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The author of this article was one of the protagonists in the publication of archival documents, long kept secret, describing how cultural property was seized in Central Europe by the Red Army at the end of the Second World War. Three decades later, he revisits this important chapter in the history of “translocations”.

It is hard to believe, but the controversy about the “trophy art” moved to the Soviet Union after the end of World War II started nearly 30 years ago. The discovery of the so-called special repositories of Soviet Museums was the unavoidable element of Gorbachev’s *perestroika*. In essence, the *glasnost* campaign became the second wave of de-Stalinization. An effort of Khrushchev to expose some crimes of the totalitarian state and, at the same time, not to rock too much the boat of the communist ideology started in the mid-1950s and was suffocated by the beginning of the 1960s¹. In the second part of the 1980s, it looked like the rediscovery (and re-interpretation) of the Soviet past had finally become unstoppable. The catalogue of revealed crimes, betrayals, mass murders, and ethnic cleansing looked endless. While Germans were involved in emotional discussions provoked by *Historikerstreit*, people in the crumbling Soviet Union were standing in lines at news kiosks to buy a new issue of the liberal «Ogoniok» magazine to read the next article about GULAG camps, forced collectivization, post-war deportation of Chechens and Crimean Tatars, or the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. The picture of the world they grew up with was shattered.

This total revision of history turned the oleographic fairy tale about the Soviet past into a horror show. People naively believed that it could not be true during those years, demonstrating a stunning thirst for the system deconstruction. (By the beginning of the 1990s, this “shock of the past” resulted in the massive hangover provoking the neo-imperialist paradigm formation.)

The historical revelations proved to be instrumental in destroying the Soviet empire and communist ideology². For a short time, archives did not fully open their doors but granted limited access to their explosive holdings. However, the feast of historians was brief. The Weimar syndrome of the Yeltsin Russia and the formation of Putinism ideology, summed in the notorious maxima «Russia stood up from its knees», put an end to de-Stalinization. In this brave new world Stalin was labeled by the regime ideologists as “an efficient manager” and Russian

history turned into a holy script³. Any attempt to revise it became punishable by the law⁴.

The revelation about hidden cultural trophies was a minor development compared to the publication of documents about hundreds of Polish officers murdered in Katyn forest, or the fate of millions of Ukrainian peasants starved to death during the Holodomor. However, structurally it was an integral part of the history of Stalinism. It also had an important distinction. In contrast to the victims of Soviet policies, the objects (witnesses and victims of the “trophy art” saga) still existed, held as they were in the secret repositories of museums, libraries, and archives around the Soviet Union. During the days of the *perestroika* optimism, it looked like if history could not be corrected, it still could be repented for.

The old sins had to be identified, and if it was still possible, the wrongs had to be amended. Rejection of the past gave the *perestroika* generation a unique chance, not just to share responsibility for it but to contest the status quo.

However, just a few years after the collapse of the USSR, the choice of Russian society vindicated the complete difference to naive expectations – in the end, the association with the perpetrators proved to be more appealing than self-identification with the victims.

The Soviet “trophy art” scandal coincided with a broad re-evaluation of the history of the confiscation, removal, and protection of art in the twentieth century. In a way, the end of the Cold War became the end of World War II postponed for more than three decades. History was revised not only in the dying Soviet Union. For a short time, the space of historical research in once-divided Europe and America became united, archive materials were accessible for the first time on both sides of the Oder-Neisse line⁵. Historical records were scattered worldwide as an old photograph that had been torn to pieces finally came back together, reconstructing the fragmented image.

Such a situation not only provoked the discovery of the Soviet secret trophies. It also triggered revalorization of the Allied (mainly American) policy on protection and restitution of cultural property, and the rediscovery of the complicated fate of artworks that belonged to the victims of the Holocaust⁶.

As a result of these developments, the late 1980s-the the early 1990s became the rare period of the international awareness of the fate of the cultural property in totalitarian states and military conflicts.

If this awareness resulted in tectonic changes in museums’ practices and art market operations in the West, it failed to initiate in any substantial progress in the Russian Federation (and other Soviet successors states).

