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Librarians as Agents of German Foreign Policy and the Cultural Consequences of the First World War

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Abstract

In this article I explore the cultural impact of the First World War by analysing the work of libraries and librarians in different settings, from German-occupied Belgium and prisoner-of-war camps to Germany's own public and private libraries. By examining the work of German, Russian, Polish, Ukrainian, and American librarians, the article makes a case for applying the notion of a 'long' First World War to cultural and intellectual history. Considering ephemeral and established libraries, along with new types of collections generated by the war itself, the article sheds light on the changes to library work as a result of mobilization, censorship, and the growth of mass readership. While these changes concerned librarians in all belligerent states, German librarians were particularly affected after the burning of the Leuven library during the city's occupation by German forces. This singular event damaged Germany's national reputation and thereby laid the groundwork for a significant politicization of library work all the way to the Second World War. In addition to tracing the importance of librarians for German foreign policy, the article reconstructs how this professional community, whose intellectual formation was ultimately supranational, responded to the First World War.

'Well, if European literature, as represented by the library of Louvain, and European religion, as represented by the Cathedral of Rheims, have not got us beyond this, in God's name let them perish.'¹ George Bernard Shaw, the Irish playwright, socialist, and critic of the First World War, wrote this in a letter to the President of the United States in early November 1914 to mobilize the American public. The library of Leuven was destroyed in the very first month of the war during a ruthless sacking of the city by the German army.

¹ G. B. Shaw, 'Letter to the President of the United States', *Nation*, 7 Nov. 1914, reprinted in *New York Times: Current History*, 1 (1915), p. 80.

The neo-Renaissance building was shelled and caught fire during the German occupation of the city, resulting in the destruction of most of its 300,000 holdings.

That the destruction of Leuven's library was construed as an injury to Belgium and a threat to European culture at large had to do with the status of libraries in European cultural history. This library was a kind of memory palace of European civilization. Decorated with busts of great men, it entered the cultural memory of the First World War alongside the human casualties of Belgium. With this incident, Germany could be exposed as the new barbarian or 'Hun', with the destruction being compared to the supposed fate of the library of Alexandria in antiquity. Alongside the charge of illegitimate attacks on civilians, the burned library cast a long shadow over Germany's carefully cultivated self-image as the proud purveyor of cosmopolitan knowledge.

The burning of the Leuven library has been previously examined as an isolated case-study.² This echoed the special place which the incident occupied in the reparation settlements for Germany under the Versailles peace treaty. While most of the formulations in the treaty remained generic, in issuing demands such as the 'complete restoration for Belgium' (article 232), or the need to return the spoils of war such as 'archives and souvenirs' to the French government, which were to be specified in a supplement (article 245), some articles listed cases where specific and unique items were named for restitution. One such case was the skull of the Sultan Mkwawa (article 246). The story behind this was an astonishing incident of brutality: the East African leader, who had resisted German rule, was beheaded and his skull was displayed in a Berlin museum just weeks after the event. Another item specifically listed for restitution was the Qur'an of the Caliph Othman acquired by the Turkish authorities in Medina and then handed over to Wilhelm II, which was to be restored to the king of the Hedjaz (article 246). The 'Louvain library' followed in this sequence of particulars. Expressly listed in paragraph 247, its manuscripts, incunabula, and printed books and maps were among the specific objects which had to be replaced. A special commission of librarians oversaw the execution of the reparation settlement in subsequent years.³

For all the emphasis in the Versailles settlement, however, the physical destruction of libraries was an atypical occurrence during the First World War, in great contrast to the Second World War, which saw the obliteration of dozens of libraries both in Europe and around the world, many of them as a result of targeted destruction by German occupation forces.⁴ Yet, as I

² Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Die Bibliothek von Löwen. Eine Episode aus der Zeit der Weltkriege* (Munich, 1988). See also Aleida Assmann, *Cultural memory and Western civilization: functions, media, archives* (New York, NY, 2011); Richard Ovenden, *Burning the books: a history of knowledge under attack* (London, 2020); Tammy Proctor, 'The Louvain library and US ambition in interwar Belgium', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 50 (2015), pp. 147–67, at pp. 148–49.

³ Peace treaty of Versailles, part VIII, reparation, article 247, available at <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/partviii.asp>. On the Sultan Mkwawa, see London, The National Archives, FO 608/215, Sir Horace Byatt's despatch, 14 Nov. 1918.

⁴ UNESCO, *Memory of the world: lost memory – libraries and archives destroyed in the twentieth century* (Paris, 1996), http://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000109150_eng.

argue in this article, irrespective of their singularity, the events at Leuven not only had an especially devastating impact on Germany's reputation as a leader of culture and education but left a more specific impact on librarians as a profession. They highlighted the political significance of libraries for Germany's reputation as a nation, boosting the importance of librarians in German foreign policy for decades after the war.

Libraries organize ideas about the world in ways which serve particular interests in particular places.⁵ Librarians frequently collaborated and even competed with other actors, while also pursuing their own agendas in mobilizing their international networks. In the immediate post-war period, librarians from a range of states – victors as well as vanquished – left a significant volume of writings which provide untapped insights into a comparative history of their profession and its ties to broader trends in intellectual and political life.⁶ To be sure, libraries as such have been at the centre of an entire sub-field of history for decades, particularly among early modernists and historians of the Enlightenment.⁷ But strangely, the study of the political dimension in the work of librarians has mostly been limited to a restricted set of research areas in European historiography, such as Soviet history or the international history of the belle époque.⁸ As I argue, looking at librarians in Germany and the rest of Europe through the lens of the cultural aftermath of the First World War not only reveals previously hidden connections in the histories of librarianship in multiple states. It also sheds light on the way in which professional groups in the cultural sector experience and respond to different kinds of political pressures and circumstances.

Drawing on a multilingual source base from what are now scattered collections across Europe and the United States, I show the extent to which

⁵ Michel Foucault, 'Des espaces autres', *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité*, 5 (1984), pp. 46–49. Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory life: the construction of scientific facts* (Beverly Hills, CA, 1979); Leigh Jenco and J. Chappell, 'Introduction: history from between and the global circulations of the past in Asia and Europe, 1600–1950', *Historical Journal*, 64 (2020), pp. 1–16.

⁶ See Theodore Wesley Koch, *War libraries and allied studies* (New York, NY, 1918); Lyubov Khavkina, *Za rubezhom. Opyt voenno-bibliotchnoi raboty* (Abroad: the experience of military library work) (Leningrad, 1929); Marjan Lodynski, *Nowoczesne bibliotekarstwo wojskowe* (Modern military librarianship) (Krakow, 1927); Fritz Milkau and Georg Leyh, eds., *Handbuch der Bibliothekswissenschaften*, 3 vols. (Leipzig, 1931–40). Aby Warburg, 'Mnemosyne Einleitung (1929)', in *Werke in einem Band*, ed. Martin Treml, Sigrid Weigel, and Perdita Ladwig (Berlin, 2010), pp. 629–39, at pp. 636–7.

⁷ Franco Moretti, *Distant reading* (London, 2013); Simon Burrows, *The French book trade in Enlightenment Europe II: Enlightenment bestsellers* (London, 2018); Andrew Pettegree and Arthur der Weduwen, *The bookshop of the world: making and trading books in the Dutch golden age* (New Haven, CT, 2020); Pascale Fouché, *Histoire des bibliothèques françaises*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1989–92). For a more recent, anthropological take, see Konrad Umlauf, 'Bibliotheken im historischen Prozess', in Konrad Umlauf and Stefan Gradmann, eds., *Handbuch Bibliothek* (Stuttgart, 2012), pp. 287–386.

⁸ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The cultural front: power and culture in revolutionary Russia* (Ithaca, NY, 1992); Stephen Lovell, *The Russian reading revolution: print culture in the Soviet and post-Soviet eras* (Basingstoke, 2000); W. B. Rayward, 'Creating the UIA: Henri La Fontaine, Cyrille Van Overbergh and Paul Otlet', in Daniel Laqua, W. Van Acker, and C. Verbruggen, eds., *International organizations and global civil society: histories of the Union of International Associations* (London, 2022), pp. 17–35.

librarians and other members of the book trade were implicated in German policy throughout the war and in its aftermath.⁹ The historiography on German culture around the time of the First World War has frequently used the war as a caesura, focusing on the impact of defeat on the mood in Germany.¹⁰ When considering the processes and institutions which shaped such ideas in the interwar period, historians have gravitated towards the more eccentric or exceptional institutions of ‘Weimar’ culture, such as the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research.¹¹ As a result, until recently, the continuities between the Wilhelmine and Weimar cultural establishments have fallen by the wayside.¹²

In looking at libraries and librarians, I hope to fill this gap and, in so doing, to make a case for the ‘long First World War’ as a paradigm in cultural history.¹³ As one of the ‘general pinnacles of contemporary life’ (in the formulation of one compendium of German cultural institutions dedicated to Wilhelm II), libraries provide an interesting case-study in this regard.¹⁴ The changing role of librarians in Germany during and after the war provides insights into the way that German society responded to Germany’s progressive isolation in the First World War. Placing the work of libraries and librarians in the context of foreign policy and international relations also sheds light on the

⁹ The sources used in this article include materials in German, French, English, Russian, Ukrainian, and Polish. For materials in Polish, I thank Paulina Bogusz for her help in both research and translation of rarely available materials.

