Brief History of the Holocaust in the Netherlands

Jewish presence in the Netherlands

With the abolition of the Inquisition in 1579, the Dutch Republic became the preferred host country for Jews fleeing the antisemitic measures imposed in the Spanish Empire. Indeed, hundreds of Portuguese Jews settled in Amsterdam around 1600. A new wave of Jewish immigrants arrived in the city around 1750, bringing the total to about 15,000 Ashkenazi and 3,000 Sephardic Jews. Contact between the two groups was minimal because their cultures, traditions, and languages were different.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, the Jews of Amsterdam were economically self-sustaining. Because they were not eligible for membership in the Christian guilds, they found themselves excluded from practically all professions. As a result, they had to find employment in commercial spheres that they introduced to the country, notably the tobacco and the diamond industries. The same held true at the institutional level: the Dutch government did not wish to intervene in the
Jewish community, which it considered to be foreign. Hence, the Jewish community was forced to govern itself and was marginalized from Dutch society.

Only in the 19th century, subsequent to the French occupation of Holland, did the Jews receive equal civil rights. Similarly, with the abolition of the guilds in 1809, the Jews gradually entered the Dutch economy. Most, however, lived in poverty and were labourers.

The 20th century

At the beginning of the 20th century, urbanisation brought about a concentration of Jews in Amsterdam. The Jewish community numbered about 60,000 people, or 10% of the city’s population. Most of them lived in the old Jewish quarter located in the city center, as well as in three other areas. These four residential districts were far from being homogeneous; non-Jews also lived there.

In 1930, there were 111,917 Dutch Jews, or 1.41% of the Dutch population. More than half were concentrated in Amsterdam alone, where they represented 8.65% of the total population.

As in the neighbouring countries, the Netherlands experienced three types of antisemitism: anti-Judaism (a particular product of Catholic teaching), cultural antisemitism (focusing on the minority status of the Jews rather than their collective identity), and the aggressive antisemitism fuelled by national socialist movements and groups of the extreme right. The Netherlands, nonetheless, stand out because of the weak interest in supporting antisemitic measures as demonstrated by the general population, as well as the relatively high level of integration and assimilation of the Jewish community.
The Holocaust

On September 1, 1939, Nazi Germany invaded Poland, the event responsible for launching World War II. The effects of the ongoing war were not immediately felt in the Netherlands, where the Jews continued to feel safe.

The Occupation

On May 10, 1940, Nazi Germany invaded the Netherlands, which until then had remained neutral in the world conflict. The Nazis took control of the government. The invasion occurred so quickly that the Jews were taken by surprise, and only a small proportion (hardly a few hundred) managed to flee the country.

Despite its initial promise not to disrupt the social structure of the country, the German government slowly imposed anti-Jewish policies; imposing discriminatory measures gradually so as to facilitate their implementation.
and to avoid having the Dutch population take up the cause of the Jews.

The process of identification and marginalization that would ultimately lead to the isolation and deportation of the Jews, and the “final solution”, had begun.¹

**Identification and exclusion of the Jews**

So it was that, from the first year of the occupation, the Jews were excluded from public office and later from public places in Amsterdam.

On January 10, 1941, the German administration ordered that a compulsory census be taken of all people having “full or mostly Jewish blood.”

On February 11, 1941, agitators of the Dutch Nazi party attacked Jews in the public places of the Jewish quarter. The violence intensified around Waterlooplein Square, causing the death of Hendrik Koot, a Nazi of Dutch origin.

The next day, the old Jewish quarter of Amsterdam was temporarily surrounded and closed, giving it the air of an Eastern European ghetto. The quarter was finally reopened but was demarcated by signs and banners indicating that it was Jewish and that the Wehrmacht soldiers (regular German army) should not enter. The German authorities took advantage of the crisis, moreover, and set up the Joodsche Raad (Jewish Council) to serve as an intermediary between the authorities and the Jews. The Council had to implement the orders of the authorities.