The reason for such development was mainly political. The “trophy art” saga trajectory completely coincided with the slow death of hope for post-communist states’ smooth transformation into functional democracies⁷.

If the collapse of the “great expectations” is well described in contemporary literature, some details of the unraveling of the “trophy art” problem still remain untold⁸.

It is essential to explain the USSR’s cultural trophies’ status after Khrushchev’s returns to the Dresden Gallery and East German and Polish museum collections in 1954-1959. These massive returns were as half-hearted as all other reformist attempts by the Soviet leader. The decision not to send back artworks, libraries, and archives, which initially belonged to the museums of the Western part of Germany, private collections, and other countries, was dictated by Cold War sentiments⁹. There was not too much logic to it. The “gesture of goodwill” towards “brotherly” GDR and Poland deprived soviet holdings of the lion’s share of masterpieces. The *Place de la Concorde* by Degas, or Schliemann Treasure, which fell through the cracks in the Soviet goodwill (in correspondence to the provisions of the secret decision of the Soviet government) were doomed for oblivion¹⁰.

The mantra about removing whole museum collections from occupied territories as legal “compensation for the Soviet cultural losses” was repeated so frequently during the first half of the 1990s that the very authors of it started to believe in its impeccability. It was destined to become the foundation of the Russian “Federal Law on Cultural Valuables Displaced to the USSR as a Result of the Second World War and Located on the Territory of the Russian Federation,” despite the open falsification of historical facts¹¹. The authors and supporters of the law cherry-picked a policy directive used in 1943-1946, disregarding Stalin’s decision to classify all information about “compensation” transported to the Soviet soil.

In the post-war USSR, such a conception was never used. The post-war secrecy introduced by Stalin was challenged after his death.

However, the collections sent back to Dresden and Leipzig by Krushchev were “saved” by soviet soldiers and not taken from Germany as “compensation.”

The grand gesture of a massive return was followed by a second wave of secrecy.

Every “cultural trophy” remaining in the USSR was hidden and forgotten¹². The very re-establishment of the secret holdings was a psychological phenomenon.

The state couldn’t solve the problem, and by hiding, it pretended that it didn’t exist. Using the Russian expression, cultural trophies transformed into a “suitcase without a handle.” Millions of books, hordes of archival materials, hundreds of

thousands of artworks for decades collected dust while inaccessible to scholars or the public. (The only exception was made for the musical instruments. Stradivarius and Guarneri violins found in the ruins of German cities and incorporated into the State collection of the musical instruments were chartered to Soviet performers and by virtue of this, avoided decades of silence.)

The motives of participation in the nearly total removal of cultural property from the defeated enemy territory in 1944-1947 by people who witnessed Nazi brutality could be understood, but the massive “incarceration” of culture (often continuing to this day) could hardly be excused.

This policy of silence had a strange side effect. All information about the losses of the Soviet museums was also classified. Unlike in Poland, no one tried to research, compose lists, set aside catalogues of the disappeared artworks, follow the major auction sales, or otherwise try to locate and recuperate lost art¹³. The only exception was made for the Amber Room, transformed into a symbol of the destruction of the Soviet museum collections by the Nazis and developed into an adventurous narrative. This narrative inspired KGB and Stasi operations and uncounted treasure hunters in the East and in the West¹⁴.

Thus, a Soviet museum curator could not discuss such skeletons in their cupboards as the “trophy” and the pieces from a museum collection looted by the Nazis and disappeared without any trace.

At the end of the 1980s, we naively believed that the problem of “secret repositories” could be solved quickly, that the “trophy art” was no more than a part of the “legacy of shame.” If every Soviet leader from Stalin to Chernenko (except for the Khrushchev’s generous gesture, however, dictated by the political necessity) was concealing the truth about the hidden paintings, sculptures, documents, and books, it was incorrect. Dreaming about a new country, rejoining the “civilized world,” we believed in international law’s efficiency, from the Geneva Convention and UNESCO agreements to the ICOM code of ethics. We were sure that the problem will be solved for mutual benefits through cooperation and negotiations.