¹⁰ Christian Meier, ‘Sieger, Besiegte, oder wer schreibt Geschichte?’, speech upon receiving the Lichtenberg Prize, 2009, <http://rep.adw-goe.de/bitstream/handle/11858/00-001S-0000-0007-5EA4-4/Article%20-%206.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y>. See also Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The culture of defeat: on national trauma, mourning, and recovery* (New York, NY, 2004); Reinhart Koselleck, ‘Arbeit am Besiegten’, *Zeitschrift für Ideengeschichte*, 6 (2012), pp. 5–11; ‘War crimes in Belgium 1914: an interview with Gerd Krumeich’, *Portal Militärgeschichte*, 14 Feb. 2018, <http://portal-militaer-geschichte.de/node/1857>; Jenny Macleod, ed., *Defeat and memory: cultural histories of military defeat in the modern era* (Basingstoke, 2008), esp. ch. 1, John Horne, ‘Defeat and memory in modern history’, pp. 11–29; Birgit Dalbajewa, *Neue Sachlichkeit in Dresden. Ausstellung, Kunsthalle im Lipsiusbau Dresden* (Dresden, 2011).

¹¹ Peter Gay, *Weimar culture: the outsider as insider* (New York, NY, 2001); Eric D. Weitz, *Weimar Germany: promise and tragedy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018); Rüdiger Graf, *Die Zukunft der Weimarer Republik. Krisen und Zukunftsaneignungen in Deutschland 1918–1933* (Munich, 2008).

¹² For a critique of Weimar historiography, see Benjamin Ziemann, ‘Weimar was Weimar: politics, culture and the employment of the German republic’, *German History*, 28 (2010), pp. 542–71. On the recent turn towards continuities, see Claudia Siebrecht, ‘The presence of the First World War in Weimar culture’, in Nadine Rossol and Benjamin Ziemann, eds., *The Oxford handbook of the Weimar Republic* (Oxford, 2022), pp. 749–74; Katharina Rietzler, ‘The war as history’, *Diplomatic History*, 38 (2014), pp. 826–39; and Emily J. Levine, *Allies and rivals: German–American exchange and the rise of the modern research university* (Chicago, IL, 2021).

¹³ On the ‘long’ war in political history, see, for instance, Robert Gerwarth, *The vanquished: why the First World War failed to end* (New York, NY, 2016); Jörn Leonhard, *Der überforderte Frieden. Versailles und die Welt, 1918–1923* (Munich, 2018).

¹⁴ Paul Hinneberg, ed., *Die allgemeinen Grundlagen der Kultur der Gegenwart* (Berlin, 1906), featuring an entry on libraries alongside universities, schools, theatres, and museums.

adaptation of cultural institutions to the ever-changing situations of wartime and post-war conditions in the aftermath of the First World War.¹⁵

Libraries had long been a bedrock of Germany's understanding of itself as a nation. In order to appreciate the status of librarians in German society during the war and after defeat, it is first necessary to look back at the link between German libraries and Germany's constitutional history between the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire in 1803 and the founding of the German empire in 1871. Much of Germany's knowledge infrastructure was the product of an earlier culture of defeat, the reforms of universities and libraries which Prussia undertook while most of northern Europe was under the occupation of Napoleon's empire. At this point, German libraries had been largely the prerogatives of regional princes, monasteries, or private scholars assembling books for their own research; particularly in some principalities and kingdoms, librarians employed at these smaller courts had developed a series of writings on the subject of book collecting and organizing.¹⁶ As Prussia lost territories and retained only limited sovereignty under Napoleon's expanding rule in Europe, it entered a period of what historians have described as defensive modernization. The secularization decrees of 1803 encouraged by Napoleon remained in place after the *Franzosenzeit* had ended with Napoleon's eviction from Europe.¹⁷

Against this backdrop, the Germans developed their Enlightenment aspirations to mastery of cosmopolitan knowledge, in contexts ranging from libraries to research universities. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was the first author to coin the term 'world literature'.¹⁸ Indeed, in Goethe's lifetime the German tradition and intensity of literary translation exceeded that of all other nations by far.¹⁹ By the end of the nineteenth century, German libraries had become vehicles for the forging of German sovereignty. The organization of knowledge itself had a prestige that was increasingly aligned with that of a unified, or unifying, modern German statehood, even though the size of this union varied: there was the dream of a greater Germany, which came to an end in 1848;

¹⁵ See Markus Friedrich and Helmut Zedelmaier, 'Bibliothek und Archiv', in Marianne Sommer, Staffan Müller-Wille, and Carsten Reinhardt, eds., *Handbuch Wissenschaftsgeschichte* (Stuttgart, 2017), pp. 265–78.

¹⁶ Uwe Jochum, *Kleine Bibliotheksgeschichte* (Stuttgart, 2007).

¹⁷ See the journey to survey the libraries of monasteries, in Carl Christian Traugott, 'Tagebuch meiner Klosterreise' (1813), as discussed in Fritz Milkau, *Die Königliche und Universitäts-Bibliothek zu Breslau* (Breslau, 1911), p. 33. For the dissolved monasteries of Silesia under librarian Büsching, see *ibid.*, p. 39.

¹⁸ Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Sämtliche Werke. Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche*, vol. 1 (Frankfurt, 1999), p. 434.

¹⁹ For Friedrich Schleiermacher, however, German translation theory was invariably connected with affirmations of Prussian superiority. See his *Über die verschiedenen Methoden des Übersetzens*, published during the Napoleonic wars by the Berlin Academy of Sciences (1813). Also discussed in Lawrence Venuti, *The translator's invisibility: a history of translation* (London, 1995).

the formation of a Prussian-dominated federal state in 1871 on the back of the Franco-Prussian war; and, finally, the emergence of a German republic in the wake of Germany's defeat in the First World War. Each of these stages comprised the foundation of a dedicated library collection which was different in character from previous collections of the German princes or private owners. As late as 1911, forty years after the foundation of the German empire, Paul Schwenke, the first director of the Royal Library in Berlin, lamented: 'Our German library system is suffering from the ailment of historical fragmentation.'²⁰ National unity and regional fragmentation remained in constant tension.

By 1913 German library organization was heavily dominated by Prussia, even though other national institutions, associated particularly with the kingdoms of Saxony and Bavaria, continued to assert their authority.²¹ While the cataloguing system of the Prussians became hegemonic, the regional libraries differed in terms of their definition of completeness and the goals of collecting. The German National Library in Leipzig, opened there in 1913, marked a new turn towards collecting popular literature as well as high art. The library channelled the bourgeois character of the city of Leipzig and the longer-term history of the German parliament of 1848. Its ambition was to collect everything from high to low literature, and to amass books published in Germany in both German and foreign languages, including dialects and border languages.²²

Libraries thus became bedrocks of the German state. Even liberals such as the influential historian Friedrich Meinecke expounded the view of Germany's vocation as a nation whose special calling was its cosmopolitan cultural legacy.²³ According to Meinecke, culture was the foundation of its sovereignty. His close associate, the historian Friedrich Thimme, duly became chief librarian of the Prussian upper house of parliament at Meinecke's behest. In 1914, after the outbreak of the war, Thimme remarked: 'We historians want to become the prophets of a new Germany now ... If we cannot serve the fatherland with the sword, we can at least try to do so with the pen.'²⁴ While other nations might struggle with the contradictions between attachments to humanity as such, national identity, and the patriotic loyalty to a specific state, Meinecke and his associates argued that, in a greater Germany

²⁰ Cited in Jörn Leonhard, 'Bücher der Nation: die Entstehung europäischer Nationalbibliotheken als Orte lokalisierter Erinnerung', in Kirstin Buchinger, Claire Gantet, and Jakob Vogel, eds., *Europäische Erinnerungsräume* (Frankfurt, 2009), pp. 72–87, at p. 82.

²¹ Gideon Reuveni, *Reading Germany: literature and consumer culture in Germany before 1933* (New York, NY, 2006).

²² Leonhard, 'Bücher der Nation', p. 79.

²³ Friedrich Meinecke, *Weltbürgertum und Nationalstaat. Studien zur Genesis des deutschen Nationalstaates* (Munich, 1908).

