

Review

**Hans Blom, David J. Wertheim, Hetty Berg and
Bart T. Wallet (eds):**

Reappraising the history of the Jews in the Netherlands

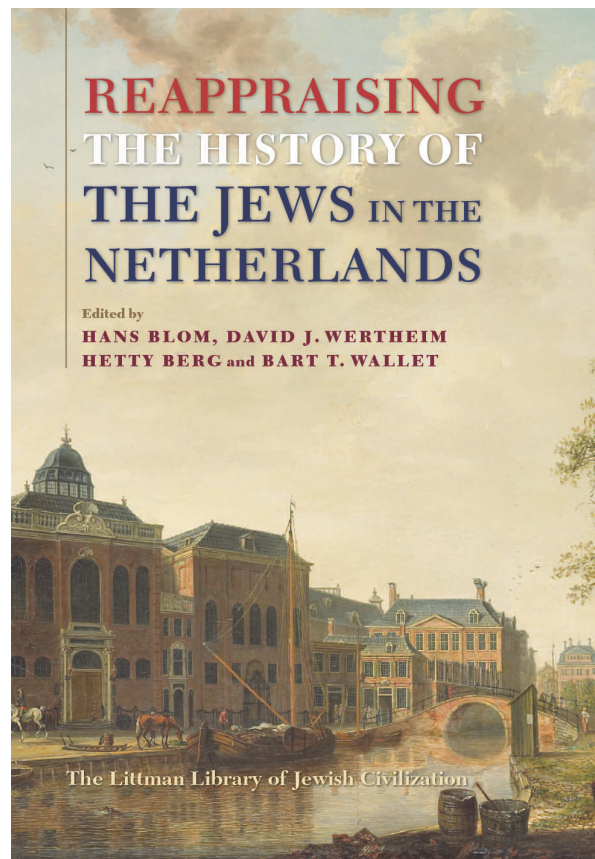
David McKay (trans.)

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On the eve of the occupation of the Netherlands by Nazi Germany in May 1940, the first volume of a planned collective two-volume comprehensive, up-to-date history of Dutch Jewry was published: Hendrik Brugmans and Alejandro Frank (1940), *Geschiedenis der Joden in Nederland (tot circa 1795)*. The second volume never appeared, due to the Holocaust and its results, which affected Dutch Jewry more than any other west-European country: about 75% of the Dutch Jewish community was exterminated, including some of the authors. It took more than five decades until a similar project was undertaken and published (in one volume), covering also the 19th and 20th centuries: *Geschiedenis van de joden in Nederland* (1995; English edition: 2007).¹ The contributors to this volume were scholars from the Netherlands, the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Israel (Ben M.J. Speet, Daniel M. Swetschinski, Jonathan I. Israel, Yosef Kaplan, Rena F.G. Fuks Mansfeld, J.C.H. [Hans] Blom, Joel J. Cahen, Peter Romijn and Chaya Brasz).

The volume under review here is an updated and amended version of the former one, and was originally published in Dutch in 2017, 22 years after the former edition. The chapters written by the original authors were updated by them – some more than others – including new insights and adding more recently published scholarly literature. The editors themselves write in their preface that “four of the chapters have been completely rewritten by the original specialists, and three chapters as well as the introduction have been completely rewritten by new authors. All the others have been updated to take account of new scholarship,” and therefore “we consider it a new publication rather than a revised edition” (vii). The authors who did not participate in the original volume are current eminent Dutch scholars: Irene Zwiep, who rewrote the chapter which was originally written by the late Fuks-Mansfeld, and Bart Wallet, a recently appointed professor of Jewish Studies at the University of Amsterdam, who rewrote two chapters, formerly written by Fuks-Mansfeld and Brasz. The introduction, too, originally written by the late Leiden University professor Ivo Schöffner, has been replaced by an introduction written by David Wertheim, the director of the Menasseh ben Israel Institute for Jewish Social and Cultural Studies in Amsterdam. Beyond the texts themselves, the book includes three maps and eight tables, an extremely beautiful visual essay (between pages 456-457), an extensive bibliography (43 pages), an index of names of persons and a general index of places, organizations and institutions, and topics. The size of the book and the fact that it is imbued with chromo paper gives the book a special allure, turning it almost into an album.

