator.

International archival law, however, includes an exception to the principle of provenance. Since the Peace of Westphalia of 1648 international law has recognized - I will use the modern term for the concept - functional pertinence. As accepted by UNESCO, functional pertinence acknowledges the right of a successor state to the archives of any former agency of a predecessor state, whether located in or outside the country, as solely responsible for the affairs of that country.⁶ The archives of the Dutch colonial administration in Batavia (now Jakarta) have thus become the property of the

³ Peter Horsman, Eric Ketelaar, and Theo Thomassen, Introduction to the 2003 Reissue, in: S. Muller, J.A. Feith and R. Fruin, *Manual for the arrangement and description of archives*. Translation of the second edition by Arthur H. Leavitt, with new introductions... (Society of American Archivists, Chicago 2003) pp. V-XXXVIII. Reprinted as [“New Respect for the Old Order: The Context of the Dutch Manual”](#), *American Archivist* 66 (2003) pp. 249-270.

⁴ Hervé Bastien, Reference Dossier on Archival Claims, *Janus. Special issue: Proceedings of the twenty-ninth, thirtieth and thirty-first International Conference of the Round Table on Archives* (1998) pp. 209-268.

⁵ Pearce-Moses, A Glossary.

⁶ Bastien, Reference Dossier, p. 240.

Republik Indonesia. Similarly, the archives of the *Reichskommissar für die besetzten niederländische Gebiete* have not been transferred to Germany but are the legal property of the Netherlands.⁷

Applying functional pertinence means that the records of the ERR units in the countries under German occupation in the Second World War have become the property of those countries and cannot be removed from the territory where they were created. The Netherlands is one of the few countries where relatively complete ERR operational files were found. These were discovered in 1957/1958 in the IISH premises at Keizersgracht 264 in Amsterdam, which the ERR had used as its Dutch headquarters. They are now kept at the NIOD, on standing loan from the National Archives. The predecessor of NIOD (the RIOD), which at first did not apply archival principles very rigidly, did not recognize the files as proper archives of the *HAG Niederlande* and held them as part of the office collection of A.J. Van der Leeuw. Later, the ERR operational files were placed as an undescribed supplementary box in a NIOD collection and were forgotten, until Hubert Berkhout located the box in August 2008.⁸

At the end of the war “many files the ERR did not succeed in evacuating or destroying were left behind in the countries they were forced to abandon. Those, together with many outgoing ERR documents addressed to other agencies during the war, have been incorporated into various record groups of German occupation agencies in different countries.”⁹ This in most cases conflicts with the principles of provenance and original order. A document addressed by agency A to agency B, belongs to the archives of B. Mixing them all up diminishes their evidential value and constitutes an archival sin. Sinners, however, outnumber saints, even in the archival profession. Nevertheless, all archival institutions holding ERR archives and related materials should endeavour to restore - at least conceptually - the original order, in keeping with the principle of provenance. If not, then the ERR documentary residue cannot make the most of its evidential and informational value for provenance research and the restitution of cultural property.

⁷ Not only according to the principle of functional pertinence but also pursuant to Dutch domestic law: Besluit Vijandelijk Vermogen (K.B. 20 oktober 1944, Stb. E 133).

⁸ Grimsted, *Reconstructing the Record*, p. 258.

⁹ Grimsted, *Reconstructing the Record*, p. 42.

The above concerns the archives of ERR units in the occupied countries. What about the archives of headquarters in Germany? Patricia Grimsted explains in her introduction why the remaining ERR records or related records are dispersed throughout 29 repositories in nine countries. Most materials were seized by the Allied governments that occupied Germany.¹⁰ The U.S. authorities transferred their booty to the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) in 1958 and microfilmed these records – assigning the incorrect title Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories (*Reichsministerium für die besetzten Ostgebiete*) and thereby conveying the impression that these records originated only in Rosenberg’s government ministry. The records of the ERR and other Rosenberg agencies within the Nazi party were in fact included in this record group as well but they were not arranged as separate series. Most of these records were returned to Germany, starting in 1963. After their return to West Germany, the Rosenberg collection was reprocessed by the Bundesarchiv in Koblenz. The files of ERR provenance were arranged as a separate record group (Bestand) NS 30, and those from Rosenberg’s other party offices were assigned to separate record groups. At the same time, the records from the Reichsministerium (Rosenberg’s government office) were assigned to Bestand R 6. As a consequence of this reprocessing – in full compliance with the archival principles of provenance and original order - the present arrangement of these records in Berlin no longer corresponds with that in the U.S. microfilms.