²⁴ A. Thimme, ed., *Friedrich Thimme 1868–1938. Ein politischer Historiker, Publizist und Schriftsteller in seinen Briefen* (Boppard am Rhein, 1994), p. 122. Friedrich Thimme, *Die inneren Zustände des Kurfürstentums Hannover unter der französisch-westfälischen Herrschaft (1806–1813)*, 2 vols. (Leipzig, 1893–5).

under Prussian leadership, these apparent contradictions achieved a happy equilibrium.

Whereas Prussia's leadership in library organization stemmed from the Royal Library, the idea of a German national library as developed in Leipzig was intimately connected to the history of German parliaments. Each founding moment of the German state – such as 1848 (the failed idea of greater Germany connected to the Paulskirche assembly) and 1871 (the creation of the Prussian-dominated smaller Germany) – had been accompanied by the foundation of a dedicated parliamentary library. The collection of the nation's central political library became progressively more nationalized, however.²⁵

As the leading state of Germany's newly minted empire of 1871, Prussia actually lacked an idiosyncratic culture of its own, in contrast to other kingdoms like Saxony or Bavaria. But one of the core achievements of this kingdom became its cultural infrastructure. Library organization and the Prussian library classification system were at the heart of this process.²⁶ By the early 1900s, the Prussian unified catalogue comprised around two million notes on 1,600,000 items.²⁷

During the First World War, German intellectuals and public thinkers fought a vigorous campaign to restore the country's good name as a civilizing force. Germany's illustrated press defied the negative imagery from abroad by publishing a photograph of the intact town house of Leuven, 'fortunately left untouched', sparing the German public the images of 'German fury' which the illustrated press distributed to readers in Britain and the United States.²⁸ A documentary reconstruction of the history of the war, including the conduct of the German army in Belgium, was also part of the effort.²⁹ German librarians played an important part in this restitution of national dignity, acting in a variety of roles: for example, imagining nations for their own people and others, forging revolutions abroad, and rebuilding international bridges.

Generally, the experience of the war and especially of defeat mobilized German intellectuals as well as politicians. According to the German jurist Carl Schmitt, the 'interwar period had not brought about a new spatial order but the principle of a spaceless, i.e. nihilistic world interventionism, whose subjects were the victorious powers, especially America, whose

²⁵ Johannes Jacobi, 'Anmerkungen zur Bibliothek der Deutschen Reichsversammlung von 1848/49, in J. Jacobi, ed., *Bibliothek als Lebenselixier. Festschrift für Gottfried Rost zum 65. Geburtstag* (Leipzig, 1996), pp. 47–76. Johannes Jacobi, ed., *Den Krieg sammeln. Die Weltkriegssammlung 1914/18 der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek* (Leipzig, 2014). See also Berlin, Bundesarchiv, R 8023/1110, 'Abgabe von kolonialpolitischen Veröffentlichungen des Kolonialwirtschaftlichen Komitees an die Bibliothek des Reichstages', 1907–19.

²⁶ Hans Petschar, Ernst Strouhal, and Heimo Zobernig, *Der Zettelkatalog. Ein historisches System geistiger Ordnung* (Vienna, 1999). See also Milkau, *Die allgemeinen Grundlagen der Kultur der Gegenwart*.

²⁷ Fritz Milkau, ed., *Handbuch der Bibliothekswissenschaft* (Leipzig, 1931).

²⁸ *Das Buch für alle. Illustrierte Familienzeitung*, 50 (1915), p. 122, <https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/bfa1915/0134>.

²⁹ Richard Oehler, 'Drei Jahre bibliothekarischer Kriegesarbeit in Belgien', *Zeitschrift für Bibliothekswesen*, 35 (1918), pp. 154–63.

instrument was the League of Nations and whose victim was Germany'.³⁰ Libraries were certainly an area where the US was asserting its dominance, not only through state interventions but particularly through a combination of public and private partnerships in co-operation with donors such as the Carnegie Endowment and the associates of the banker J. P. Morgan.³¹ In the 1920s, proposals to inscribe the restored Leuven library included the words 'Furore teutonico diruta dono americano restituta' ('Destroyed by Teutonic fury, restored by American donations'), but that vindictive note was eventually abandoned.³² In fact, in addition to American funds and international donations used to reconstruct the building, the restitution of the library's holdings occurred in large part through the instruments of German reparation agreements.³³

In the case of the Leuven library, oversight was given to Richard Oehler, a cousin of Friedrich Nietzsche and librarian at the University of Bonn.³⁴ Unlike the financial transactions pertaining to reparations, which were handled by international financial institutions such as the Bank for International Settlements, restitution in kind was left to national actors to manage. But, as I will show, librarians came to play a particular role in the transition of Germany from a victorious to a defeated power, from a Prussian-dominated monarchically governed empire to a republic with a diminished Prussia, a shrunk army, and a marginalized international situation.

II

In Stefan Zweig's short story 'Buchmendel', the protagonist, Jacob Mendel, a book pedlar and local legend at Vienna's Café Gluck for his photographic memory, gets in trouble with the authorities for sending postcards to France and England, both enemy countries, at the height of the First World War. Apparently ignorant about wartime censorship and restrictions on mail crossing enemy lines, in the postcards Mendel complained that his subscriptions to the *Bulletin bibliographique de la France* and the *Antiquarian*, two key journals for the profession, had failed to reach him.³⁵ Mendel returns to Vienna a broken man and dies soon after. The short story is primarily concerned with the tragic

³⁰ Carl Schmitt, 'Über das Verhältnis der Begriffe Krieg und Feind' (1938), in *Der Begriff des Politischen* (Berlin, 2015), pp. 94–102.

³¹ See Arnold Toynbee, *The German terror in Belgium: an historical record* (New York, NY, 1917). See also Ovenden, *Burning the books*; Katharina Rietzler, 'Experts for peace: structures and motivations of philanthropic internationalism in the interwar years', in Daniel Laqua, ed., *Internationalism reconfigured: transnational ideas and movements between the world wars* (London, 2011), pp. 45–66.

³² Pierre de Soete, *The Louvain library controversy; the misadventures of an American artist, or 'Furore teutonico diruta: dono americano restituta'* (Concord, NH, 1929).

³³ Steven Witt, 'Interwar internationalism and the rebuilding of the Catholic University of Louvain library (1914–1928)', *Libraries: Culture, History, and Society*, 4 (2020), pp. 1–28.

³⁴ *Jahresbericht der preussischen Staatsbibliothek 1921–1923* (Berlin, 1924). See also Peter Schöller, *Der Fall Löwen und das Weissbuch. Eine kritische Untersuchung der deutschen Dokumentation über die Vorgänge in Löwen vom 25. bis 28. August 1914* (Cologne, 1958).

³⁵ Stefan Zweig, 'Buchmendel' (1929), in *Kaleidoscopes*, trans. Eden Paul and Cedar Paul (New York, NY, 1934), pp. 248–9.

fate of the Jews, caught between wartime escalation and the rise of nation-states. But it can also be turned around as the tragedy of a more global community of librarians and bibliophiles, Europe's more universal cosmopolitan subjects, whose virtual community, organized in printed volumes such as the *Bulletin bibliographique*, was under threat of dissolution and decline. In fact, the cosmopolitan identity of librarians as a profession was repurposed in the war to aid the needs of propaganda, nationalism, and anti-imperialism. German-speaking librarians and people of the book trade more broadly became agents of strategic nationalism and of new forms of German expansionism in Europe. Paradoxically, at first sight, this also meant reducing the connection between Germany and Austria and focusing instead on Germany's propaganda needs in places like occupied Belgium or among the international prisoners-of-war (POWs) in its internment camps.

Libraries and book provision were an important part of Germany's cultural policy department in wartime. This was particularly significant outside the country's borders, where cultural policy was closely connected to general governing regimes, as was the case in occupied Belgium. As an informal adviser to Germany's leading publishing house Insel, Zweig was all too aware of the changes which people in the book trade experienced as a result of censorship and paper shortages. Insel's director, Anton Kippenberg, with whom Zweig corresponded, was in charge of book provision in German-occupied Belgium.³⁶ He also directed the Secret Army Printing Press of the German army, which operated from Belgium.³⁷ As Kippenberg put it in a letter to a friend, 'whether we get to "keep" Belgium or be its "protégés" or whatever: it is unconditionally necessary that we keep with it – like with other countries – spiritual relations ... especially through the book trade, which in this respect has to become much more political'.³⁸

Like many other intellectuals, Kippenberg was involved in the German propaganda effort during the world war, both as a publisher and as an officer. His bestselling *War almanac (Kriegs-Almanach)* from 1915 contained works dealing with the Germanic spirit of victory from Tacitus to the battle of Sedan.³⁹ He deftly adjusted his programme to wartime demands by bringing out a 'special wartime edition'.⁴⁰ World literature was used to serve national propaganda efforts and, equally, to align the loyalties of the colonial majorities favourably to a post-war Germany. In December 1916, in Belgium, the front newspaper of Germany's tenth army carried a headline that 'Goethe's dream of world literature continues to work its way'.⁴¹ On many copies of books published and distributed by Insel during the First World War, we can find a stamp of approval

³⁶ Oliver Matuschek and Klemens Renoldner, eds., *Anton Kippenberg, Stefan Zweig. Briefwechsel 1905–1937* (Berlin, 2022), pp. 213–14.