In order to punish the Jews for the murder of Koot, however, the Germans carried out the first raid in the Jewish quarter. On February 22, 1941, about 425 young Jewish men between the ages of 20 and 35 were deported first to Buchenwald and then to the Mauthausen concentration camp; Not one came back alive.

As soon as rumours of the first raid reached the Dutch communist party, it organized a strike to show its support for its Jewish colleagues. The strike spread to other non-Communist sectors, and many social democrats and patriots joined in the demonstration that followed in the old Jewish quarter. This demonstration, which took place between February 25 and 27, became the symbol of the resistance and of the support of the Dutch population for the Jewish community.
The event is, however, an exception to the norm, in that no such other act of resistance was ever organized thereafter. On February 27, the German administration declared a state of emergency. The army intervened and quickly put an end to the demonstration.

In May 1941, the restrictive measures against the Jews intensified even more. Jews were banned from public baths and parks, and they could no longer rent rooms in certain hotel complexes. Later in the year, Jewish students were separated from non-Jewish ones and forced to attend separate schools. In January 1942, they were completely banned from public schools. Signs declaring “Jews are forbidden” appeared everywhere.

Early in 1942, raids were carried out in Amsterdam, and the first unemployed Jewish men were deported to labour camps. In the five days preceding the raids, the Jewish Council had organized medical exams to identify Jewish males in sufficiently good health to work in the camps. One thousand seventy-five Jews were called up. Deportations to the labour camps went on throughout the year. By September, between 7,000 and 7,500 Jews had been sent to 37 different labour camps dispersed in the eastern and southern Netherlands. Although the German administration had promised that the working conditions would be similar to those of the other Dutch workers, the Jews’ rations were actually reduced, and their salary was on average 25% lower than that of the non-Jews.

In the same year, the Nazi authorities intensified their system of identification and exclusion of Jews and ordered that their identity cards be marked with the letter “J.” At the end of March 1942, the Nuremberg Laws took effect in the Netherlands. These were a series of legal measures adopted by the Nazi government in 1935 for the purpose of defining “Jews”, discriminating against them, and restricting their freedoms. Soon after, the authorities made the wearing of the yellow star by all Jews over the age of six compulsory at all times.

**Deportation**

In February 1942, the Nazi authorities ordered the deportation of foreign Jews (mainly German Jews who had fled Germany when Hitler came to power) to Westerbork and then to Auschwitz.

In the summer of the same year, the SS officer in charge of “Jewish affairs and evacuation”, Adolf Eichmann, informed the German Foreign Office that 40,000 Jews were expected to be “evacuated” from the
Netherlands. Due to a devastating efficiency, this quota would be reached by the end of the year. The deportations were to continue until Amsterdam was declared judenfrei, free of all Jews. This came to pass in September 1943.4

Thus it was that the first notices of deportation arrived in July 1942. In May 1943 began the final phase of the deportations. From that point on, even those Jews who had until then benefited from exemptions were deported to the East. This was particularly true of Jews married to non-Jews; they were forced to choose between deportation and sterilization. More than 3 000 Jews would renew their exemption after undergoing sterilization. It would appear, however, that the doctors responsible for performing the operations were favourable to the Jewish cause; hence, only 600 of the 3 000 Jews were really sterilized. It should be noted, furthermore, that the majority of Jews in mixed marriages refused to undergo the operation and chose to risk deportation.5

All in all, the arrest and deportation of the 70 000 Jews of Amsterdam to the death camps (the “extermination” camps as the Nazis called them) took less than a year. By the war’s end, about 107 000 Dutch Jews had been killed by the Nazis. That number represents an enormously high percentage of Jews killed (73% of the Dutch Jews) compared to that of other countries in Western Europe (about 40% in Belgium and 25% in France). It also highlights the atypical6 case of the Netherlands in Western Europe.

Liberation

The liberation of the Netherlands occurred relatively slowly. The Canadian army was given the responsibility of liberating the northwest coasts of France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. In November 1944, with the Canadian army advancing, the Nazis redoubled their efforts to deport as many Jews as possible. Numerous raids in Rotterdam led to the deportation of 50 000 Jews to the East.