¹ Another volume, though with a different approach, was published several years earlier by this author, his late father, and another scholar — in Hebrew: *Pinkas Hakehillot: Holland* and in Dutch: Jozeph Michman, Hartog Beem and Dan Michman, *Pinkas. Geschiedenis van de joodse gemeenschap in Nederland*.

The volume consists of nine chronologically ordered chapters. It starts with the Middle Ages (written by Speet), when there was no permanent settlement of Jews in the Low Countries (the Netherlands as a well-defined political entity also did not exist yet). Chapters 2-4, written by Swetchinski, Kaplan and Israel, deal with the permanent open settlement period of Jews in the Netherlands from the end of the 16th century until the middle of the 18th century. Examined are social, economic, demographic, religious, and cultural aspects, and they are set within the broader context of Dutch and general Jewish history of the time. Jews arrived in the Netherlands from various directions: from the Iberian Peninsula and from Central and Central-East Europe. The backgrounds of these areas are essential to be described for the understanding of the religious and cultural character of the emerging Dutch Jewish communities and their social and professional structures. The Portuguese (that is, Sephardic) community was especially influential in the economic and intellectual spheres, far beyond Amsterdam, and some of its members have left a far-reaching impact on philosophy and an ongoing imprint on the perception of Dutch Jewry by outsiders, inside the Netherlands (on painters such as Rembrandt) as well as outside the country.

Chapter 5, rewritten by Zwiép, covers the period of the transition of the status of the Jews in the country. The Dutch State itself underwent a political transition from the Dutch Republic consisting of a coalition of provinces to the Batavian Republic — a more unified entity established after the French conquest (1795), afterwards to a kingdom under Louis Napoleon (Napoleon Bonaparte's brother), then to being annexed by France, and finally, upon the liberation from France, to the establishment of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. It was also a period of economic decline. For the Jews, too, this was a period of deep change on all fronts. This chapter, now called "From nations to citizens [...] in the shadow of enlightenment," was titled "Enlightenment and emancipation" in the original edition. It deals with the increasing accommodation and acculturation of Jews and the change in their political status from belonging to two Jewish "nations" (the Sephardic and the Ashkenazi ones) to citizens, due to the official emancipation in 1796. Moreover, from a situation in which Jewish communities were actually separate entities all over the country, they were now unified (in 1808) into an overall countrywide organization called consistory, which after the liberation would be transformed into two so-called church associations ('*kerkgenootschappen*') — a High-German ('*Hoogduitsch*,' that is, Ashkenazi) and a Portuguese one. The author of this chapter expands specifically on intellectual aspects: the question to what extent the German Jewish Enlightenment ('*Haskalah*') was influential and provoking deep changes in the Dutch Jewish community as it did in the German states. She also pays attention to the Jews in the Dutch colonies Surinam and Curaçao. What I missed in this fine chapter by

itself is the integration of Jews into Dutch society via non-political venues: Jewish-gentile cooperation in the criminal world on the one hand, and the acceptance of Jews into Freemason lodges on the other. On these issues there are some fine studies.

