The impact of citizens opinions on Dutch police participation in the deportation of the Jews 1942-1943

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The Dutch police joined the German occupier in deporting Jews from the Netherlands. Although that fact has always been public knowledge and although the Netherlands were one of the first countries where an all-encompassing history of the persecution of the Jews was published, namely in 1947, it took a long time before this fact was expressed explicitly in historiography and public discourse.

During the post-war purge, the participation of the ordinary police in the deportation was taboo, with the result that police officers had to continue

their career with a bad conscience until retirement, for some of them at the highest positions. Until the mid-1960's, their participation remained tacit knowledge: the issue could not be found in newspapers. In the next decade, it became part of public debates, for example those about the liberation of German war criminals, but the Dutch policemen concerned didn't appear in the limelight.

This conspiracy of silence in the police was partly broken in the 1980's when the generation that had been recruited during the war and that most often had done the dirty job retired. Some opened up their heart, even on television, and a few historians got interested, started research and published at the turn of the century some empirical historical studies. However, meanwhile, public interest in the issue had disappeared: police witnesses refused to appear on television anymore and died.

Among all local Dutch institutions that were involved in the deportation of the Jews, the police are nowadays best researched. Nevertheless, the character and scale of their assistance is still not fully clear.

How did the Dutch police look like at the beginning of the occupation. In 1940, the Netherlands, containing some nine million inhabitants, were a well-established parliamentary democracy with a decentralised political structure with some traditional oligarchic features. Its judicial structure derived from the Napoleonic occupation.

There were five different kinds of police. The main part consisted of city police, Gemeentepolitie, to be found in some hundred cities. They were nominated and directed by the local mayor and mainly paid by the local government. In smaller towns, there was Gemeenteveldwacht, nominated by the provincial governor and directed by the local mayor. In parishes, one could find members of the Rijksveldwacht, a national police force, directed by the minister of Justice.

Last but not least there were two kinds of military police: the Koninklijke Marechaussee, that was patrolling the border regions and a riot police in the main cities: the Politietroepen.

During the 1920's, major parts of the Dutch police had been radically modernised, often by importing the latest German gear and technologies.

There were strong personal ties between German and Dutch policemen.

The German occupational government, the Reichskommissariat, was dissatisfied with the fragmented structure of the Dutch police but it realised that it had to rely on them because Nazi-Germany needed its manpower elsewhere, quite soon at the eastern front. The Dutch authorities remained responsible for day-to-day police work, but the Reichskommisariat reserved the right to instruct the Dutch police when necessary.

Apart from that prerogative, it tried to gain control of the police in three ways: by amalgamating forces, by creating a national recruiting and training centre and by nominating reliable officers at key positions in the police. In the Spring of 1942, they had achieved some success. The Marechaussee, the Politietroepen and the Rijksveldwacht were merged, new police personnel had passed a half year training according to German, national-socialist standards and at top of the main city police forces German-minded officers were installed. It was, however, uncertain if these results were up to the severe and demanding task of rounding up and deporting Jewish inhabitants.

Dutch police participation in executing this task was first of all the result of the German police strategy.
Two elements were basic:
1) The German police authorities were convinced that the February strike had been provoked by the local German civilian authority who had tried in vain to create a ghetto in Amsterdam by use of force. When they gained control of the anti-Jewish policies in the Spring of 1942, they relied on local, trusted institutions for the execution.

2) Secondly, the concentration of Jews in Amsterdam and The Hague and their wide dispersal in the countryside forced them to a scissor's movement in their territorial strategy of rounding up Jews: first concentrate on the major towns, then comb out the countryside and finally return to the major towns to finish the job there. Apart from that, they could rely on the local and regional labour offices that were busy interning Jewish men that had been made unemployed. [new sheet]

Deporting the Dutch Jews didn‘t take much more than one year. During this operation Dutch institutions were stepwise dropping out. First the

Jewish Council dropped out, then the ordinary police, than the especially created police battalions and then the auxiliary police.

In this process of disengagement, four crucial moments can be discerned:
1) The first moment was August 1942. Ordinary Dutch city police was engaged on a larger scale, because the Jewish Council became unwilling to urge Jews to come to the trains on their own. During September 1942, the local police in Amsterdam and The Hague rounded up Jews by force. They contributed significantly to the German objectives, offering hardly any resistance. When their unwillingness grew, the German police authorities, satisfied with the result, decided to switch to the Dutch provinces:

2) the second moment. From October 1942, local police in the countryside, first of all those in the Northern parts of the country, were engaged in rounding up Jews. In some towns, there was resistance. Resisters were dismissed and often went in hiding, for fear of arrest.

3) The third moment came in February 1943, when the archbishop incited Catholics to refuse cooperation. He was joined by the Dutch government in exile.
Now resistance among Dutch policemen grew fast, most strongly in Utrecht, the seat of the archbishopric. Although Dutch police participation didn't fully stop, it then became far less effective. The Reichskommissariat started to punish disobeying police harshly, for example by detaining family members of policemen that went in hiding. It had to rely on a national-socialist auxiliary police and their own Ordnungspolizei.

4) The fourth moment was May 1943 when the demobilized Dutch soldiers were brought back into captivity: a German measure that aroused strong popular protest. Finishing the roundup of Jews was mainly an affair of the German police and bunches of Dutch national socialists.

Now, let's turn to the main question: what impact did the perception and the knowledge of the fate of the Jews have on police behaviour? In the 1930's, the Dutch population was well-informed about Nazi-Germany and many abhorred the repressive regime. Although there was some anti-Semitism, public expression was not tolerated socially. Most people

realised that the Jews were the main target of the occupational regime. Disgust was expressed publicly and loudly during the February-strike of 1941.

However, the repression of the strike also made clear to the population that the occupier would fiercely repress any opposition to achieving its main goal. In the summer of 1942, a Dutch, London-based radio station and some clandestine newsletters reported that the deported Jews waited mass-murder in Poland. These rumours were taking seriously by many Jews and quite some policemen. When in August 1942, however, this reporting stopped and the local institutions, among them the police, joined in the deportation, policemen complied and Jews waited in fear.

There was some small scale opposition, mainly religiously inspired. A majority of the population went into inner emigration. At the turn of the year, resistance among still participating policemen was growing, partly out of reluctance against the abhorred job, partly in reaction to the news of German military defeats.

For the Dutch police, February 1943 was the turning point. For the population, that moment came somewhat later, at the end of April when the Dutch military had to return in captivity. The impact of citizens opinions on the attitude of the Dutch police during the German occupation was small. Institutional factors like the well-functioning governmental apparatuses and the decision of the local authorities to assist in the deportation proved far more important.

There were reports that the deported Jews waited mass murder, but the occupational situation offered many arguments to brush them aside. The enforced estrangement from society made opposition of individual policemen difficult. When the population turned into inner emigration, police were not addressed on their illegal actions anymore. Only the incitement of the Dutch archbishop had a serious impact on their behaviour, but for most Jews that came too late.

[De Nederlandse Politie in WWII]