

War Booty at Uppsala University Library

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Abstract:

Uppsala University Library was founded in 1621. The Swedish King Gustavus II Adolphus some years later made large donations to this library of books taken as war booty in Poland. Some decades later, many books originating in Germany, Bohemia and Denmark ended up at Uppsala in a similar manner. Taking cultural war booty is strictly forbidden in the laws of war today, but at the time it could be considered to be legal, if it was done under certain correct circumstances, following the tradition established by Hugo Grotius.

In the present paper we discuss some aspects concerning this war booty in Swedish libraries. These books surely travelled across borders, and the idea that war booty accordingly represents a kind of cultural transfer has been suggested from time to time. In this paper this view is problematized. Can this really be seen as an example of cultural transfer, from a historical point of view? Or is it something else?

Keywords: War booty, 17th century, Counter-reformation, cultural transfer, libraries

War Booty at Uppsala University Library

Uppsala University Library was founded in 1621. The Swedish King Gustavus II Adolphus some years later to this library made donations of books taken as war booty in Latvia and Poland during the many wars that Sweden, as an aspiring super-power, was engaged in at the time. Some decades later, a great number of books originating in Germany, Bohemia and Denmark ended up at Uppsala in a similar manner. Taking cultural war booty is strictly forbidden according to the international laws of war today, but at the time it could be considered to be legal, if it was done under certain correct circumstances, following the tradition of Hugo Grotius. And the practice was widespread at the time, by all parties and all countries in Europe. And not only books were looted, of course. Arms, art, liturgical artifacts,

flags, and goods of most other kinds were taken as well. And not least geographical territories. In peace treaties matters concerning restitution could nevertheless be settled, as in the treaty of Oliwa in 1660 between Sweden and Poland, according to which parts of the booty should be, and to some extent were, restored to Poland.

In the present paper we would like to discuss some aspects concerning this war booty in Swedish libraries. Shameful as the acquisition method must be regarded from the perspective of our time (Swedish media love to treat it for this reason), it was considered legal at the time, and we certainly cannot turn history back, but must handle this material in a way that is respectful to all parties today. These books, and the values, both cultural and economic, they represent, indeed travelled across borders, and the idea that the war booty accordingly could and should be considered from the perspective of cultural transfer has been suggested from time to time. In our paper we want to problematize this view. Is really cultural transfer a relevant theoretical perspective? What is needed for it to be a cultural transfer? Just transporting the books across the border, can't really be enough, can it? So if it is not cultural transfer, what is it? We have to know the history of the war booty books in our library, and how the collection has been taken care of and used, in order to answer these questions and to have such a discussion. We will start by giving a short background to literary war booty in Swedish libraries, mainly Uppsala University Library.

The inevitable and fundamental work treating the question of literary war booty in Swedish collections is Otto Walde's doctoral thesis *Storhetstidens litterära krigsbyten* (Literary War Booty from the Era of Greatness). Between the years 1621 and 1650 Sweden almost constantly was at war, and the military campaigns were in general both ambitious and successful. By Swedish 19th-century historiographers the period was accordingly given the label "The Era of Greatness", and this is what it is still generally called, and what kids are still taught in school. With the growing ambitions of a young and poor state in the outskirts of Europe, the idea soon also appeared that the country should not only have a powerful military position, but that cultural prominence was important as well. Military power should go hand in hand with cultural power. But Sweden was poor in books, universities, scholars, artists and artisans, etc. Uppsala University, which was the only university of the country, had been reopened in 1595, and its library was founded in 1621. The Swedish army accordingly used the opportunity of the many wars to also take war-booty and especially looked for and looted rich book collections. We easily notice that the targets of this practice were often the libraries of Jesuit Colleges and other Catholic strongholds in particular – Sweden was in the first half of the 17th century the foremost warrior for the protestant cause, not least in the Thirty Years War. The aim of this interest in books was thus twofold: to strike at the Catholic Counterreformation by depriving this movement of parts of its intellectual weapons and, secondly, to enrich Swedish institutions, like Uppsala University, with fine and excellent book collections. Thus, for instance, the library of the Jesuit College in Riga (1621), in Braniewo (1626), the chapter library of Frombork (1626), the library of Julius Echter, prince-bishop of Würzburg, and one of the most prominent persons of the German counterreformation (1631) and the library of the Jesuit College of Poznań (1655) were seized and ended up in the collections of Uppsala University Library. We are talking about literally thousands of books.

