Elisabeth Gallas
Reconstructing European Jewry.
Restitution of Jewish cultural assets as transnational project

Negotiations concerning restitution play an important role within the processes of 'overcoming' dictatorships. Especially the Jewish claims for restitution and indemnification, which were raised after 1945, represent the complex field of conditions of the legal and moral confrontations with the crimes of national-socialist Germany. Along the ideas and work of the Jewish Cultural Reconstruction organization, established 1944 in New York, I wish to examine this complex field by analyzing the early measures of restitution dealing with the Jewish cultural heritage looted and confiscated by the Nazis between 1933 and 1945 as they are represented in the organization. The JCR was confronted with the very difficult legal situation of the Jews at the time, where they were not able to claim collective rights without a proper state representing them. After the establishment of Israel the picture did not change entirely as the diasporic nature of Jewish lifeworlds articulated different needs to other (nationally organized) collectives. The JCR therefore functioned as trustee for the looted Jewish cultural property which was a great political success. More, the JCR represented a transnational project of memory-constitution as it was composed of the major Jewish organizations worldwide and dedicated its work to proper documentation of the crimes as well as the ideal of reconstructing European Jewish culture (elsewhere than in Europe). The impulses for the formation of a Jewish memory on the Holocaust deriving from that work had an impact that profoundly outlived the organization itself.