DISPOSSESSION: THE PLUNDERING OF GERMAN JEWRY, 1933-1945 AND BEYOND

Conference at Boston University, November 9-11, 2014. Co-sponsored by Boston University and the GHI Washington. Conveners: Christoph Kreutzmüller (Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin) and Jonathan Zatlin (Boston University). Participants: Eva Balz (University of Bochum), Johannes Beermann (University of Bremen), Hartmut Berghoff (GHI), Michael Berkowitz (University of London), Tal Bruttman (City of Grenoble/Memorial de la Shoah, Paris), David Crowe (Elon University), Charles Dellheim (Boston University), Jeffrey Diefendorf (University of New Hampshire), Laura Meier-Ewert (La Commission d’indemnisation des victimes de spoliations intervenues du fait des législations antisémites en vigueur pendant l’Occupation, French Embassy, Berlin), Abigail Gilman (Boston University), Dorothea Hauser (Warburg-Archiv, Hamburg), Susannah Heschel (Dartmouth), Stefan Hördler (GHI), Ingo Loose (Institut für Zeitgeschichte, Munich-Berlin), Stefanie Mahrer (Franz Rosenzweig Minerva Research Center, Hebrew University of Jerusalem), Alfred C. Mierzejewski (University of North Texas), Benno Nietzel (University of Bielefeld), Jonathan Petropoulos (Claremont McKenna College), Albrecht Ritschl (London School of Economics), Anna Rubin (Department of Financial Services, New York State), Christine Schoenmakers (University of Oldenburg), Eugene Sheppard (Brandeis University), Lisa Silverman (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee), Pamela Swett (McMaster University), Jonathan Wiesen (Southern Illinois University).

With the assistance of several organizations at Boston University and the German Historical Institute in Washington DC, Jonathan Zatlin and Christoph Kreutzmüller organized an international conference at Boston University devoted to analyzing the expropriation of Jews in Nazi Germany. A variety of panels examined the different means of dispossession employed by the perpetrators and the experiences of the victims of that dispossession. As part of a larger project on “Economic Racism in Perspective,” organized by Zatlin, the conference sought to uncover new ways of understanding the financial significance and cultural importance of the dispossession and murder of Germany’s Jews.

In his keynote address, which coincided with the 76th anniversary of the November 1938 pogrom, Kreutzmüller argued that many players at the local and national levels shaped the process of destruction of
Jewish business, but it was not a linear process following a set plan. In small towns, ongoing boycotts and periodic violence had taken a devastating toll by the mid-1930s. Nonetheless, the number of companies run or owned by Jews had only somewhat declined in the big cities, especially in Berlin. However, the savage violence and extended plunder that occurred during November 1938 dramatically reduced the quantity of Jewish-owned businesses. Remarkably, some Jewish businesspeople were able to maintain their businesses — in a few cases up to the moment of their deportation. Destruction of the Jews’ economic existence was an integral part of the process of their persecution and, ultimately, their murder.

The first panel sought to provide a larger macroeconomic context. Albrecht Ritschl examined the instruments used to destroy the Jewish population financially. He estimated assets belonging to Germany’s Jewish population in 1936 to have a value in real capital stock in Germany of some 850 billion Reichsmarks (RM). He calculated the Jewish population’s share of capital in 1933 at about 0.75 percent the national total. On that assumption, he concluded that the value of all assets owned by German Jews to be around 6.375 billion RM in 1936. Jonathan Wiesen analyzed National Socialist ideological antipathy to Jewish property ownership. The theft of property owned by Jews, Wiesen argued, was not an “incidental by-product of the Holocaust,” but rather a key component of National Socialism. The aim was to “racially sanitize the marketplace” by eliminating the commercial activities of Jews. This effort was supported by new legal measures and encouraged by propaganda. Aryanization, spoliation, and other forms of expropriation of assets belonging to Jews were seen as “the right thing[s] to do” and allowed many actors to hide behind new laws and regulations, when it was really greed, avarice, and the possibility of personal enrichment that incited them to steal or buy at discounted prices property formerly owned by Jews.

The second panel focused on German-Jewish commercial presence. Dorothea Hauser discussed the persistence of the large Jewish private Bank, M. M. Warburg & Co. She refuted the notion that the bank continued to be profitable until its Aryanization in 1938 because of special protection by Hjalmar Schacht. On the contrary, Hauser demonstrated, the bank lost more assets than any other private bank in Germany after 1933. Ironically, however, the bank managed to offset some of its losses as it became increasingly involved in assisting Jewish efforts to emigrate. Stefanie Mahrer discussed Salman Schocken
and the strategies he invented to prevent the “Aryanization” of his department stores and the theft of his personal property, and especially his library. Pamela Swett used the archives of the Salamander shoe company and its salesmen’s journals to build a case study on the influence of travelling salesmen as important local participants in the process of excluding Jews from the economy. Swett convincingly showed that some businessmen defended Jewish colleagues, but most were frustrated by the state’s continued tolerance of Jewish participation in the commercial sector and sought ways to accelerate the processes by which Jews were dispossessed.