³⁷ Hubert Roland, *Die deutsche literarische 'Kriegskolonie' in Belgien, 1914–1918. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der deutsch-belgischen Literaturbeziehungen 1900–1920* (Bern, 1999).

³⁸ Anton Kippenberg to Eberhard von Bodenhausen, 31 May 1915, cited in Roland, *Die deutsche literarische 'Kriegskolonie'*, p. 116.

³⁹ *Kriegs-Almanach* (Leipzig, 1915).

⁴⁰ *Die Insel-Bücherei 1912–1937* (Leipzig, 1937), p. 12.

⁴¹ Cited from the publisher's information brochure *Die Insel-Bücherei 1912–1937*, p. 13.

of the German censorship authorities that featured a drawing of the Leipzig Monument to the Battle of the Peoples from the Napoleonic wars, which had been completed in 1913.⁴²

In the military setting, the role of the librarian as an organizer of knowledge was supplemented by the variety of ad hoc book peddlars who actually brought the books to the front and distributed them there. These included military personnel, people working for international non-governmental organizations such as the Red Cross or the YMCA, and other people. The library was not a static institution collecting a universe of knowledge but became a mobile collection of books to be supplied to the frontline.⁴³ In the German General Government of Flanders, the high command presided over civil administration as well, including culture. Governor-General Bissing netherlandized Ghent university, which became the first university in the country where only Dutch was spoken. By March 1917, Belgium was separated into two administrative units, Flanders and Wallonia, with Brussels as the capital of Flanders. Academic and cultural resistance to these German policies was met with harsh responses, the most famous case being the deportation of the Wallonian historian Henri Pirenne and his internment in a German POW camp as an enemy civilian. Pirenne argued that Belgium needed to 'unlearn' the entire way of approaching science that had come to be associated with Germany, full of chauvinistic reviews of scholarship, 'Excursen, d'Antiquariats, de Regesten, de Forschungen', which failed to mention any histories beyond the Rhine.⁴⁴

As a result of the First World War, libraries became mobile and adaptable to military needs in special areas such as occupation regimes or POW camps. The German army had developed a prominent mobile book service during the war. Prior to 1916, German soldiers had been accustomed to pack boxes of around fifty to sixty books, which would be supplied to the trenches. In the middle ages, such portable reading cases were called *armaria*. By 1916 the military, with assistance from a particularly active military chaplain, developed the motto 'Spiritual strength makes weapons and victories' ('Der Geist schafft Waffen und Sieg'). The chaplain who became particularly known as an activist for this practice was Ludwig Hoppe.⁴⁵ Having only recently returned to Germany after a period as a pastor in Brazil, Hoppe set up eighty mobile

⁴² Heinz Sarkowski, *Der Insel Verlag 1899-1999. Die Geschichte des Verlags* (Frankfurt am Main, 1999), p. 188.

⁴³ Christine Van Everbroeck, 'Flemish movement', in Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, eds., *1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, 8 Oct. 2014, https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/flemish_movement.

⁴⁴ Henri Pirenne, *Ce que nous devons désapprendre de l'Allemagne. Discours prononcé à l'ouverture de l'Université de Gand* (Ghent, 1922), p. 22. Ian Wood, *The modern origins of the early middle ages* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 222-44; Geneviève Warland, 'Henri Pirenne, témoin fiable ou narrateur meurtri? De son journal de guerre à ses souvenirs de captivité', in Frédéric Mériot, Chantal Metzger, and Institut d'histoire des conflits contemporains, eds., *La Grande Guerre et la Belgique* (Paris, 2018), pp. 51-64.

⁴⁵ 'Kriegsnachrichten aus deutschen Bibliotheken', *Zentralblatt für Bibliothekswesen*, 13, no. 1 (Jan.-Feb. 1916), pp. 58-49; 'Der Erlebnisbericht "Im Auto durch Feindesland" vom Felddivisionspfarrer Ludwig Hoppe', 1915, https://www.europeana.eu/en/item/2020601/https__1914_1918_europeana_eu_contributions_12820. Ludwig Hoppe, 'Verwaltungsanweisungen für den Bücherwart der

libraries, which he called ‘educational canons’ (*Bildungskanonen*), comprising about 1,000–1,250 books, many filled from Kippenberg’s portable library editions.

The history of the occupation of Belgium and the attempts by the German governor-general to implement a divide-and-rule policy by instigating Flemish nationalism is a neglected aspect of the history of the First World War.⁴⁶ Yet it is instructive if one wants to understand the growing role of cultural figures such as librarians in forging and supporting German national interests. Nine months after the destruction of Leuven’s library, the president of the Kaiser Wilhelm Society, the German empire’s leading scientific research organization, as well as general director of the Royal [Prussian] Library of Berlin, Adolf von Harnack, was looking for a suitable figure to be sent to Belgium for the purposes of damage limitation to the reputation of Germany as a cultural nation. Harnack had been one of the signatories of the letter of ninety-three German professors who disclaimed Germany’s special responsibility for hostilities in the war, eliciting a hostile ‘Reply to German professors by British scholars’, which in turn insisted on Germany’s culpability.⁴⁷

Harnack’s choice fell on the librarian Fritz Milkau (1859–1934), who was duly appointed by the German government to form a special library committee working closely with the governor-general’s office. His task was to examine the state of libraries in occupied Belgium and the impact of the occupation on them. One of the conclusions of this committee was that Belgian libraries had not been modern enough to ensure their fire safety, and that, in all other cities shelled or bombed by the German armies, the libraries had survived. But Milkau did not fail to lament the loss of Leuven’s library, which, he argued, was indeed devastating, no matter how much the event had been exploited in allied propaganda: ‘This is not just Belgium’s loss. The entire world has become poorer.’⁴⁸

Milkau was his generation’s leading representative of German library science, chiefly due to his compilation of a work on cataloguing.⁴⁹ Before the war, he had served as head librarian of the universities of first Greifswald, then Breslau, then Berlin, and had reinvigorated German library science by reviving Carl Dziatko’s ‘Principles of title ordering’, the basis for a unified

Fahrbaren Kriegsbücherei: auf Grund der Felderfahrungen’, <https://portal.dnb.de/bookviewer/view/1035342928#page/n0/mode/1up>.

⁴⁶ Hubert Roland, ‘Kulturtransfers und Identitätsbildung(en): sechs Thesen zur verflochtenen Geschichte der deutsch-belgischen Beziehungen’, in Ralf Bogner and Manfred Leber, eds., *Neun plus eins. Literarische Beziehungen zwischen Deutschland und seinen Nachbarn* (Saarbrücken, 2014), pp. 187–207.

⁴⁷ Both are reprinted in *The New York Times, Current History*, 1, no. 1, ‘From the Beginning to March, 1915’ (1915), available at <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/13635/pg13635-images.html>.

⁴⁸ Fritz Milkau, *Das Kriegsschicksal der belgischen Bibliotheken. Ein Reisebericht*, special issue of *Zentralblatt für Bibliothekswesen*, 33 (1916), pp. 1–27, at p. 24.

⁴⁹ Fritz Milkau, *Centralkataloge und Titeldrucke. Geschichtliche Erörterungen und praktische Vorschläge im Hinblick auf die Herstellung eines Gesamtkataloges der preußischen wissenschaftlichen Bibliotheken* (Leipzig, 1898).

Prussian catalogue.⁵⁰ Dziatko had presented the summary of best practice of librarianship from French, British, German, Austrian, and American public and academic libraries. Under the Prussian minister of education, these principles were used to develop a general classification of all Prussian university libraries.⁵¹ Milkau remained respectful of his Belgian colleagues, even though he lamented their flirtations with the American system of organizing knowledge, in preference to the Prussian one.

In 1915 and 1916, German foreign policy-makers also used connections to Russian librarians abroad to foster revolution through POW camps. A particularly concerted effort in this regard concerned the education of Russian political prisoners, as well as the general public, through a people's library (*Volksbibliothek*). The leading figure here was Nikolai Rubakin (1862–1946), a Russian librarian who lived in exile in Switzerland, and from there worked for the German government under the codename Martel.⁵² He had established contacts with the culture section of the German foreign office.⁵³ Rubakin had spent his youth in St Petersburg in socialist revolutionary circles, and acquired an authority in Russia as a statistician, popularizer of science, and writer of guidebooks on literacy. By the 1900s, he was widely known as a public educator and theorist of library science. After the failed revolution of 1905 and the internal fragmentation of the socialist revolutionary movement, Rubakin moved to Switzerland, never to return to Russia, and even left the socialist revolutionary party. He lived first as a private librarian, but from 1923 until his death in 1946 was head of a scientific research institute which was devoted to a new discipline that he called 'bibliological psychology'.