“Lacking from the Rosenberg records returned by the United States are key documents that were removed from the U.S. Rosenberg collection for use at the International Military Tribunal (IMT) in Nuremberg. Many of those processed and used as IMT exhibits remain incorporated in the U.S. portion of IMT records. ... Many others that were turned over to the IMT but not used in the trial were given to the French and are held in the Center of Contemporary Jewish Documentation (Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine, CDJC), which is now incorporated in the Shoah Memorial in Paris.”¹¹ It seems paradoxical that this violation of the archival principles of provenance and original order, namely the transformation of documents out of their original context

¹⁰ Grimsted, *Reconstructing the Record*, p. 44, and p. 146.

¹¹ Grimsted, *Reconstructing the Record*, p. 146.

into court exhibits, has diminished their evidential value for attesting to what happened in that original context.

Unlike the Rosenberg records seized by U.S. authorities in Germany and returned in the 1960s, the records captured by the Soviets were not sent back. The largest segment of surviving Rosenberg records thus remains in Kyiv. Many of the documents were probably sent from selected ERR units in occupied Europe to ERR headquarters in Berlin. Presumably, these files were found by Soviet trophy scouts somewhere between Ratibor and Berlin in the autumn of 1945, but details concerning their discovery in Germany are unavailable.

The ERR archives in the Central State Archive of Ukraine “represent one of the most important surviving groups of ERR records.” They “have never been appropriately processed or described by office of provenance and are still in the state of disorder in which they were first processed and deposited in the secret divisions of several archives.”¹² From Patricia Grimsted’s Survey we learn that the **Kyiv** archives contain reports from various occupied countries addressed to ERR headquarters in Berlin, including, for example, otherwise unavailable reports from Brussels to Berlin describing ERR operations and detailing seizures of important library and archival collections, for example from Jewish institutions, Masonic lodges, Socialist institutions, and private collections in Belgium. Runs of documents in several files detail ERR activities in France, the Netherlands, Italy, Yugoslavia etc. These archives from ERR headquarters have a different legal status from those of the units in occupied countries: while the documents in the respective units are, as I explained before, to be preserved in the countries concerned (functional pertinence), the archives originating from the ERR headquarters should be returned to their provenance (Germany) and reunited with the other parts of the ERR archives.

As mentioned above, the survey is not a survey of the dispersed archives of ERR but has a far more comprehensive and a more varied scope. The survey covers the ERR archives and related materials, such as those from the projected *Hohe Schule* for the Nazi elite and in particular the Institute for Research on the Jewish Question (IEJ). Also

¹² Grimsted, *Reconstructing the Record*, p. 279.

included are the records of the related Furniture Operation (*Möbel-Aktion*), which was initially run by Rosenberg's Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories.

After the war, the western Allies and various governments formed a lot of records - to a large extent using the ERR materials - "in the process of locating, recovering, identifying, and returning the archives, books, art, and other cultural or religious objects seized by the ERR or during the *Möbel-Aktion*."¹³ These are, of course, not ERR archives, but Patricia Grimsted has nonetheless very appropriately included them in her Survey.

The same holds true for related records, such as the materials prepared for the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg, where Rosenberg was interrogated, tried, and hanged.¹⁴

Now is this a survey? Not if one understands a survey to be a broad, general overview (as the [SAA Glossary](#) does¹⁵). According to the Oxford English Dictionary, however, a [survey is](#): the act of viewing, examining, or inspecting in detail, esp. for some specific purpose; a written statement or description embodying the result of such examination. But if we want to label Patricia Grimsted's work in archival terms, our traditional terminology is inadequate. Some sections have the characteristics of a [guide](#) (a broad description of the holdings of one or more archives, typically at the collection level). Elsewhere, the Survey is more like what archivists describe as an [analytical inventory](#): a detailed description of a collection, often with respect to individual files or items. Other sections are more like a [special list](#) featuring greater detail than a standard finding aid describing series, folders, or items from different collections that relate to the same topic.

Below are two examples.

In the NIOD inventory of the Rosenberg files, number 14 is described:

Surveys of art works and their value which have been added to the collection of Hermann Göring, 1942-1943, 1 folder, copies.¹⁶

¹³ Grimsted, *Reconstructing the Record*, p. 19.

¹⁴ Grimsted, *Reconstructing the Record*, p. 46.

¹⁵ Pearce-Moses, *A Glossary*.

¹⁶ [Overzichten van kunstwerken en de waarde daarvan die aan de verzameling van Hermann Göring zijn toegevoegd. Datering: 1942-1943. Omvang: 1 omslag. Ontwikkelingsstadium: Kopieën.](#)

The description appears fairly concise.

