

Jews in Amsterdam and Holland

A Historical and Social Background

In the past, many authors (Poliakov, Hilberg, Dawidowicz, Marrus/Paxton and even a few Dutch historians) wondered why, of all occupied countries (except Poland), proportionately, the largest number of Jewish victims was deported from the Netherlands i.e. about 75%. In countries like Denmark or Bulgaria, this percentage was practically zero; in France 25%, Belgium about 40% and in Germany itself about 23% of the 1933 Jewish populations. This high Dutch death toll should have sounded a warning that something is/was wrong with the characteristic of 'Dutch tolerance'.¹

Why did this happen despite courageous collective behaviour during several general strikes, and many Dutch men and women bravely resisting the German oppressor? The explanations given below concern Dutch society, but could be partly at least a model for other European societies as well.

Good comparative material about this question has started to appear since 1996 and, thanks to some critical reflections on it, the notorious role of the Dutch elite in the German Genocide can be highlighted.² There are, however, few signs that the general public, most decision-makers, journalists, historians or other scientists have adopted the correct view of the manifestations of the German Genocide and Shoah in Holland. In 2009 a conclusion was published: "In the Netherlands the total population is perceived as victims of the Germans; differentiations or the specific mentioning of special groups of victims is largely avoided."³

These differentiations are necessary to get a realistic picture of the groups of victims. This aim has not been fulfilled yet. In fact, I have urged time and again the necessity to improve the relevant research and pointed to major deficiencies among research institutes, but have been met with strong opposition even from representatives of the old target groups.⁴

Apparently, the feeling is that a revision and criticism of old positions will have grave consequences. Whatever the reasons for this 'omission', the relevant question here remains unanswered: how was it possible that in a country with nearly no antisemitism and an image of tolerance that is centuries old, proportionately the most Jews were sent to their death? The basic elements of an answer make up this first chapter.

The Double-Dutch

During the war the Netherlands had a German civilian government under a strong NSDAP/SS influence whose overall aim was to incorporate the country within the *Reich*. This was partly a consequence of the manner in which Queen Wilhelmina and the former Dutch government had left the country, practically giving the new German rulers the status of legal successors.⁵

In addition, the perpetrator's regime easily found every kind of *active* cooperation within the Dutch bureaucracy allowing them to centralise the rounding up and deportation of the jews. At every level, the Dutch bureaucrats precisely executed the German deportation orders and, far too often, felt obliged to act in a brutal way against their fellow citizens, without being asked. Adolf Eichmann was astonished about such favourable cooperation.

However, the crucial factor in the notorious Dutch efforts is the following: the state bureaucracy under the leadership of the Dutch heads of the ministries and large bureaucratic institutions, who could now act according to the *Führerprinzip* and used the occupation to realise their dreams of centralisation that had been postulated before the war.

This leadership was prepared to pay the price of 'a few jewish guests', in order to plan and execute these aims. It was constantly argued that "this could avoid more serious problems". And, indeed, the Germans welcomed and *followed* the Dutch bureaucratic centralisation in nearly all aspects except, of course, in military matters. Therefore, in my DW the concept of the *Second Occupation* (the one by the Dutch state bureaucrats) could be coined.⁶

For the execution of the deportation decisions, the notorious Amsterdam bureaucracy was of strategic importance because most jews lived and were collected in this city. This involved not only the municipal police (Van Meershoek; Roest), but also the population registry, which cooperated closely with Lentz (see below). This office produced special street maps on which the houses of jews were indicated in colour, so that nobody could miss them.

As a protest against this deportation there was a brutally repressed strike against the Germans (February 1942). Unfortunately, it was mainly a Communist initiative and had to be played down by the Social Democrat elite, while the protest remained an abortive and Amsterdam-only affair: in the end, these 'Reds' were even the bad guys; a variant of 'blaming the victim'.

One aspect that favoured quick deportation was that the Queen and the government in exile were too slow in urging the Dutch population to bother about their jewish citizens. The Dutch resistance also began late (after April 1943 by which time most jews had already been deported), and was brave but small, divided and only partially effective.