Rubakin was a representative of a form of Russian nationalism that was associated with the popularization of knowledge (*narodnichestvo*), but also with the socialist movement in the late empire. He had developed a theory of knowledge acquisition that he promoted as a 'theory of communist propaganda'.⁵⁴ His role as a critic of government statistics made his books bestsellers in pre-revolutionary Russian social science.⁵⁵ One of his leading studies was *Among the books*, a three-volume history of knowledge through the lens of

⁵⁰ Carl Dziatko, *Instruction für die Ordnung der Title im Alphabetischen Zettelkatalog der Königlichen und Universitäts-Bibliothek Breslau* (Berlin, 1886); Fritz Milkau, *Preußischer Generalkatalog* (1899).

⁵¹ Gotthold Naetebus, 'Über die Bibliotheken der preußischen Universitätsinstitute', *Zentralblatt für Bibliothekswesen*, 23 (1906), pp. 341–56; Gotthold Naetebus, 'Instituts-, Behörden- und andere Fachbibliotheken', *Handbuch der Bibliothekswissenschaft*, 2 (1933), pp. 523–65.

⁵² See George Katkov, *Russia, 1917: the February revolution* (New York, NY, 1967). See also Berlin, Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts (PA), RAV 26-1/603, Gesandtschaft Bern, Rubakin (Martel), Oct. 1918–Feb. 1920; and RAV 26-1/605, 'Sonderhefte über Personen: Rubakin' (Martel).

⁵³ Palo Alto, CA, Hoover Institution Archives, B. I. Nicolaevsky papers, box 496, folder 3, letters from M. N. Pavlovski (31 Oct. and 8 and 26 Nov. 1962), with copies from the German embassy of 'Akten Ru' (Martel), L.849/L.244.000.244.046. See also Moscow, Russian State Library Archive, Fond Robakina, Kessler–Roubakine correspondence, 10 Dec. 1919–30 Jan. 1920.

⁵⁴ Nicolas Roubakine, 'Les secrets du département de la police zariste', *Novoe russkoe slovo* (New Russian Word), 25 Jan. and 1 Mar. 1925 (published in New York).

⁵⁵ Nikolai Rubakin, *Rossiya v tsivrahk. Strana, narod, soslovija, znanja* (Russia in numbers: country, people, estates, knowledge) (St Petersburg, 1912).

the printed book.⁵⁶ Hidden under this universal classification were many books and authors which the tsarist policy of Russification had tried to suppress.

For the German needs in POW education, Rubakin proposed curating a set of 200 pamphlets, many of them containing literature previously illegal in the Russian empire, some authored by him or other influential critics of the tsarist regime. Members of the German consular team investigated closely the brochures which Rubakin offered to distribute among Russian POWs.⁵⁷ The proposal was to create four or five central libraries in the most populated camps, and 100–200 small libraries in the other camps. Each central library would cost about 600–700 roubles.⁵⁸ The German advisers remarked that most of the books suggested by Rubakin were written by non-Russian authors, with a particularly positive image of England, Australia, and America, often in contrast with Germany, as countries of freedom and democracy. Only socialist literature represented in the collection was friendly to Germany.⁵⁹ The brochures were printed in the Berlin-based printing house of Friedrich Perzyński, a German orientalist who before the war had risen to fame for discovering life-size Buddhist sculptures in China. During the war he worked for the German intelligence bureau for the East.⁶⁰ However, German censors were selective in choosing Rubakin's brochures. On several occasions, they refused to distribute overtly 'pro-English' or anti-German material.⁶¹ Throughout this period of collaboration with Rubakin, they attempted to locate his political views somewhere between socialism, pacifism, and Tolstoyanism. In one of his brochures, 'The will of Allah', Rubakin used a standard European orientalist trope to criticize the imperial Russian powers: he orientalized them by transposing the story of a suffering Russian peasant to an Ottoman setting with a despotic sultan.⁶² Another report by the censors complained that Rubakin was too friendly with American organizations such as the YMCA, including promoting plans 'against Prussian absolutism, Junkerism, militarism, the peace of Brest-Litovsk and imperialism'.⁶³

Considering that, by September 1914, German POW camps already had more than 120,000 French POWs and over 90,000 POWs from the Russian empire, the addressees of any propaganda constituted a highly complex and diverse society. By 1918, there were over 1.5 million Russian POWs, around 0.5 million French, and more than 180,000 British, to name just some of the most numerous. After the peace of Compiègne, many of the Russians began to make their way back to Russia, where, in 1918, a special commissariat for refugees was beginning to organize them according to principles convenient to the

⁵⁶ Nikolai Rubakin, *Sredi knig (Among the books)* (2nd edn, 3 vols., Moscow, 1905–15), 1, cover.

⁵⁷ PA, RAV 26-1/605, Zimmermann to Romberg, Imperial Ambassador in Bern, 3 Dec. 1915.

⁵⁸ PA, RAV 26-1/605, Martel to Zimmermann, 2 Jan. 1916.

⁵⁹ PA, RAV 26-1/605, Report, 25 Feb. 1916.

⁶⁰ PA, RAV 26-1/605, Zimmermann to Romberg, 27 Mar. 1916.

⁶¹ PA, RAV 26-1/605, Zimmermann to Romberg, 6 Apr. 1916.

⁶² PA, RAV 26-1/605, 'Volya Allakha' ('The will of Allah'), 17 Mar. 1916, originally published as Volya Allakha. Abdul, Abdul i eshche raz Abdul (*The Will of Allah: Abdul, Abdul and Abdul again*) (Moscow, 1906).

⁶³ *Ibid.*

Bolshevik party.⁶⁴ It was in Germany's interests to reach these minds with anti-imperialist material.

By April 1915 it was reported that the libraries in the German POW camps were being managed in co-operation with the Danish Red Cross. As the officials reported, 'Full consideration is given to the Russian spiritual life, according to the wish of the Russian writer Martel. The composition of the libraries follows criteria which also serve German interests.'⁶⁵ By May 1917 Rubakin was still in contact with German officials, even though they were growing increasingly discontented with his attempts to mark all the books in his series with his name. It was, one official argued, 'entirely unwelcome that Rubakin adds the stamp "Bibliothek Rubakin" to his books'; this generated suspicion, particularly from Russian Red Cross visitors who favoured the old regime.⁶⁶ The internal report further complained that the

composition of these libraries [sent by Rubakin] suffers from a curious overestimation of the importance of socialist, party political influence, even at the level of elementary and middle education. Books on the history of German social democracy, on despotism, anarchism, militarism and such can be done without, and in some cases are undesirable.

Even after the end of the war, German foreign office representatives continued to be interested in Rubakin's connections, particularly with John Mott, the head of the YMCA, who they thought could help them connect to Wilson.⁶⁷

Rubakin's own ideas went in a new direction after the war, and he never returned to Russia, even after the success of the revolution.⁶⁸ He became particularly interested in the theory of propaganda.⁶⁹ As he put it, there are 'social barriers' to the way in which content can reach a reader.⁷⁰ 'One and the same book can have a revolutionary effect on the same reader today and a

⁶⁴ See Irina Belova, *Human waves: refugees in Russia, 1914-1918* (Manchester, 2017), pp. 88-107. See also Peter Gatrell, *A whole empire walking: refugees in Russia during World War I* (Bloomington, IN, 2005).

⁶⁵ PA, RAV 26-1/605, Friedrich to the Chancellor, 15 Apr. 1916, secret.

⁶⁶ PA, RAV 26-1/605, Stumm to Romberg, 28 May 1917.

⁶⁷ PA, RAV 26-1/605, Report of meeting between Jäckh and Rubakin about the latter's connections to Mott, 25 Oct. 1919.

⁶⁸ Alexander Potebnya, *Iz lekciï po teorii slovesnosti (Lectures on the theory of literature)* (Kharkov, 1894); see also Alexander Potebnya, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii (Complete works)*, vol. 1 (Kharkov, 1925), p. 141. Nikolai Rubakin, 'Rabota bibliotekaria s tochki zrenia biblio-psikhologii: k voprosu ob otnoshenii knigi i chitatel'ia' ('The work of a librarian from the point of view of biblio-psychology: on the relationship between the book and the reader'), in Nikolai Rubakin, ed., *Chitatel' i kniga. Metody ikh izuchenia (The reader and the book: methods for their investigation)* (Kharkov, 1925).

⁶⁹ N. Rubakin, 'Tajna uspešnoi propagandy' ('The secret of successful propaganda') (1972), in *Bibliologičeskaia psikhologia (Bibliological psychology)* (Moscow, 2006), pp. 767-76.