Literary war booty was also taken in the wars against the Danes in the 1650s, for instance, but then there were no confessional reasons for taking books. We will thus omit this booty from our discussion here, nevertheless knowing that there are of course differences in the practice of the Swedish army of the days.

To this background we would now like to try to apply the concept of cultural transfer, as has been suggested from time to time in recent treatments of war booty. This rather new theoretical perspective, first used under this label in the middle of the 1980s by Michel Espagne and Michael Werner concerning the historical relations between Germany and France, essentially refers to “the process by which cultural practices are transferred between different cultures”. The definition we will use has been translated from the German Wikipedia-article on the subject (sub voce “Kulturtransfer”). Wikipedia is as it is, but it indeed has many readers. Those who are interested in different other approaches to and definitions of the concept in the research of previous decades will easily find those in scholarly articles.¹ A definition of course immediately raises new questions: What is culture? What is a cultural practice? We won’t lose focus here and start a discussion in order to answer these questions, but worth stressing is that just as cultural practices may be of different kinds, cultures can be so too: vertically in society and horizontally between different regions and countries. It can be scholarly and laic, etc. Cultural practice is one thing, cultural value is another, and so is cultural capital (in the sense of Bourdieu).

One way of approaching this question would be to investigate and discuss how the war booty books were treated and used once they had been delivered to the library and put on the shelves. At a young protestant university in the very north of Europe, the main purpose of which was to educate young men to the service of the state and of the church, large amounts of books arriving from catholic institutions *cannot just have been widely accepted and used without friction*. The 17th century is a period of great religious conflict in Europe. In the propaganda, in poetry and literature, in the protestant regions at the time, the pope is generally referred to as antichrist. There are numerous dissertations defended and printed at Uppsala University in which catholic practices and ideas are refuted. The polemic tone is ubiquitous, from both sides in the conflict. In the rather recently completed catalogue covering the books from the Jesuit College of Braniewo, for instance, we also notice that this library included only one single title by Martin Luther. On the other hand, Catholic theologians are numerous, of course. If we look at single copies, we often see that the names of protestant authors and scholars have been erased (as Melanchthon’s name in an edition of Aristotle from 1542, taken from Poznan [see picture]). And the sections of the catholic libraries covering religious matters are understandably very large. Huge libraries from catholic strongholds on the continent on the shelves of a young university in the outskirts of Europe were great trophies and treasures. That they also represent a great cultural value is self-evident, and this value has been transferred, no doubt. But is there a transfer of culture when the books are not read, except, perhaps, for the purpose of knowing one’s enemy and his ideas? If cultural transfer would be a relevant concept, we would expect that the catholic (Polish, German, Latvian) cultures and views they represent would have had influence in its new environment. From a religious perspective, considering the many catholic books, we could exclude that possibility almost completely, we claim. Notice that we said ‘almost completely’. For there is one circumstance that would indicate influence.

When the books from Braniewo Jesuit College had been transported to Sweden and ended up in Uppsala, the Catholic theological literature was arranged according to the classification system used by the Jesuit Colleges of Northern Europe. In this regard Uppsala University Library seems to be rather unique among Protestant libraries of the time. Probably the reason for doing so was practical. Why invent a new order when an order was already existing, and

