THE LOSSES OF THE MUSIC COLLECTION OF THE HESSISCHE LANDESBIBLIOTHEK IN DARMSTADT IN 1944:
A CASE STUDY ON THE FAILURE TO SAFEGUARD HISTORICAL LIBRARY HOLDINGS

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There are numerous archival sources that enable us to study the history of the Hessische Landesbibliothek (Hessian State Library) in Darmstadt during the Second World War. Only recently have a large number of source materials been discovered that will be presented and analysed for the first time in this paper. Archival documents from the official correspondence of the library, original lists made up for the removal of the library holdings, as well as registers, catalogues and interviews with historical witnesses, offer a near-complete view of the events that led to the catastrophe of 1944, when one of the greatest and most valuable historical libraries in Germany lost more than two-thirds of its holdings, among them an irreplaceable ancient music collection that testified to three centuries of musical practice at the Darmstadt court.

Library Protection and Losses during the Second World War

In treating the losses that occurred in the twentieth century, this paper will shed light on many general facets of knowledge preservation and destruction. After all, unleashing a wave of destruction that dwarfed everything that had come before, the Second World War marked a clear turning point in the transmission of the cultural heritage: due to the immense loss of sources, it is often no longer possible to learn anything about the deperdita of former epochs.

The protection of libraries in wars is a topic that has been examined in a more or less attentive fashion throughout the ages. In the early modern

1 Now called the Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Darmstadt. In the following, source information will make use of the sigla adopted from the Répertoire International des Sources Musicales (RISM), where D-DS refers to the Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Darmstadt, D-Da to the Hessisches Staatsarchiv Darmstadt, D-B to the Staatsbibliothek Berlin, and D-Bba to the Bundesarchiv Berlin.
period some rulers and private persons brought their libraries to safety in the event of war, thus protecting them against destruction and looting. Two examples can be cited to illustrate this practice. The famous Bibliotheca Palatina of Heidelberg was brought to Rome as booty during the Thirty Years’ War, and during the wars that Louis XIV fought against the territories of the margraves of Baden-Durlach, the margraves’ library was taken to the family palace in Basel, where it survived intact. After the damage wreaked on libraries in the wars of the nineteenth century (the worst probably being the burning of the Bibliothèque Municipale in Strasbourg during the Prussian bombardment in 1870) and the destruction of the University Library in Louvain at the very beginning of the First World War by attacking German troops, the belligerent powers finally saw the necessity to install commissions charged with protecting museums, libraries and archives in battle zones. One of the reasons for the delayed and insufficient preventive measures in Germany during the Second World War was probably the lack of experience with military actions on German territory during the First World War and the underestimation of the dimensions of modern aerial warfare. By contrast, fascist Italy had an excellent centralised library administration that, taking a very pragmatic view of the development of the war, laid the basis for saving national library holdings of great value.

Whereas the responsible officials in Italy and France began considering and implementing measures to safeguard their libraries at an early stage, in Germany the first official statement reflecting these concerns was not

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6 See Andrea Paoli, ‘Salviamo la creatura’: Protezione e difesa delle biblioteche italiane nella seconda guerra mondiale (Roma: Associazione italiana biblioteche, 2003), and Le biblioteche e gli archivi durante la seconda guerra mondiale. Il caso italiano, ed. Andrea Capaccioni, Andrea Paoli and Ruggero Ranieri, (Bologna: Pendragon, 2007). It is clear from the official post-war reports that around 80 per cent of the state libraries were heavily damaged in Italy as well (see La ricostruzione delle biblioteche italiane dopo la Guerra 1940–45, I danni, ed. Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione/Direzione Generale Archivi e Biblioteche [Rome, 1949]).