⁷⁰ Nikolai Rubakin, *Vvedenie v bibliologičeskuiu psikhologiu (Introduction to bibliological psychology)* (Moscow, 1929), reprinted in Rubakin, *Bibliologičeskaia psikhologia*, p. 38.

counterrevolutionary one tomorrow.’⁷¹ The effect of propaganda could be affected by family, local, national (or ethnic), state, international, professional, educational, confessional, momentary, historic, and cosmic circumstances.⁷² These could be subject to processes such as ‘social contagion’.⁷³

The choice of the German foreign office to work with Rubakin as a partner, and no other librarian from the former Russian empire, is instructive here. For, as far as Russia was concerned, a far more prominent figure, particularly in library science of the period from the Russian civil war to the early Soviet republics, was Lyubov’ Khavkina (1871–1949). Another librarian from a *narodniki* milieu, she had begun her career in the Russian empire as the initiator and then librarian of the Kharkov Public Library in Ukraine, between 1891 and 1918. Khavkina received her initial training at Humboldt University in Berlin between 1898 and 1901 and learned about American library science after a visit to the 1900 World Fair in Paris. For the American Library Association and the US Committee on International Relations, it was Khavkina who was the chief representative of the future of the profession in the successor states of the Russian empire.⁷⁴ It is possible that the differential treatment from Germany’s foreign office officials reflected the fact that they were interested in librarians who had destabilized the former Russian empire, like Rubakin, but less so in those who, like Khavkina, sought to support the new state with their work.

Wartime experiences of mobile libraries and chapbooks briefly placed early modern institutions of knowledge dissemination – such as book peddling, excerpting, and selective canonization and translation – centre-stage.⁷⁵ In German POW camps such as the *Halbmondlager* near Berlin, anthropologists and linguists recorded sound and folklore in 250 languages. The project had been funded by the German government’s newly established Centre for the Study of the Orient.⁷⁶

As can be seen from these cases, German military and political interests differed widely when it came to addressing western and eastern Europe. Germany was not interested in rebuilding national identities, but merely in weakening enemy powers. For the Russian empire and the global colonial

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 121, citing V. Bekhterev, *Kollektivnaia reflexologia (Collective reflexology)* (Petrograd, 1920), p. 113. See also Paul Otlet, ‘L’enseignement par soi-meme et la lecture systématique’, *L’Interné*, 1 Oct. 1916, p. 5.

⁷⁴ Lyubov’ Khavkina, *Kniga i biblioteka (Book and library)* (Moscow, 1918), here cited from the new edition (St Petersburg, 2011). See also her revealing correspondence with a younger colleague and mentee: ‘L. B. Khavkina v pis’makh k V. A. Artisevich’ (‘L. B. Khavkina in letters to V. A. Artisevich’), *Nauchnye i tekhnicheskie biblioteki (Scientific and Technical Libraries)*, 11 (1996), pp. 31–62; and Edward Kasinec, ‘L. B. Khavkina (1871–1949)’, *Libri*, 37, no. 1 (1987), pp. 59–71.

⁷⁵ Lyubov’ Khavkina, *Za rubezhom. Opyt voenno-bibliotечноi raboty (Abroad: the experience of military library work)* (Leningrad, 1929).

⁷⁶ Martin Gussone, ‘Die Moschee im Wünsdorfer Halbmondlager zwischen Gihad-Propaganda und Orientalismus’, in *Beträge zur islamschen Kunst und Archäologie* (Wiesbaden, 2010), pp. 204–31.

populations, instability in eastern Europe was in some ways preferable to stability.

In library work as elsewhere, Germany's policies in East and West differed markedly. The one exception was Poland, where Germany facilitated not only the emergence of a nation-state under Piłsudski (as a buffer state to the Russian empire) but also the growth of a corresponding Polish national library from a military one. A Polish military librarian, Marian Łodyński (1884–1972), compiled perhaps the most effective summary of national library formation in wartime. A historian of Poland by training, he had obtained a doctorate before the First World War and joined the Polish army after Poland gained independence in 1918. By this point Marshall Józef Piłsudski, supported by the German government, had successfully proven that the Polish legions, as part of the Austro-Hungarian army, were an effective force against Russia. On his authority Poland received the status of a regency and then, following Austrian defeat, national independence under German protection. Łodyński was one of the men from the military who rose quickly in the civilian administration, working in the sector of cultural management. He became the first director of the Central Military Library in 1919. This library had its origins in the reference libraries established at Polish military institutions and organizations during the First World War, but the core of the collection was items from the Military Library of the Provisional Council of State in Warsaw, established in February 1917. Łodyński created and presented a programme of reorganizing national military libraries and of Polish national librarianship in 1926, the year Piłsudski led a coup d'état in Poland.⁷⁷

Considered in comparative perspective, German librarians and people from the book trade were instrumental in helping to forge nations or destabilize empires at the end of the war, but how precisely this affected a given librarian or country depended on a given country's place in the German vision of a future Europe. As can be seen from the above, Germany was not the only power to reach out to librarians specifically as agents of contact with Russia's post-imperial successors. But Germany's path in this process was distinct from that of the Allies.

III

The break between the Allies and the Central Powers was particularly manifest in the interruptions of scientific co-operation which isolated Germany.⁷⁸ At the turn of the century, German-speaking science, represented particularly by the well-funded Prussian institutions of knowledge, had dominated global teaching and research, rivalled closely by corresponding French institutions. Library science was something of an exception, as American library science had already been rivalling the Prussian system before the war due to the towering figure of

⁷⁷ Marian Łodyński, *U kolebki polskiej polityki bibliotecznej (1774–1794) (The cradle of Polish library policy, 1774–1794)* (Warsaw, 1935).

⁷⁸ Wolfgang U. Eckart and Robert Fox, eds., *Blockades of the mind: science, academies, and the aftermath of the Great War* (Halle, 2021).

Melvil Dewey.⁷⁹ Even before the war, the balance was beginning to shift towards America, not least owing to the fact that Belgium had become a centre of the internationalist movement, and that internationally renowned libraries such as Leuven – inaugurated by two lawyers, Paul Otlet and Henri la Fontaine, in Brussels in 1895 – were admirers of Dewey’s system of organization.⁸⁰ The events of the war further shifted interests in favour of the US system. In the light of this background, after the war librarians could become not only agents of Germany’s reintegration in the world scientific community, but also guardians of its competitive advantage.

In 1920, in response to the long-term as well as immediate threats of isolation, Germany, again under the leadership of Harnack, saw the founding of the *Notgemeinschaft der Deutschen Wissenschaft*, an emergency rescue fund for German academics, working towards reintegrating Germany in a more cosmopolitan network of scientists. In this context, Wilhelm Riedner, head librarian of the Bavarian State Library, attempted to reconnect with an international network of colleagues. German culture and education, he argued, were ‘a factor of power to such an extent that it can be maintained even when the other factors of power have disappeared’.⁸¹ Riedner worked closely with the German foreign office in managing Germany’s resumption of cultural relations with the US.⁸² His visit to American libraries was consequently closely watched in the foreign office.⁸³

In fact, Riedner was more than an ornamental figure in the resumption of relations.⁸⁴ He was particularly interested in finding out how the composition of the *Commission de coopération intellectuelle* (Institute for Intellectual Cooperation), the League of Nations’ branch of cultural relations, reflected French influence and preponderance. The US government and the Carnegie foundation had initiated the new National Research Council in 1916. Leading British policy-makers endorsed similar moves, seeking to strengthen Franco-British co-operation to oust German scientists from their global hegemony, unwilling to tolerate universal compendia ‘written in the language of the Huns’.⁸⁵

⁷⁹ Colin Higgins, ‘Library of Congress classification: Teddy Roosevelt’s world in numbers?’, *Cataloging and Classification Quarterly*, 50 (2012), pp. 249–62; Dorothy Mackay Quynn, ‘The Ecole des Chartes’, *American Archivist*, 13 (1950), pp. 271–83.

⁸⁰ J. L. Heilbron, *The dilemmas of an upright man: Max Planck and the fortunes of German science* (Cambridge, MA, 2000).

⁸¹ Wilhelm Riedner, ‘Völkerbund und geistige Zusammenarbeit’, *Mitt. VUE*, 6 (1926), pp. 85–92, at p. 92.

⁸² Wilhelm Riedner, *Wie kann der Frieden und das Gedeihen für Deutschland und Europa durch internationale Zusammenarbeit gesichert werden?* (Berlin, 1924).

⁸³ N. A., ‘Education in action’, *Journal of Education*, 103, no. 2564 (28 Jan. 1926), pp. 106–8.

⁸⁴ Wilhelm Riedner, *Spensers Belesenheit* (Naumburg, 1906). For more on this context, see Paul Forman, ‘Scientific internationalism and the Weimar physicists: the ideology and its manipulation in Germany after World War I’, *Isis*, 64 (1973), pp. 151–80; Brigitte Schroeder-Gudehus, *Les scientifiques et la paix. La communauté scientifique internationale au cours des années 20* (Montreal, 2014).