In Patricia Grimsted's "survey" we find the following¹⁷:

- 14:** Sonderstab Bildende Kunst, with detailed inventories of paintings and other works of art acquired from the ERR for the Göring Collection and processed in Paris by the Sonderstab Bildende Kunst, AG Louvre;
- list of Göring acquisitions from the Jeu de Paume (45 p., dated 20 Oct. 1942) covering 410 artworks (including 237 paintings, 51 pieces of furniture, as well as other categories) and recording the date of acquisition and ERR code for the collection of provenance;
 - second list indicating the appraised value;
 - supplement of 8-9 Apr. 1943 indicates additional acquisitions and their appraised value;
 - supplemental list of 84 modern paintings, by artists such as Braque, Corot, Degas, and Matisse (presumably those used for exchange).¹³

Footnote 13: These inventories were issued as Attachment 6 to the Office Strategic Services, Consolidated Intelligence Report no. 2, "The Göring Collection," 15 Sep. 1945.

The second example:

The Collectie Van der Leeuw at the NIOD has been reordered and described recently by the CAS (*Centrale Archiefselectiedienst*, the central Dutch agency for selection of records), which was commissioned to inventory a large number of NIOD archives).¹⁸

218 Documents concerning research into the transfer of public and private libraries from the western occupied zones to Germany during the war, as well as notes concerning library claims, 1940-1965, 1 bundle.¹⁹

¹⁷ Grimsted, *Reconstructing the Record*, p. 261.

¹⁸ Grimsted has not yet seen this inventory, so her numbers differ from the ones in that inventory.

¹⁹ [Stukken betreffende het instellen van een onderzoek naar het overbrengen van openbare en private bibliotheken uit de westelijke bezettingsgebieden naar Duitsland tijdens de oorlogsperiode, alsmede aantekeningen inzake bibliotheek-claims. Datering: 1940-1965. Omvang: 1 pak.](#)

Patricia Grimsted's "survey" is far more detailed²⁰:

- f) two folders with original reports by Dr D.P.M. Graswinckel on ERR Jewish library seizures found in Hungen and elsewhere in Germany, along with Van der Leeuw's correspondence with Graswinckel (1946-1947), Professor Vorenkamp, and others (1947-1949), regarding recovery and restitution of Dutch collections.
- g) folder with lists of books recovered from France (Sub-Commission for Books, SCL), presumably from Tanzenberg;
 - documents regarding books recovered by Graswinckel from Prague, ca. 7 crates (7-14 Apr. 1949), with receipts for shipment, etc.

I will not elaborate on the inadequacy or the lack of information in the Dutch inventories. Rather I have presented these two examples to demonstrate that Patricia Grimsted's survey is not a simple survey, nor a simple guide, but indeed largely a "special list" featuring far more detail than a standard finding aid. The NIOD and the other 28 archival institutions holding ERR materials would do well to improve their inventories by referring to the Grimsted survey. This could be done most effectively by embedding links to the survey in the local finding aids, and vice versa. Such links need not infringe upon the copyright of the author and publisher of the Survey. Even quoting the Survey in local finding aids would be a fair use of the copyrighted material. To make such linking efficient, the Survey, which is now in PDF format, would need to be converted into an HTML webpage - which can be done very easily and would further enhance the Survey as it now appears on the IISH website. Maximum benefit would be derived from digitization, for example, by making all the internal references (of the type: see Section 2.1.1.3. and Section 2.4.6.; or see page ...) machine readable, as has already been done with references to external websites. More importantly, the Survey should not remain a static research paper. To realize its full potential as a dynamic tool, it should be updated regularly, as more and better information on the ERR plunder and the ERR archives becomes available throughout Europe. The IISH and the NIOD might connect the Survey to the [European Holocaust Research Infrastructure](#), which would

²⁰ Grimsted, *Reconstructing the Record*, p. 265-266. I have corrected Grasswinckel and Van de Leeuw to: Graswinckel and Van der Leeuw.

bring together virtual resources from dispersed archives sustaining first-rate Holocaust research.

As explained at the beginning, the ERR was a subtly interwoven spider web and an entangled mesh operating as a network across Europe. Now that the mesh has been unravelled in the Survey, spinning a new web might serve historical retribution. This new web would form a network across Europe and beyond: no longer a mesh of oppression and plunder but a network of information that might rectify the oppression and undo the plunder by restitution of cultural property through research and education. As Wesley A. Fisher, Director of Research Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, writes in his foreword “The importance of this Survey is equally in its relevance to the restitution of history.”²¹

The ERR used and abused records for oppression and plunder. Paradoxically, these same records might counteract this effect by being reconfigured as instruments of empowerment and liberation, salvation and freedom.²²

²¹ Grimsted, *Reconstructing the Record*, p. 24.

²² Eric Ketelaar, *Recordkeeping and Societal Power*, in: Sue McKemmish, Michael Piggott, Barbara Reed, and Frank Upward (eds.), *Archives: Recordkeeping in Society* (Wagga-Wagga, Charles Sturt University 2005) p. 287.