¹ http://jlsj.upg-ploiesti.ro/site_engleza/documente/documente/Arhiva/Word_and_text_no_2_2014/00Introduction.pdf (fotnot 11)

could be applied immediately? During the 1650s, however, the spiritual climate of Sweden got tougher and the state church advocated for a strong Protestant, and anti-Catholic, orthodox theology. This also led to a theoretical change of the classification of theological literature, and the more important works were suddenly divided along strictly confessional lines into Lutheran, Calvinistic and Catholic subdivisions. How then were the books used? Both students and professors had access to the library; in practice the professors could take the books out of the library and use them in their homes, which was not allowed for the students. Unfortunately the earliest lists of loans that have been preserved at Uppsala date from the 1690s. There are, however, strong indications to suggest that controversial literature, like Catholic books, in the second half of the 1600s were moved to a closed room in the library to which the students did not have free access. These books were only to be used, read and understood by trained theologians, who were true trustworthy Protestants, who knew how to “correctly” interpret the texts, and were not easily influenced by what they read. In this way Catholic literature came to be used in their “right and proper way”, as they put it.

The use of a classification system from another cultural and epistemological context is, we claim, the closest we can come to something that looks like cultural transfer. But not even this is strong enough. For to what extent does a classification system and the order of the books on the shelves influence the minds of the users, if the categories where the greatest differences can be found, i.e. the theological ones, are generally suspected and rejected? And after a few decades the classification system changed. Is this a transfer of cultural practices?

Other parts of the war booty libraries were more used, of course, and not problematic at all. Scientific books presenting the latest cutting edge scientific discoveries in different fields of course were most welcome, and much sought after at a young, poor and rather small peripheral university as the one in Uppsala. This goes also for the many excellent editions of Classical authors, of which a university library of course never can have enough. In this field, we could talk about a “transfer of knowledge” between different cultural and geographical contexts, rather than a cultural transfer.

So far we have mainly dealt with the intellectual contents of the libraries on edition-level, and we question if cultural transfer is really the proper perspective. If we turn our attention to the single copies themselves there, it is true that these are certainly much coloured by their cultural context. Material evidence of all kinds, provenances, book bindings, etc., mirrors its cultural background. Many bindings from Poland are typically Polish, and some are very typical of Cracow-origin. Our Copernicana-collection, which was taken as war booty from Frombork in 1626, contains many books that used to be owned and used by the great astronomer Copernicus himself. The cultural value that such a collection represents is certainly enormous. But has it influenced the cultural practices in Sweden or Uppsala? Not that we know. The cultural aspects that are present in material evidence have also been very carelessly treated during the centuries. Books have been rebound, annotations covered, cut off or deleted, etc. First in our time such aspects have started to be of great importance. One could wonder whether the book bindings that arrived with war booty collections inspired and influenced book binders in the new context, or not, and this is surely possible, just as Swedish architecture was influenced by Polish architects during the reign of King Sigismund, during some years at the end of the 16th century when he was King of both Poland and Sweden at the same time. If so, that would surely be a case of cultural transfer. But so far we cannot prove such an influence, but it would surely be worth an investigation.

Notice here that we have been speaking of book collections as war booty. If we would broaden our perspective and also include other kinds of items that were taken, the result could be different. An astonishing fact is that Swedish armies took many religious artifacts as booty, such as altar pieces and liturgical instruments, and used them in churches in Sweden, where a lot of people constantly could see them and relate to them. What happens in such cases? Perhaps cultural transfer can be a more useful concept here.

So what is this war booty of book collections, if not an example of cultural transfer? A transfer of cultural value, of course, but probably this is not precise enough. For an ambitious and growing young country, which aimed at cultural prominence as well as military, we believe that rich book collections were important primarily in bestowing their new owners with cultural capital, in the sense of Bourdieu. So why couldn't we just call it a transfer of cultural capital? We think that this primarily is what happened. But it is not all. This was war booty, trophies taken by victorious warriors in bloody conflicts. The Latin word that was generally used at the time for this kind of material is *spolium*. The original sense of this word is a booty that a victor could take from the corpse of the foe he had killed. To own such booty had *in itself* positive associations at the time, which is a fact that we need to be aware of when dealing with these questions today, when these positive associations are no longer at hand, and have turned negative instead, and rightly so.

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