Chapter 6 deals with the period 1814-1870 and was rewritten by Bart Wallet. In the original version, the period 1814-1840 was actually skipped, and the period 1840-1870 was characterized as *moeizame aanpassing* ('laborious adaptation'). Wallet now provides a much broader description and deeper analysis of the entire period since the establishment of the Kingdom of the Netherlands until 1870. The sub-title of this chapter is now called "Centralization and nationalization of the Dutch Jews." Wallet emphasizes that in this period "the national Dutch authorities were more actively involved in the Jewish community and Jewish life than at anytime before or since (apart from the occupation period, 1940-45, of course)" (201). The end of this period is set by the fact, that the authorities "withdrew once and for all from [active interference in] Jewish life and Dutch Jews had to stand on their own two feet" (250). The author deals with demography and geography (including the colonies), provides charts of the structures of the Jewish communal organization, sheds light on the shift in the discourse of Dutch Jews from (western) Yiddish to Dutch, on education, on Jews in the Dutch army (especially during the Belgian uprising in 1830), on the state of the poor, on conversions, on social and economic mobility, on religious developments and culture, on the Jewish press, and on the connections of Dutch Jews with the broader Jewish world. One can conclude this period by describing it as being the decisive phase of shaping a Dutch Jewry.

The title of chapter 7, which covers the period 1870-1940, has remained the same: "Dutch Jews, the Jewish Dutch, and Jews in the Netherlands," and its authors, Blom and Cahen, remained the same. Yet, the contents are extensively updated in view of remarks on the former version and the extent of new research that was done since 1995, and it is the longest chapter in the volume. In a way, this chapter demonstrates the enormous social and cultural loss, both of the Jewish community and of Dutch society at large, because of the Holocaust. In this period "The Netherlands underwent a process of accelerated change, expansion, and prosperity" (251). It is important to mention here that the Netherlands was not involved in World War I, yet as part of Europe, it experienced the consequences of the war in political and economic ways. In this period the processes of integration, acculturation, and assimilation of Jews and the Jewish communities continued, yet they had their limits. Dutch Jewry grew demographically, and many Jews were involved in the new political world that emerged, although because of the segmented (which in Dutch is called *verzuild*, meaning 'pillarized') structure of society, Jews could align themselves only with

the liberal, socialist, and communist parties and associations, and not with the Protestant and Catholic ones. Especially in the social-democratic political organizations (some unions and the Social Democratic Labor Party – SDAP), some prominent leaders were Jewish. Yet, percentages of intermarriage with non-Jews, though growing, remained quite marginal until the 1930s. Dutch Jewry also underwent a strong secularization process, yet most Jews remained officially aligned with the orthodox communities' organizations for the purposes of birth (circumcision for boys), marriage, and burial practices. This chapter provides a multifaceted picture of a dynamic and rapidly changing Dutch Jewry characterized by diversity, and it is impossible to delve into particulars within the limits of this review.

Chapter 8, "The war, 1940-1945," written by Romijn, is relatively short in view of the importance of this period in the overall history of Dutch Jewry. As stated in the beginning of this review: about 75% of Dutch Jewry were murdered by Nazi Germany, more than the percentage of any other western European country, and close to the percentage of the most victimized countries in Europe, such as the Baltic countries, Poland, and Greece. The relatively smooth process of the persecutions and deportations to the death camps should essentially be attributed to the German *machinery of destruction* (a term coined by Raul Hilberg), yet the role of the Dutch bureaucracy and society cannot be underestimated. This aspect of the occupation period continues to haunt Dutch society and Dutch scholarship on the Holocaust. Within the larger picture of general Holocaust historiography, the Netherlands stands out regarding the fact that it is a nation about which, probably more than is the case for any other country, comprehensive histories (that is, overviews) have been written (the first one, by Heinz Wielek, appeared already in 1947). There are at least eight of these overviews, two of them also available in English (by Jacques Presser and Bob Moore). Moreover, there is a wealth of research on this period. Consequently, this chapter, even though updated in comparison to the earlier edition, kept itself to a summarizing overview and to a minimum of bibliographical references. As such, it can serve as a helpful introduction to this period for foreigners, especially for Holocaust courses at universities and colleges outside the Netherlands. Nevertheless, one curious point deserves to be mentioned here, which is the title "the war" that is given to this chapter. For decades, this was indeed the accepted term for this period in the Netherlands in general, and it was used also by Dutch Jews. However, since the mid 1990s, when the first edition of this book appeared, the terms Shoah and Holocaust have gradually been embraced also in the Netherlands. Consequently, a new museum on this period which will open in 2023,

is called the National Holocaust Museum. For the non-Dutch readership, it would have been better to have changed the title.²