On April 12, 1945, the Canadian army liberated Westerbork, which still held about 900 Jews. The Netherlands were officially liberated on May 5, 1945.

Although the war had indeed come to an end, life did not become easier for the general population and even less so for the Jewish survivors of the genocide. In fact, the reconstruction of Europe in general and of the Netherlands in particular proved difficult. Hundreds of thousands of people were altogether destitute and had to go through displaced persons camps.
Like most countries after the war, the Netherlands tightened its control over immigration. The government refused to acknowledge the existence of the Holocaust and the tragedy that the Jewish community lived through during the occupation. No special measures were taken to come to the aid of the Jews.

Similarly, the State refused to provide any help whatsoever to the repatriated Jews, arguing that such help should come from the Jewish communities of the Netherlands or elsewhere in the world. The State thus refused to help its own citizens. Only 10,000 of the 70,000 Jews of Amsterdam survived the war – a number hardly sufficient to re-establish a community that had existed on Dutch soil for almost four centuries. The old Jewish quarter is almost entirely demolished and will never be reestablished.

1 This phenomenon is well depicted in the diary of Anne Frank.
2 Anne Frank describes this situation equally well in her diary.
3 Westerbork transit camp was first built in 1939 by the Dutch government for the purpose of herding the German Jewish refugees fleeing Nazism. At the time of the invasion, the camp numbered about 750 refugees from central and Eastern Europe. In early July 1942, the camp administration came into German control as part of the deportation process. From that time on, Westerbork became the main transit camp in the Netherlands through which 102,000 Jews, Sinti, and Roma passed before the final deportation to Auschwitz or Sobibor.
4 It is in this context that Margot Frank was summoned and the family went into hiding.
5 Some Jews were able to flee or hide (in particular, Anne Frank and the others hiding in the Secret Annex). Others had the chance to be entered on the exemption lists that allowed them, for some time at least, to avoid deportation. There were several types of exemptions: administrative, given to the employees of the Jewish Council; racial (half- or quarter-Jews. Jews married to non-Jews, baptized Jews, and foreign Jews who might receive better treatment than that accorded the Dutch Jews); economic (specialized workforce considered necessary for the proper functioning of the country's economy).
6 The atypical case of the Netherlands: The Dutch case differs from that of the neighbouring Western European countries, by virtue of the abnormally high percentage of Jews that were deported and killed during the occupation. Numerous factors explain the “success” of the Germans in the Netherlands: The speed and intensity of the German persecution; the geographical location (ocean to the west, Germany to the east, occupied Belgium to the south); and the Dutch terrain (relatively flat, little forest), making it difficult to flee or hide.
Moreover, contrary to France and Belgium which were under military administration, the Netherlands had a German civil government that allowed the SS and members of the Nazi party to exert a greater influence over the decisions pertaining to the isolation and deportation of the country's Jews. Thus the deportation of the Dutch Jews was carried out without interruption right up to the last minute.

The collaboration between the Dutch bureaucracy and police with the Nazi occupiers was yet another important factor that allowed the deportation of the Dutch Jews to proceed efficiently. In fact, the assistance of the Dutch bureaucracy to track down Jews who were in hiding by means of an effective census; the large number of German police officers (5,000 compared to the 3,000 in France); the cooperation shown by the Dutch police during the deportations and especially in the “pursuit of Jews” who had gone into hiding rendered the process of deportation and murder terribly efficient. The relative weakness of the resistance movement, the limited aid of non-Jews, and the high level of obedience on the part of the Jews due to their ignorance about the details of the Nazi plan for them should also be noted.

7 During the war, thousands of Jewish children were sent to live with non-Jewish families. In 1946, 3,458 children were living in foster homes; of those, 2,041 were now orphaned. They found themselves at the center of a controversy with two conflicting objectives. On the one hand, the government wished to leave the children with their foster families; on the other, the Jewish community wanted to rebuild by bringing the hidden children back under its aegis and educating them, thus ensuring the future of the community. The controversy stretched over several months. In the end, in 1949, 1,500 of the 2,041 children were returned to the Jewish community, while about 500 others remained with their foster family.