In April 1991, my collaborator Grigorii Kozlov and I published in «ARTnews» magazine the article *Spoils of War*, revealing for the first time the scale of the secret holdings of Soviet Museums¹⁵. Before posting the American magazine piece, we tried to offer it to Soviet publications; however, it was rejected every time. I remember frequently visiting a well-known liberal editor of a respected magazine trying to convince him to run the story. Every time he replied to my pleas after some hesitation: «It is too early».

Finally, we understood that it will be “too early” forever and decided to publish our article abroad.

We chose «ARTnews» because, by the late 1980s, the magazine became known for its focus on the fate of cultural property looted during World War II. By this time, «ARTnews» had already put out groundbreaking articles on the hidden artworks, exposing the Mauerbach depository in Austria and paintings from Hitler and the Göring collections in the German museums¹⁶.

Our report described the losses of the Soviet museums, covered the trophy brigades' operations in Germany, and listed such highlights of the "secret depositories" as the Schliemann Treasure. We didn't specify the mentioned art objects' locations, including the Trojan gold, on purpose. In our opinion, it was the obligation of the Soviet cultural and museum authorities to reveal where the trophies were hidden.

The article provoked an international scandal and the avalanche of denial inside the country. In September, the second article, *The Soviet War Treasures. The Growing Controversy* was out¹⁷. This time, it included the documents proving Schlieman gold's location in the Pushkin Museum and such paintings as, for example, *Place de la Concorde* by Degas in the Hermitage.

However, nay-saying continued until 1994, when Irina Antonova, the Pushkin Museum director, finally demonstrated the hidden treasure to the German experts. A year later both the Pushkin Museum and the Hermitage organized exhibitions of the "trophy art". The show in St. Petersburg was called *The Hidden Treasures Revealed: Impressionists Masterpieces and other Important French Paintings Preserved by the State Hermitage Museum*¹⁸. The very title of the show provoked the question of why paintings from private German collections, including the *Place de la Concorde* by Degas, preserved by the museum, were hidden for such a long time? The Pushkin Museum exhibited a variety of paintings including the canvases disappeared at the end of World War II from the Hungarian Jewish collections. The title of the show *Twice Saved* echoed the main trope of the propaganda campaign followed the Krushchev's return of the East German museum collections. However, the presence of property of the victims of Holocaust in the exhibition made an attempt to recycle the old legend not too efficient. The show was instantly re-christened in the international press into *Twice Stolen*¹⁹. Finally in 1996 the Schliemann Treasure, the very presence of which Antonova denied for years, was shown to the public²⁰.

Our first publications were not finalizing but initiating our research.

We had a chance to interview those participants of events who still were alive. Among them were the members of the trophy brigades Andrei Belokopytov and Andrei Chegodaev. (I remember that during the interview, Chegodaev retreated to the kitchen and returned with a piece of a rug – a fragment of canvas in which,

according to him, Raphael's *Sistine Madonna* was packed during the transportation to the USSR.)

Yet, the primary sources for our reconstruction of the events were not verbal recollections, regardless of how important they were, but the documents. To the luck of historians, the totalitarian systems of the twentieth century were obsessed with documenting everything (including the most unspeakable crimes). Such fixation produced the endless paper trail. It was possible to make five copies of every document by sticking in a typewriter five pages interleaved with carbon paper.

The first, the second, and presumably the third copy could be stamped as classified or highly sensitive. The fourth and the fifth were often lost in a bureaucratic ocean of miscellaneous documentation. Relevant documents had to be fished out the files of the Committee on the Arts correspondence and reports, which included orders for the purchase of chairs for village clubs or equipment for provincial cinema theaters.

