



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Did Dutch Jews Go Like Lambs to the Gas Chambers?

by Dr. Manfred Gerstenfeld

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,204, June 19, 2019

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Retired Dutch general Toine Beukering – a candidate for chairman of the Senate – said earlier this month that the Jews were “chased like docile lambs into the gas chambers.” This remark, for which he later apologized, once again raised the issue of the huge historical distortion of the Dutch role during WWII. The Dutch, who collaborated massively with the German occupiers, now exaggerate Dutch wartime resistance and underemphasize the disproportionately large role of Jews in it.

Gen. (ret.) Toine Beukering is a freshman Dutch senator from the Forum for Democracy, a new anti-immigration and Eurosceptic party. Because the Forum for Democracy has become the largest party in the Senate, the Senate chair is expected to be chosen from its ranks. Beukering is its candidate.

On June 8, the largest Dutch daily, *De Telegraaf*, published an interview with Beukering. During the interview, he explained that one of the reasons he joined the Dutch military was that he had read a shelf full of books on the Shoah as a child. He said, “I’ve always been intrigued by how it was possible that the Jews – such a courageous, militant nation – were chased like docile lambs into the gas chambers.”

The interviewer asked whether he understood that people would be shocked by this remark. Beukering replied that he had participated in the Dutch kippa-wearing day in solidarity with Jews.

Beukering’s words did indeed cause an outcry, and he apologized for them a few days later.

The former general’s words once again illustrate the myth the Dutch have created about their wartime history after their country was liberated by the Allies from German occupation in May 1945.

In May 1940, a few days after the Germans invaded the Netherlands, the Dutch queen, Wilhelmina of Oranje, fled to London without consulting her ministers. Most ministers followed her. They left no instructions to the remaining functionaries about how to act during the occupation. The Dutch army capitulated within a few days.

The Dutch Supreme Court was among the first to betray the Jews. In 1940, the Germans asked all Dutch officials and teachers to sign a declaration that they were not Jewish. Almost all concerned signed, including the non-Jewish members of the Supreme Court. So did almost all employees of the Ministry of Justice. The Germans used this declaration to exclude Jews from official positions. Lodewijk Visser, the Jewish president of the Supreme Court, was dismissed by the Germans in early 1941.

In 2011, a book was published about the Supreme Court during the German occupation. The authors concluded that this court “lost the halo of the highest maintainers of justice in the Netherlands.” When the book was publicly presented, the then President of the Supreme Court, Geert Corstens, said the signing of the declaration in 1940 “went against everything for which the Supreme Court should have stood.”

Dutch Jews, who were forced to wear yellow stars, were increasingly isolated in a nation where the number of collaborators far exceeded the membership of the prewar Dutch National Socialist party (NSB). Most of the population displayed total indifference toward the Jews and their fate.

Members of the Dutch police knew it was their task to arrest only criminals, yet they greatly assisted the Germans in arresting Jews, including babies and the elderly. Jews were transported by Dutch railways to the Westerbork transit camp, where they were guarded by Dutch military police. More than 100,000 Dutch Jews – over 70% of the prewar Jewish population – were sent to their deaths in the German camps in Poland.

In 2018, an exhibition about the Jews and the Royal House of Oranje took place at the Amsterdam Jewish Museum. There one could listen to an audio recording of the few sentences Queen Wilhelmina allocated to her Jewish citizens on Dutch radio in her multiple speeches during the war. They were spoken in an offhand manner. These few impassive lines were contrasted at the exhibition by the recording of her fiery talk against the mobilization of Dutch men to work in Germany.

A small percentage of the Dutch population – very courageous people – helped Jews. Twenty-four thousand Jews went into hiding. Of these, 16,000 survived. Many others were betrayed or caught by Dutch volunteer organizations – a civil and a police one – the members of which were rewarded monetarily for every Jew they captured.

In the Dutch resistance, Jews who numbered less than 1.5% of the population before the war played a disproportionately large role. This has been underpublicized by both media and historians. A monument near the Amsterdam municipality testifies to the Jewish resistance.

A few months after the end of the war, Minister of Transport and Energy Steef van Schaik, of the Catholic KVP party, addressed a large gathering of railway employees at The Hague. He said: "With your trains, the unhappy victims were brought to the concentration camps. In your hearts, there was revolution. Nevertheless, you did it. That is to your honor. It was the duty the Dutch government asked from you because the railways are one of the pillars that support the economic life of the Dutch people. That should not be put at risk."

Years later, a journalist wrote in an Amsterdam daily that Van Schaik's words were "the most horrible text ever spoken by a Dutch minister."

After the war, the Dutch had a psychological need to soften the impact of their rapid defeat in May 1940 at the hands of the Germans. This led to an exaggeration of heroic acts by the Dutch during the occupation, even to the point of invention. In that scenario, there was, at best, a place for the Jews as second-tier victims. The image was that they had not resisted but instead chosen meekly to be deported.

This profoundly false motif was expressed once again in Beukering's words.

These feelings also played out in the attitude toward Dutch Jews among ministers of the first postwar government. These ministers displayed a coolness and even a disdain for Jews.

When Jewish representatives met the first postwar PM Willem Schermerhorn, a Laborite, he told them he did not consider it his task to see to it that Jews receive their assets back. These assets had been entirely stolen by the Germans.

Many decades later, the management board of the railways and some local police chiefs apologized for the wartime role of their predecessors in the persecution of Dutch Jews. Yet in 2012, then liberal Minister of Security and Justice Ivo Opstelten refused to apologize on behalf of the police at large. This is despite the fact that members of the Dutch police were critical to the process of carrying out the genocide of the Jews.

Postwar Dutch governments have continued to maintain the "docile lambs" distortion. The current liberal PM, Mark Rutte, has set the Netherlands apart as the only Western European country to refuse to admit the huge failures of its wartime governments, let alone apologize for them.

Dr. Manfred Gerstenfeld is a Senior Research Associate at the BESA Center and a former chairman of the Steering Committee of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. He specializes in Israeli–Western European relations, antisemitism, and anti-Zionism, and is the author of The War of a Million Cuts.