

Rob Bakker, *Boekhouders van de Holocaust. Nederlandse ambtenaren en de collaboratie* Almere, Verbum, 2020. 727 pp. ISBN 978-9074274920

Debates about the persecution of the Jews in the Netherlands during the Second World War, like those related to the wider Nazi occupation of the country, have been primarily conducted within Dutch historiography. There have been few interventions from outside and this national introspection has led to a gradual shift in emphasis from histories of the period that have gone from barely mentioning the *jodenvervolging* to a point where it has become central to almost any contemporary discussion. The author of this book makes no secret that his primary focus is on the role of the Dutch bureaucracy in the identification, isolation, pauperization and deportation of the Jews, with the wider issues of official state and local collaboration relegated to a subtitle. There is nothing inherently wrong with such an approach but there remains a danger of myopia in focusing just on the one issue and of not seeing Dutch civil servants as having responsibilities for all aspects of state administration while being cut adrift from their former political masters. This is not to exonerate the behaviour of national and local government officials or the various police forces from responsibility for what befell the Jewish communities, but this culpability is already well known and well understood, having been the subject of several detailed studies, such as Peter Romein on the burgemeesters and Guus Meershoek on the Amsterdam police. This raises the question of what new insights this book of more than 700 pages brings us.

The text is arranged more-or-less chronologically, beginning with the parameters of how the Dutch civil servants were instructed and then behaved under foreign occupation. This one chapter covers a great deal of ground, dealing as it does with the initial responses of different groups, such as mayors and the police, as well as the definitional problems such as the extent of collaboration and how to analyse their behaviour. In defining collaboration, the author explicitly follows the definitions established by Cor Lammers (2005) and Gerhard Hirschfeld (1988), but when it comes to establishing an analytical structure, his use of a model that encompasses

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functions, relations, intentions, and continuity is attributed to Peter Romein, although annoyingly this has no accompanying bibliographical reference. Following from this is a relatively short discussion of the position of the Jews in the Netherlands before 1940 before a series of chapters that deal with the various antisemitic measures carried out in the first year of occupation, namely the imposition of the 'aryan attestation', the expulsion of Jews from government service and the registration of Jews carried out by the Rijksinspectie van de Bevolkingsregisters under Jacob Lentz. Each chapter ends with a reasoned conclusion about the importance of each phase to the overall analysis of bureaucratic behaviour. For example, the implementation of the 'aryan attestation' is portrayed as being in conflict with the *Aanwijzingen* (the instructions given to the civil servants in the event of an occupation). The role of the Secretaries-General is also seen as crucial in driving the process and while there may have been individuals who had reservations, they were isolated in a wider group dynamic of obedience and the threat of dismissal in the event of non-compliance. This first step in signing the attestation and marginalizing the Jews was 'the point of no return' (p. 171) and set the agenda for a more intensive form of collaboration that included further registration, isolation and ultimately deportation. On the Rijksinspectie the author seems to suggest that the existing literature has portrayed Lentz as the ultimate collaborating bureaucrat but points out that he was only one man and the face of a much bigger machine. This argument seems to underplay his personal role

in perfecting the system and in seeing the Jews as subverting the same, while at the same time implicating his subordinates and civil servants in other departments who all realised that the registration of the Jews was something

new, not normal (*geen reguliere*), and a discontinuity with the past.

A section entitled 'Isolation' deals with the exclusion of the Jews from society and the economy. Here the author concludes by suggesting that the civil servants knew that the anti-Jewish measures were unlawful (*onwettig*) and that they might be held accountable in the future. Much the same conclusions are drawn in relation to the economic spoliation of the Jewish community, where the civil servants were implicated alongside other German and Dutch agencies in the systematic expropriation of property and other assets. Here as elsewhere the author looks at the issue through the prism of the *aanwijzingen* – arguing that what was done was in breach of the terms laid down for administrative behaviour in the event of an occupation. This same theme also informs the chapters under the heading 'deportation'. The author discusses the role of the bureaucracy in the 'accounting' of the deportations, the agency of the Dutch police and railway system, the Dutch guard units at Westerbork, Amersfoort and Vught, the effective

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collusion of the legal machinery with Jewish citizens being denied protection by the law, and more broadly with the public perception of the Jews and their plight. In the latter case, he taps into the ongoing debate sparked by Bart van der Boom about what was known about the fate of the Jews within the Netherlands during the occupation. In all these discussions his conclusions show that the civil servants involved were more concerned with the day-to-day running of their particular functions and were either unaware or chose not to consider the consequences of their actions. This should come as no surprise at it would probably be true of most modern bureaucracies – the tragedy being in the specifics of some actions by some branches of government service under foreign occupation.

There is no doubt that this is a comprehensive survey of Dutch bureaucratic collaboration in relation to the *jodenvervolging*. The amount of ground covered by the book is vast, and while there are some discursions away from the central topic, the author should be congratulated on bringing all these elements together in one volume. However, it begs the question of whether this extensive survey is necessary to make a case that is already widely accepted – namely that there was widespread official collusion with the German aims of registering, isolating, despoiling and then deporting the Jews from the Netherlands. The conclusions at the end of each chapter are balanced but make a strong case for the overall argument that the shortcomings and mistakes by individuals and agencies within the Netherlands effectively placed the Jews, both Dutch and non-Dutch, outside the protection of the law and thus at the mercy of arbitrary measures that led to their pauperization and deportation from the country.

While it is undoubtedly right that the nation and its historians address the tragedy that befell its Jewish citizens, there is a danger that concentration on a single issue masks the reality of the situation – namely that the Dutch civil service had a multiplicity of functions and myriad issues to consider – emanating from both its traditional role in executing government policy and from the abnormal circumstances of a foreign occupation. In this respect, some further consideration

of how other national bureaucracies, primarily in Western Europe, dealt with the same issues might have been informative and would have added an additional dimension to the analysis. Notwithstanding this critique, this is a detailed and carefully constructed analysis that brings together a wealth of scholarship to present a balanced and nuanced view of what the author himself concludes by describing as 'a black page in the history of the Netherlands'.

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