

Christina Kott, *Préserver l'art de l'ennemi? Le patrimoine artistique en Belgique et en France occupées, 1914–1918*, Brussels, Bern, Berlin et al. (P.I.E. Peter Lang) 2006, 441 p. (Comparatisme et Société, 4), ISBN 90-5201-332-2, EUR 46,90.

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Christina Kott has succeeded admirably in filling one of the most enduring holes in the literature surrounding the cultural history of the German occupation of Belgium and France during the 1914–1918 war. In doing so, she has not only shown the contours of the German military and civilian administration's effort to protect works of art in areas under occupation, but she has also written a fine pre-history of the more malevolent parallel efforts undertaken by the Nazis and the Wehrmacht in the Second World War. The differences are palpable between the two episodes, but some parallels clearly exist. In Lille in 1917, Charles Rémy, an official in the mayor's office was imprisoned and sent to Germany for refusing to arrange for the transport of works of art in the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Lille to be removed for »safe-keeping« in Valenciennes. This collection had masterpieces of particular interest to the German occupiers of Lille; works by Dürer and others needed protection, though the advantage of having them in Valenciennes rather than in Lille is not evident; to be sure, the building in Lille where they were held had been damaged, but who could say which way the war would go anywhere in France and Belgium?

This episode is but one of many fascinating episodes of occupation policy detailed by Kott. How are we to read them? The overall position of Belgium, as well as of northern France, was subject to German requisitions of all sorts. It is evident that for much of the non-Jewish population, to be occupied by the Germans was worse in 1914–1918 than in 1940–1944. We have studies of food supply and foreign aid, especially to children, but there is much less available in print on the cultural politics of occupation. For this reason, we are indebted to Kott for her judicious account of what was either an act of heavy-handed benevolence or of German cultural aggression. Kott leans towards the first interpretation, and on balance her account is persuasive. She shows well how different the story was in Belgium, where a proper civilian administration was set up by the Germans, and northern France, where this was not the case.

The Kunstschutz operated on a shorter military leash than did its peers in Belgium, where there was more collaboration between German officials and Belgian administrators. Non-cooperation by locals in France hampered the effort in France, but the differences went further than that. The long-term cultural project of a German aesthetic protectorate in Belgium was less well developed with respect to France, though there were tentative steps taken to unite the northern regions of France with Belgium under a kind of Burgundian/Flemish cultural embrace. What Kott shows above all is the palpable tension between what she terms nationalism and cosmopolitanism in the work of the Kunstschutz. That

tension existed elsewhere in Europe, and though Kott cites the work of Liulevicius on Ober Ost, she abjures comparison between her story and that related to other areas of German occupation. And whereas the potential for criminal action on the part of German officials dealing with the art of occupied countries clearly existed in 1914–1918, the record assembled by Kott shows how far removed the Kaiser's army and occupying forces were from Hitler's army and political police. It is salutary to recall this set of distinctions when setting the Great War in the context of worse things to come.