⁸⁵ *Nature*, 17 June 1925, cited in German government report by Heilbron, 31 Dec. 1925.

As a librarian, Riedner wanted to overcome what he perceived as an anti-German conspiracy in the Institute for Intellectual Cooperation and other influential circles.⁸⁶ Following meetings with leading American librarians, he proceeded systematically to oversee the completion of gaps in periodical and magazine holdings due to war censorship.⁸⁷ As a member of a set of advisers of the German government, he fought against an intellectual blockade against Germany by British and American Science associations.⁸⁸

Librarians like Riedner were key in compiling lists of periodicals which were supplied by the Notgemeinschaft der Deutschen Wissenschaft. This included responses from those willingly to supply missing literature from places such as consulates and embassies.⁸⁹ Whether under the auspices of new organizations such as the Institute for Intellectual Cooperation or as part of older institutions, in the interwar period library science became truly established as an aspect of Germany's foreign policy. As the next section will show, meanwhile, at a domestic level, too, librarians began to change what libraries collected and how they positioned the reader in their spaces.

IV

While librarians became closely involved in German foreign policy, the war also changed what libraries collected inside Germany. However, unlike the collections of the Allied states, such as the Imperial War Museum's collections in London or similar initiatives in Paris, German collections remained heavily decentralized.⁹⁰ Many war collections were started not only within federal states of the German empire but within princely or ducal libraries. War libraries emerged in Strasbourg, Berlin, Leipzig, Munich, and Frankfurt am Main, to name but a few, all between August and November 1914. The Prussian general and military librarian Albert Buddecke, who was head of the library of the High General Staff in Berlin from 1909, noted 217 libraries of this kind.⁹¹ Having served for two months as an officer on the Western Front, he then returned to Berlin as a member of the acting general staff of the army, where he spent most of the war years, from December 1914 until October 1918. During this period he was in charge of the Sorting Office for the Spoils of War and Library Material. This was essentially a meta-collection of war libraries across the country. There was even a

⁸⁶ PA, RZ 503/65495.

⁸⁷ PA, RZ 503/65495, letter of 25 Apr. 1925.

⁸⁸ PA, RZ 503/65495, Kerkhof report, 16 Dec. 1925.

⁸⁹ PA, RZ 503/65495, letter of 26 Sept. 1922.

⁹⁰ Valérie Tesnière, 'Bibliothèque de documentation internationale contemporaine in the "documentary moment"', *Matériaux pour l'histoire de notre temps*, 100, no. 4 (2010), pp. 7–13; Sue Malvern, 'War, memory and museums: art and artefact in the Imperial War Museum', *History Workshop Journal*, 49, no. 1 (2000), pp. 177–203.

⁹¹ Alfred Buddecke, *Die Kriegssammlungen. Ein Nachweis ihrer Einrichtung und ihres Bestandes* (Oldenburg, 1917).

union of specialized libraries or collections devoted to the war.⁹² The task was to make ‘comprehensive war collections in the framework of comprehensive libraries’.⁹³

Three of the largest war collections were in Berlin, at the Bavarian State Library in Munich, and at the German National Library in Leipzig.⁹⁴ For the Berlin library an entire department of nineteen staff members was created to integrate the war materials into the permanent collection.⁹⁵ The war had its own system of order and broke the rules of organizations associated with the Prussian system. The Leipzig library collected books and brochures, but also war and propaganda maps; official, law, and ordinance gazettes; war newspapers and circulars; propaganda air drops; single-sheet prints; and posters.

One area of innovation where German librarians were particularly accomplished was the collection of documents on the social and economic history of the war. The Kiel Institute for World Economy, an innovative think tank which was founded in the first year of the war, collected economic knowledge of the war from a global perspective.⁹⁶ In Frankfurt, the Institute of Social Research opened its doors. In Leipzig, the Austrian social statistician Otto Neurath was commissioned to create a museum of war economy, which also comprised a comprehensive library explaining the war from the perspective of the international resource economy.⁹⁷ Initially planned as a project of the kingdom of Saxony, the idea was to show continuities and changes in war economy from the Napoleonic wars to the present.⁹⁸ Leipzig’s *Weltkriegsbücherei* (World War Library) effectively presented the war from a global angle but through the lens of the Central Powers, with a special section devoted to Austria-Hungary.⁹⁹ Another *Weltkriegsbücherei* emerged in Stuttgart as part of a private collection initiated in 1915 by the owner of a Ludwigsburg coffee company, Richard Franck. Following the expropriation of Castle Rosenstein from the royal family of Württemberg during the November revolution of 1918, the Württemberg government gladly lent its spaces to the library and also opened a small war museum next door.¹⁰⁰ When the library

⁹² ‘Verhandlungsbericht über die Tagung der deutschen Kriegssammlungen am 11. und 12. Mai 1918 im Preussischen Abgeordnetenhaus’, Berlin, Archiv SBB PK, A 46/1; *Vergleiche auch Mitteilungen des Verbandes deutscher Kriegssammlungen E.V.* (Leipzig, 1920).

⁹³ Otto Glauning, ‘Umfassende Kriegssammlungen im Rahmen umfassender Bibliotheken’, *Mitteilungen / Verband deutscher Kriegssammlungen*, 1 (1919), pp. 8–12.

⁹⁴ Jacobi, ed., *Den Krieg sammeln*.

⁹⁵ Walther Schultze, ‘Schema des Sachkataloges der Kriegssammlung der preussischen Staatsbibliothek’, *Zeitschrift für Bibliothekswissenschaft*, 36 (1919), pp. 108–26, at p. 111.

⁹⁶ Ernst Baasch, ‘Die Kommerzbibliothek in Hamburg: ein Rückblick vorzüglich auf ihre ältere Geschichte’, *Zentralblatt für Bibliothekswesen*, 36 (1919), pp. 147–57.

⁹⁷ *Veröffentlichungen des Deutschen Kriegswirtschaftsmuseums zu Leipzig* (Leipzig, 1917).

⁹⁸ Otto Neurath, *Bericht über die Versammlung anlässlich des Vortrags des Privatdozenten Dr. Otto Neurath über ‘Die Kriegswirtschaftslehre und ihre Bedeutung für die Zukunft’ im städtischen Kaufhaus in Leipzig am 4. Mai 1918* (Leipzig, 1918), p. 14.

⁹⁹ *Führer durch die Sonderausstellung Weltblockade und Kriegswirtschaft des deutschen Kriegswirtschaftsmuseums* (Leipzig, 1918), pp. 23ff.

¹⁰⁰ *50 Jahre Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte. Weltkriegsbücherei Stuttgart 1915–1965* (Frankfurt, 1965); Christian Westerhoff, “Die Zentrale der Kriegsschuldbekämpfung”: die Weltkriegsbücherei in der

opened, Franck explained how important it was to ‘understand to what extent the war continues to hold a spell over the world, even though it has passed like a terrible storm’.¹⁰¹

Overall, librarians remained true to their professional calling of classifying and organizing knowledge in the long term rather than being subservient to short-term national interests. At the same time, wartime experiences and the pressure from the American libraries as an international model changed their role. In the post-war period, the combination of frontline and POW experience had a profound impact on the design and use of existing libraries. The Victorian British or American model of the public library gained a greater foothold around the world.¹⁰² As the German librarian Bona Peiser had put it, the model for this came from ‘the public library of England and America’ and served the purpose of integrating foreigners in society.¹⁰³

The principles of library organization at different levels reflected German ideas of world order, as well as Germany’s ideas about ordering universal knowledge. German academic culture – and, at its heart, a library culture – retained forms of rivalry, not only with international competitors such as the US libraries under Dewey and their international adepts, but also with national federal alternatives such as the Saxon or Bavarian institutions. From a cosmopolitanism at the service of empire, German libraries developed special competence in assembling knowledge on the history of the war itself and understanding the global economy, but also on global social science and cultural history.

Alongside libraries which collected records of the war, some of the most idiosyncratic new library foundations can themselves be regarded as intellectual tools of post-war reconciliation. This was nowhere more pronounced than in the library founded by the art historian Aby Warburg in 1919. Like many German intellectuals, Warburg suffered a nervous breakdown in the war, and he used the wealth that his family held in the private Warburg bank to start his own ‘war library’, a collection of books, photographs, and newspaper cuttings related to the cultural history of the war.¹⁰⁴ This principle of connecting seemingly different subjects in an attempt at recollection informed Warburg’s collecting principles at the library. Influenced by the wartime

Weimarer Republik’, in Christian Westerhoff, ed., *100 Jahre Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte, 1915–2015* (Stuttgart, 2015), pp. 28–47; Christian Westerhoff, “‘Die Öffnung aller, auch der verborgensten Quellen’”, 7 June 2021, http://www.portal-militaergeschichte.de/sites/default/files/pdf/westerhoff_weltkriegsb%C3%BCherei.pdf.