However, trying to do research during the halcyon days of the relative archival liberalism, we never had a chance to access such essential collections of documents as the archives of Gokhran (the State Treasury), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, KGB, the Soviet Military Administration of Germany, and other state bodies of the USSR. The knowledge about operations on the removal of cultural property from the zone of Soviet occupation of Germany remains limited mainly by information about activities of the trophy brigades of the State Committee on the Arts and the State Committee on Cultural and Educational Organizations. If these brigades were responsible for removing the majority of artworks and other cultural materials from the occupied territories, other organizations' brigades also seized a lot of cultural property. It is enough to mention confiscation by the brigade of Gokhran of the collection of the Grünes Gewölbe in Dresden. Another remaining "white spot" in our knowledge of the immediate post-war events is Ukrainian trophy brigades' activities. So far, Ukrainian researchers have failed to locate any documents shedding light on their operations. It is not known who commanded these groups, what their objective was, and how they cooperated or competed with their counterparts from Moscow. The multitude of trophy officers dispatched to Germany by practically every USSR governmental organization still requires meticulous research. For example, it is known that the State Committee of Architecture removed from Germany various artworks. Some of the trophy paintings are held in the Shchusev State Museum of Architecture repositories in Moscow. Their provenance is not known. The impressive group of works on paper from the collection of the Preußische Akademie der Künste

was transferred to the Kyiv Museum of Western and Oriental Art (now Bogdan and Varvara Khanenko Museum of Art) around 1984 from the library of the State Committee on Construction of Ukrainian SSR. However, we have no information about the activities of the architects dressed in field uniforms in the Soviet zone of occupation.

In 1995 the first stage of our investigation was completed. We reconstructed the general narrative of the odyssey of the “trophy art” in our book *Beautiful Loot. The Soviet Plunder of the European Art Treasures*. (It was released in the United Kingdom under the title *Stolen Treasure: The Hunt for the World’s Lost Masterpieces*.)²¹

One year before our book’s publication, we started a research project on the systematization of the copies of archival documents from the Russian Federation archives in cooperation with the Germanisches Nationalmuseum. The project’s task was to amass the critical quantity of the documental materials, which could help initiate further research of confiscation and removal of artworks from German museum collections. To convince the German side of the proposed undertaking’s efficiency, we prepared three reports. The first was dedicated to the transportation of the confiscated cultural property to the USSR²². The second contained documents proving in detail the location of the famous Gothic stain-glass windows from Marienkirche in Frankfurt on the Oder. The stain-glass windows found by the trophy brigades in Potsdam were transported to the State Hermitage. (Ironically, on delivery of them to the museum, the Hermitage curators mistakenly described the window depicting the scenes of Apocalypse as the story of Christ, confusing the Antichrist and Jesus). The report was used for the restitution claim satisfied by the Russian government in 2002, making the windows of Marienkirche the only group of artworks restituted to Germany in accordance with the Federal Law on Cultural Valuables Displaced to the USSR²³.

The third report was dedicated to the Sculpture Collection of the Berlin State Museums, a number of pieces having been damaged by fire in the anti-aircraft artillery tower in Friedrichshain. Excavated from the ashes initially by trophy brigade members and later by a professional archeologist nearly one year after the disaster, the sooty remains of the once magnificent collection were shipped to the Pushkin Museum and the Hermitage.

The fate of the damaged sculptures, fragmented and defaced by fire, was ironic. Unlike the Sistine Madonna or other paintings from the Dresden gallery, they were, in reality, saved from the smoldering ruins of the Flakturm Friedrichshain. They belonged to the museum’s collection in East Germany and had to be returned according to the logic of the Krushchev’s decision. However, part of them stayed in the USSR. The explanation for not sending back all the damaged objects could

be twofold. On the one hand, cracked majolica, half-melted bronzes, and broken marbles didn't wholly fit the legend of the masterpieces "saved twice" – first by the Soviet soldiers and then by the Soviet restorers. The restorers could re-varnish Raphael or retouch Correggio, but they couldn't magically resurrect shattered marbles²⁴. The return of the ruined artworks could be a dangerous step for the Soviet PR campaign.

On the other hand, the very situation in the Flakturm Friedrichshain provoked doubts, if not suspicion. It is unlikely that it will ever be established what caused the two fires that destroyed its contents. However, already during the first post-war decade, the Soviet occupational authorities were accused of negligence. Such accusations were summarized by Christopher Norris, an American art historian, and the former MFA&A officer, in his article published in the *Burlington Magazine*. Norris claimed that the Soviets concentrated on evacuation of the Flakturm Zoo collections and neglected the storage in Friedrichshain, failing to post sentries. According to the art historian, the Soviet Military Administration of Berlin was late with the organization of excavations. Simultaneously, the Soviet zone authorities remained deaf to the allied call to take care of the damaged site frequently looted by DPs.

