A Cultural Genocide: An Analysis of German Culture in the Third Reich

Prior to Adolf Hitler becoming Chancellor of Germany on January 30th, 1933, Germany was a hub of erudition, despite the poor economy. Universities were thriving, scientific innovation was on the rise, and theatre and the fine arts were growing increasingly popular. However, when Hitler came in, he began implementing his flawed ideals into German culture. The Chancellor was fiercely anti-intellectual (as was typical of Nazi party members), and for him, the reawakening of the Germanic spirit was far more important than Jewish intellectualism. By burning books, banning music, and plundering artwork, Hitler engineered one of the greatest cultural genocides in history.

On May 10th, 1933, a spectacle occurred that had not been seen in Europe since the Middle Ages. University-aged students gathered in Berlin to cast thousands of books by both renowned and obscure authors into a roaring fire, under the watchful eye of Joseph Goebbels. Goebbels, addressing the 40,000 people gathered around the fire, proclaimed that “Jewish intellectualism is dead” and encouraged the students to “clean up the debris of the past” (USHMM Web). Prior to this day, students had spent weeks tossing condemned manuscripts out of German libraries. This anti-intellectual
movement was certainly not student-based. Professors were equally guilty of removing all Jewish, socialist, and pacifist authors from their bookshelves. All of this was achieved with minimal active participation from the Nazi party, which demonstrates just how powerful persuasive speech and propaganda can be. The list of banned authors was extensive and included several highly-respected writers like Helen Keller, Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, H.G. Wells, and Albert Einstein. In response to the banning of her work, Keller penned a lengthy letter to German students stating:

> History has taught you nothing if you think you can kill ideas. Tyrants have tried to do that often before, and the ideas have risen up in their might and destroyed them. You can burn my books and the books of the best minds in Europe, but the ideas in them have seeped through a million channels and will continue to quicken other minds. I gave all the royalties of my books for all time to the German soldiers blinded in the World War with no thought in my heart but love and compassion for the German people ...I deplore the injustice and unwisdom of passing on to unborn generations the stigma of your deeds (qtd. in Onion).

Keller’s message is reiterated by Heinrich Heine, a German poet, essayist, and journalist almost one hundred years prior to the war when he warned the world that “wherever they burn books, in the end will also burn human beings”. Unfortunately, the book burnings were only the beginning for Hitler and his ilk.
The second way that the Nazi party disintegrated all multiculturalism within Germany was by banning certain genres of music. Jazz music was banned during the Third Reich, as it was considered black music (Lusane 184). Black dancing, songs, and plays were also prohibited. Several derogatory propaganda posters were displayed around German cities, one of the most infamous emblazoned with the words "Entartete Kunst" or "Degenerate Art". This particular poster featured a coal-black monkey playing a saxophone. Despite the boycott of cultural items, jazz music was eventually reintroduced into German culture in the Third Reich (Fackler Web). Jazz musicians were called in to substitute the German musicians serving in the war. Occasionally, jazz/swing music was even used in propaganda. One example of this is in the propaganda band *Charlie and His Orchestra*, assembled by Joseph Goebbels's *Propagandaministerium* (Fackler Web). Even after jazz was reintroduced into German society, several of the musicians and fans were thrown into prison. Evidently, the Jews were not the sole victims of the Holocaust. Other religious groups and ethnicities were discriminated against as well, though this fact was not as widely broadcasted.

The third way the Nazi party attempted to build a “pure” culture was by plundering thousands of artwork and cultural items from non-Germans. The two biggest culprits were Hitler and his less-known second-in-command, Hermann Goering. Goering, as the right hand man of Hitler, committed some of the most heinous crimes in history. He abused his political power to loot some of Europe’s most beautiful pieces of art, using them to adorn the walls of Carinhall, his countryside home near Berlin. In Goering’s catalogue of the stolen cultural items, recovered years after the war, Goering
records over 1,400 paintings, 250 statues, and 168 tapestries as part of his collection (Samuel Web). When the allies moved in on Germany towards the end of the war, Goering loaded the art onto freight trains, moving it into Bavaria and later Austria. However, on the way, the trains were intercepted, and Goering, rather than returning with the allies to be hanged for crimes against humanity, committed suicide. It was later discovered that the art collection found on the freight trains was far from complete. Goering had left much of it behind in Berlin when he fled the city, but not before trading some of the more “degenerate” pieces of art for those of greater market value.

Many pieces from renowned artists such as Vincent Van Gogh, Vermeer, and Botticelli were taken, hidden away in mines and German mansions for decades. This mass theft took place between the years of 1933 and 1945, in the Third Reich. In the beginning, Jewish art dealers were required by law to sell their artwork for unreasonably low prices to Nazi soldiers, before fleeing from Germany. Soon, Jewish-owned collections were forcibly confiscated, and many of the owners were sent to die in labour camps. It was estimated that one third of all privately held art in Nazi-occupied countries was shipped to Germany during the war (Nagorski Web). Paintings and sculptures deemed “degenerate” were snatched from museums, much of it added to Hitler’s and Goering’s personal collections. Charles A. Goldstein, a lawyer with the Commission for Art Recovery states, “It was the largest art theft in history. I’ve seen numbers every which way, but there’s no doubt the scale was astronomical” (Poole 44-54).

During the war, a group of allied servicemen and women worked to retrieve thousands of cultural items stolen by the Nazis. These people were called the
Monuments Men, and there is now a movie out about their heroic efforts. They often worked with very few resources, and very seldom obtained the packing material, boxes, and crates needed for the shipment of artwork. However, they made do, somehow transforming German sheepskin coats and gas masks into packing material. Together, the Monuments Men recovered close to 60,000 cultural items ("The Real Monuments Men" Web). Archivists and historians continue to strive daily to continue the work of these men and women, righting the wrongs done in the war.

By the banning, looting, and destruction of thousands of cultural items, the Nazis attempted to mould Germany into their flawed idea of a perfect nation. These cultural items represented the people of Germany’s history, and if the Nazi’s could succeed in destroying that, then they could build up a new nation. Thankfully, history can never be erased. The stories of the Monuments Men, Hermann Goering, Helen Keller, and the Jewish victims will live on forever. Hopefully, the world will never have to endure a cultural genocide as notorious as this one ever again.
Works Cited


The Real Monuments Men: Quest to Recover Art Stolen by the Nazis Continues 69 Years after WWII. Jewish News One, 2014. Film.