¹⁰¹ Richard Franck, speech at the opening of the World War library, 21 May 1921, Württembergisches Landesarchiv, Stuttgart, Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte, folder 2, cited in Westerhoff, ‘Die Öffnung’, p. 2.

¹⁰² Thomas Kelly, *Early public libraries: a history of public libraries in Great Britain, 1845–1975* (London, 1966); and Alistair Black, Simon Pepper, and Kaye Bagshaw, *Books, buildings and social engineering: early public libraries in Britain from past to present* (London, 2016).

¹⁰³ Frauke Mahrt-Thomsen, *Bona Peiser. Die erste deutsche Bibliothekarin. Wegbereiterin der Bücher- und Lesehallen-Bewegung und der Frauenarbeit in Bibliotheken* (Berlin, 2013).

¹⁰⁴ He relied heavily on the relatively recent business of newspaper cuttings run by Kurt Goldschmidt in Berlin. See Anke te Heesen, ‘News, paper, scissors’, in Anke te Heesen and Lorraine Daston, *Things that talk* (Berlin, 2003), pp. 33–57.

experiences of his friends but also by the propagandistic divisions of a continent that he viewed in terms of intellectual and stylistic connections, he searched for an object history that could also serve as a metaphor of reconstruction. ‘Flemish tapestries’, he argued, were like ‘vehicles for images’ which became part of an ‘international migration between North and South’, leading to what he called the “‘victory” of the Roman High Renaissance’. The Warburg library in Hamburg, which opened in 1919, represented a kind of neo-Renaissance conception of the afterlife of antiquity in the modern world.¹⁰⁵ He labelled the work of his own library of cultural sciences ‘Mnemosyne’ (‘recollection’), a memory palace which had recovered from traumatic rupture a renewed connection to the world’s common past in an antiquity which was no longer merely European but comprised the Middle East and the Americas as well.¹⁰⁶ The recovery of content lost in the library of Alexandria was a constant reference point.¹⁰⁷

Warburg’s library’s focus on cultural transfer and change was enabled by its unique classification system made accessible to the scholar, organizing material so as to enable the study of the transmission of classical antiquity through the concepts of ‘action, orientation, word and image’.¹⁰⁸ A significant part of this library was devoted not only to ‘truth’ but also to representations of truth that may in fact be considered incorrect, false, or irrational, such as rumours, beliefs, and rituals.¹⁰⁹

As post-war librarians continued to mould cosmopolitan and universal knowledge to national as well as professional interests, war itself became an item of knowledge, a collectable, not just a factor of the collections. In many cases, this gave rise to new areas of knowledge generated by the need for information peculiarly relevant to the war experience. Despite the evident ruptures associated with the war, libraries and the work of librarians constituted an area of continuity in cultural life which came in handy at a time of Germany’s

¹⁰⁵ Warburg, ‘Mnemosyne Einleitung’, pp. 636–37. See also Peter Schwartz, ‘Aby Warburgs Kriegskartothek: Vorbericht einer Rekonstruktion’, in Gottfried Korff, ed., *Kasten 117. Aby Warburg und der Aberglaube im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Tübingen, 2007), pp. 39–69; Dorothea McEwan, ed., ‘Wanderstraßen der Kultur’. *Die Aby Warburg-Fritz Saxl Korrespondenz 1920 bis 1929* (Munich, 2004), p. 73.

¹⁰⁶ Aby Warburg, ‘Arbeitende Bauern auf burgundischen Teppichen’ (first published 1907), in Dieter Wuttke, ed., *Ausgewählte Schriften und Würdigungen* (Baden Baden, 1992), pp. 165–71, at p. 165. Aby Warburg, ‘Mediceische Feste am Hofe der Valois auf flandrischen Teppichen in der Galleria degli Uffizi’, in *Die Erneuerung der heidnischen Antike. Kulturwissenschaftliche Beiträge zur Geschichte der europäischen Renaissance. Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, ed. Horst Bredekamp (Berlin, 1998), pp. 255–8.

¹⁰⁷ Aby Warburg, ‘Heidnisch-antike Weissagung in Wort und Bild zu Luthers Zeiten’, in *Werke in einem Band*, pp. 424–91, at p. 484.

¹⁰⁸ Gertrud Bing, ‘Aby M. Warburg’, *Rivista storica italiana*, 72 (1960), pp. 100–13.

¹⁰⁹ Aby Warburg, ‘Pagan-antique prophecy in words and images in the age of Luther’, in *The renewal of pagan antiquity* (Los Angeles, CA, 1999), pp. 597–651. Marc Bloch, ‘Réflexions d’un historien sur les fausses nouvelles de la guerre’, *Revue de synthèse historique*, 7 (1921), pp. 13–35. On the parallels between Bloch and Warburg, see also Steffen Haug, commentary on Marc Bloch’s ‘Réflexions d’un historien sur les fausses nouvelles de la guerre’, 10 June 2019, <http://bilderfahrzeuge.hypotheses.org/3854>.

international isolation. Some librarians were mobilized during the war literally or figuratively. But in the interwar period, many of them returned to their old roles and sought to re-establish their cosmopolitan networks.

V

Were librarians mere instruments of German national interest during a crisis caused by the First World War? Or did they maintain continuities in their professional ethos in spite of the crisis? To what extent did the ephemeral libraries of wartime such as book peddling or POW experience influence the democratization of libraries under the weight of the demands of a new mass readership or a cosmopolitan angle? As I have tried to show here, on the one hand, leading librarians and people from the book trade in Germany were drawn into the propaganda efforts as well as the foreign policy efforts of the new German state. On the other hand, librarians displayed a particular aptitude for operating in a climate of ideological instability and state collapse by returning to the technical challenges at hand of seeking to complete their collections and serve a variety of readers. Organizing world knowledge was as much a practical as it was a political task.

Starting with the areas under German occupation, librarians were involved with both the occupation regime and the foreign office. In Belgium, their aim was to limit reputational damage by surveying the scale of destruction of libraries in occupied Belgium. In the transatlantic context, German librarians helped to overcome Germany's isolation after the war. Libraries, and connections with international librarians, were also instrumental in Germany's attempts to influence Russian POWs and enemy civilians of Russian background, as well as the colonial POWs of the allied countries.

While the prevailing evidence in the work of librarians is their tendency towards continuity and adaptation, it is undeniable that the interwar period was also a time of change and innovation for some. Civil servants like Wilhelm Riedner became highly visible and prolific participants in debates about the nature of political power, democracy, sovereignty, and national identity. In addition, changes concerned readers as well as librarians, as more people were using libraries than ever before.

Between 1916 and 1918 Germany went from being a world power and an empire-nation seeking to foster revolution in Russia to weaken its empire, to a defeated nation witnessing an enforced regime change in Europe under rising US hegemony. In this context, library science and library policy turned out to be a microcosm of German foreign policy in a period of changing national priorities. All this changed dramatically after the Nazi takeover in 1933 and especially after the unleashing of the Second World War, which brought the interwar normalization of German library work to an end, as the Third Reich systematically burned books at home and destroyed libraries abroad, especially on Germany's eastern front. To name just one example, Richard Oehler, the man entrusted with the Leuven reparations, became active in the cultural politics of the Nazis by leading the Union of German Librarians. In this capacity he personally oversaw the confiscation and destruction of

the Weimar Republic's unique libraries, such as that of the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research. He also sought to make Britain pay for the destruction of Leuven's library in the Second World War in the event of Germany's victory.¹¹⁰ In contrast, the Polish librarian Marian Łodyński became a leader in Poland's underground movement in preserving its libraries while Poland was under German and Soviet occupation.¹¹¹

The active role of librarians in different political settings had its roots in the aftermath of the First World War. In retrospect, the librarians examined here appear not only as subjects of nation-states but also as members of a supra-national professional group with conflicting loyalties to their nation, their national and international political affiliations, and the ethos of their profession. The tensions between these loyalties during the unfolding conflict and its aftermath provide new insights into the ways in which European society was affected by the war in the longer term. Following the burning of the Leuven library, librarians came to occupy an important role as keepers of cultural heritage and sources of international reconciliation. Many librarians became politically engaged intellectuals in a post-war world in ways that transcended the duration of the hot phase of the conflict. This aspect of Germany's cultural leadership gives further weight to the notion of a 'long' First World War, a now familiar concept in studies of the political and economic history of the war, but one that is not yet established in cultural and intellectual history.

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¹¹⁰ Alfons Maria Arns, 'Oehler, Richard', in *Frankfurter Personenlexikon (Onlineausgabe)*, 10 Dec. 2019, <http://frankfurter-personenlexikon.de/node/5046>.

¹¹¹ Maria Dembowska, *Bibliotekarstwo Polskie 1925–1951 w świetle korespondencji jego współtwórców (Polish librarianship 1925–1951 in the light of the correspondence of its co-authors)* (Warsaw, 1995).

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