Norris stated in his article:

The writer visited the Flakturm in August and found a Polish 'displaced person' at the door and the debris still high on the floors. The bleached terra-cotta, calcined marbles, discoloured bronzes, and, over all, the heavy fall of concrete from the roof bore witness to the great heat of the fire. Fragments of china, small bronzes, and a few pieces of the larger sculpture were still to be seen. Official Allied representations were made, requesting the Russians to allow an organised excavation of the Flakturm by the museum authorities, but, early in 1946, Soviet troops cleared and collected the debris and later, in accordance with a quadripartite agreement respecting fortified places, blew up the Flakturm.²⁵

The publication in a specialized art history magazine could hardly be noticed in Moscow. However, on 10 December 1952, «The Times» published a summary of the Norris article²⁶.

Such attention of the leading British newspaper, pinning the blame for the destruction of the collections stored in Friedrichshain on the Soviet failure to protect the repository, could become an essential factor in the decision not to return the damaged art objects to the GDR.

In 1995 we deposited the collection of copies of the documents connected to confiscation, transportation, and registration of trophy artworks to the

Germanisches Nationalmuseum. That same year the museum published a book based on our research²⁷.

We hoped that the project could be continued and offered the second stage of research focused on collecting documents of the Soviet state boards and museums connected to the preparation of the Krushchev's returns of artworks to GDR. These returns were accompanied by the total inventoring of the Soviet museums and institutions' cultural trophies. Undoubtedly such a group of documents could be instrumental in the location of the artworks removed to the USSR after the war and remained in the museum repositories. However, for reasons unknown to us, the project was discontinued to our great disappointment. With time passed, it is becoming clear that the momentum for collecting such documentation is lost and hardly will return in the visible future.

The documents deposited in Nuremberg were called the Akinsha-Kozlov Archive. They were not used intensively for the simple reason that all of them were in Russian. A few curators from museums in the Eastern part of Germany (who more likely had some command of the Russian language) consulted them from time to time.

Such hermetic existence of the archive was interrupted only in 2008. A year earlier the Kulturstiftung der Länder, which collaborated with Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz in the program German-Russian Museums Dialogue, requested a loan of the archival materials from Nuremberg. Once deposited by us in the Germanisches Museum, the documents traveled to Berlin to be examined and researched.

The research group created by the Kulturstiftung included qualified historians and art historians focused on the losses of the German museums²⁸.

The timing of the project couldn't be better. The appointment of Marina Loshak as a new director of the Pushkin Museum made possible cooperation with SPK manifested in the groundbreaking exhibition *Das verschwundene Museum. Die Berliner Skulpturen- und Gemäldesammlungen 70 Jahre nach Kriegsende*²⁹. The show realized as a joint project with German-Russian Museum Dialogue focused on the artworks destroyed and damaged in the Flakturm Friedrichshain, which attracted our attention in 1994. However, in 2015 the German art historians learned about the fate of the damaged objects from the Sculpture Collection, not only from the old Soviet documents. Cooperation with Russian curators gave a chance to see and research the objects. The disappeared masterpiece of Donatello, the statue of John the Baptist damaged by fire during the Friedrichshain disaster, was finally examined and published³⁰. We revealed its location in our report of 1994.

Twenty years later, the Florentine sculptor's damaged bronze was finally returned to the realm of art history.

This year, the “German-Russian Museums Dialogue” research group completed its examination of the documents collected by us in the Russian archives more than two decades ago. It will be summarized in a volume published in 2021³¹.

Reviewing all these positive developments, it is difficult not to muse about the future of the investigation of the history of removing cultural property from defeated Germany.

The possibilities of such research are not exhausted yet, but their future depends on many factors – political climate, access to archival holdings, and a possibility of cooperation with Russian museums.

Last but not least, it depends on the willingness of the German museum’s directors and curators to conduct painstaking and laborious reconstruction of the past shattered in fragments not unlikely from some statues destroyed in the Flakturm Friedrichshain, whose pieces could be found today in Berlin, Moscow, and St. Petersburg.

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