Chapter 9, the second longest chapter in the book, on the post-Holocaust era, was entirely rewritten by Wallet. It is much longer than the original chapter in the first edition. This is justified because another quarter century has passed and considerable research on this period — historical, sociological, and demographical — has been carried out. For those who are interested in the current face of Dutch Jewry, this may probably be the most useful chapter. The chapter deals with the restoration of rights for the survivors, returnees from camps and those who had been in hiding; the reconstruction of Jewish life; demography and the social position of the Jews and the balance between the Jewish community in Amsterdam and those in the rest of the country (center and periphery); the ties with and approaches towards Israel and Zionism, including *aliya* ('emigration to Israel'), and the more recent repercussions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; post-war and recent antisemitism; religious affairs and internal polarization; the Jewish-Christian dialogue; the memory and commemoration of the Holocaust and the renewed issue of restitution and compensation since the 1990s; and more.

In conclusion, this new overview of Dutch Jewish history reflects changes and turns in historical approaches as well as the growth of research on multiple aspects of Dutch Jewish history. Cultural, economic, and religious history receive more attention, broader international Jewish contexts are integrated into the proposed interpretations, and more space is devoted to Dutch Jews in the Dutch colonies (Surinam, the Caribbean, and the former Dutch Indies, which is present-day Indonesia). In the wake of newer trends in historiography in general, among them the embracing of anthropological insights, special attention is given to the multiple identities of Dutch Jews in various locations and at different times. This rich book will undoubtedly remain the most authoritative textbook on the history of Dutch Jewry for many years to come. It is wholeheartedly recommended.

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² For an overview and analysis of the terminology for the period of the Nazi anti-Jewish campaign see my article "Why is the Shoah called "the Shoah" or "the Holocaust"? On the history of the terminology for the Nazi anti-Jewish campaign."

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About the reviewer

Dan Michman, born in Amsterdam, is professor (emeritus) of modern Jewish history and the former Chair of the Arnold and Leona Finkler Institute of Holocaust Research, Bar-Ilan University (Israel); he is also Head of the International Institute for Holocaust Research and Incumbent of the John Najmann Chair in Holocaust Studies at Yad Vashem, Jerusalem. His publications, available in twelve languages, cover a broad range of topics regarding the Shoah, its historiography, representations and impact; and regarding the history of Dutch Jewry. His authored and co-authored, edited and co-edited books include *The Jewish refugees from Germany in the Netherlands, 1933-1940* (PhD dissertation, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1978 [in Hebrew]); *Het liberale jodendom in Nederland, 1929-1943* (Van Gennep, 1988); *Pinkas: Geschiedenis van de joodse gemeenschap in Nederland* (Uitgeverij Contact, 1999); *Holocaust historiography: A Jewish perspective: Conceptualizations, terminology, approaches and fundamental issues* (Vallentine Mitchell, 2003); *Encyclopedia of the Righteous Among the Nations: Belgium* (Yad Vashem, 2005); *De la mémoire de la Shoah dans le monde juif* (CNRS, 2008); *Holocaust historiography in context: Emergence, challenges, polemics and achievements* (Berghahn Books, 2008); *The emergence of Jewish ghettos during the Holocaust* (Cambridge University Press, 2011); *The religious cultures of Dutch Jewry* (Brill, 2017); *Hiding, sheltering and borrowing identities: Avenues of rescue during the Holocaust* (Yad Vashem, 2017); *Emotions, imaginations, perceptions, egos, characteristics: Egodocuments in Dutch Jewish history* (Amphora Books, 2021); *Jewish solidarity: The ideal and the reality in the turmoil of the Shoah* (Yad Vashem, 2022).