In the following two panels, which addressed bureaucracy and dispossessions, speakers turned to the perpetrators. Concentrating on the role of the Reich Economics Ministry, Ingo Loose sought to periodize the ministry’s antisemitic policies. The 1930s, Loose argued, were a period of “legitimization of injustice” in which the Ministry introduced several decrees organizing the expropriation of Jews. After 1939, however, the Ministry was less involved in the robbery of the Jewish population throughout Europe. Johannes Beermann analysed the active role German freight shippers played in dispossessing German Jews. In a particularly telling set of stories, Beermann demonstrated the readiness of freight shippers to exploit the upsurge in Jewish clients seeking to emigrate. Christine Schoenmakers explored the Deutsche Golddiskontbank (Dego), a Reichsbank subsidiary that played a significant role in dispossessing Jews. In cases of emigration and Aryanization, Dego served as the hub for cash, foreign exchange, stocks and illiquid property, arranging its registration, transfer and utilization for the Nazi economy. Jonathan Zatlin focused on a ruse employed by the Gestapo to conceal the dispossession and murder of elderly German Jews. The Gestapo employed the so-called Heimeinkaufsverträge, or retirement home contracts, to obscure the regime’s genocidal intentions toward German Jews by pretending to behave more “humanely” toward the elderly. In reality, however, the Gestapo not only murdered the elderly, but also seized funds on a scale that the security apparatus believed would ensure its autonomy from budgetary supervision and political oversight. Stefan Hördler presented the systematic and regulated confiscation of the personal belongings of concentration camp inmates as well as the redistribution and sale of their assets for the benefit of the state treasury. Alfred Mierzejewski discussed how the German public pension system was used by the Nazi regime to deprive Jews of both pension benefits and equity.
The next panel turned towards other European countries with an eye to understanding the adoption of similar procedures in the context of the War. Tal Bruttman pointed out that the French authorities passed laws and decrees aimed at registering the Jewish population of France and excluding them from public life and commerce. For Bruttman, these were home-grown initiatives, inspired by but not emulating the “German model.” David Crowe dealt with dispossession by the General Government in German-occupied Poland. Crowe also touched on the difficulty that Jewish survivors and their families face, particularly since 1989, of gaining the restitution of property in Poland.

The following panel was dedicated to art and visual representation. Michael Berkowitz portrayed photography as a diverse field that was populated in large measure by Jews in both Central and Eastern Europe, a world that has not only been destroyed but has also largely been forgotten today. Charles Dellheim broadened the context by telling the stories of several Jewish art dealers in Western Europe who began as autodidacts but soon became pivotal figures in the art world. Dellheim sought to restore their dignity and cast them not simply as victims of persecution and plunder by underscoring their importance to the development of European aesthetic taste. Jonathan Petropoulos discussed the networks of art dealers that developed during the “Third Reich” and that were active in the acquisition and sale of artworks looted from European Jews. After 1945, a core group of former Nazi dealers, many based in Munich, trafficked looted art, working with non-Nazi dealers in Switzerland, Liechtenstein, and Austria, but also Western Europe and the United States. The failure of denazification ensured that these art dealers continued to profit from such stolen goods during the post-war period, right up until today. Understanding these networks, Petropoulos maintained, is key to tracking Nazi looted art that has yet to be properly restored to its owners.

The last panel focused on restitution and compensation. Eva Balz discussed property politics in East and West Berlin after 1945. She suggested that the Cold War and mutual provocation between Soviet Union and Western Allies had a significant but unexplored impact on restitution policies. Benno Nietzel examined the dispossession of German Jews and the Aryanization of Jewish-owned businesses in a longer-term historical perspective. Exploring the fate of Jewish entrepreneurs after the loss of their firms, he analysed the development of Aryanized businesses during the war and into the post-1945
period. Nietzel read the restitution proceedings of the 1950s as a renegotiation of property values, which implied not simply financial conflict but also social struggles for memory and recognition. A case study of the restitution process for Aryanized property in Austria was provided by Lisa Silverman using the experience of photographer Madame d’Ora (Dora Kallmus). Silverman contended that the return of stolen property, like the loss that had preceded it, was entwined with the fate of families and traumatically inflected. Anna Rubin presented on the mission of the Holocaust Claims Processing Office (HCPO) of the New York State Department of Financial Services and the HCPO’s methods for addressing restitution claims. She gave several instructive examples that laid out the terms of legal success.

By combining research on the different means used by the Nazis to dispossess the Jews with stories detailing the experiences of the victims, the conference revealed the complexity of the process by which the Jews were expropriated. The many papers also hinted at the different dimensions of the loss, providing everyone with a sense of what was destroyed in human, cultural, and financial terms. The conference also offered scholars new impetus for further research on the legal, financial, and cultural techniques deployed by state actors, business people, and the local civilian population in seizing Jewish property. It also made clear the need for more work on the different ideological motives and justifications for theft on this scale. Finally, the conference demonstrated in new ways and with new material that the so-called “restitution process” after the war has hardly restored the former property rights of the victims.

Jonathan Zatlin (Boston University)