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### [Review of: L. Vastenhout (2022) Between community and collaboration : 'Jewish Councils' in Western Europe under Nazi occupation]

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**Laurien Vastenhout.** *Between Community and Collaboration: Jewish Councils in Western Europe under Nazi Occupation.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. Pp. 280. Cloth \$99.99.

The actions of the “Jewish councils” established by the Nazis in German-occupied European countries constitute one of the most controversial and painful issues in both the historiography and the culture of remembrance of the Shoah. This controversy dates back to the years of World War II itself, when opponents accused the councils of serving the ruthless oppressor by aiding in the process of isolating and deporting their fellow Jews, whom they were supposed to represent. This criticism found its strongest expression in the classic works of Raul Hilberg—who, incidentally, later nuanced his position—and Hannah Arendt in the early 1960s. In their view, the Jewish councils had been willing tools of the Nazis, endlessly accommodating the occupier’s wishes with the same spirit of passivity and compromising attitude the Jews of Europe had used to secure their existence for centuries.

The monolithic and generalizing picture that underlaid this extremely negative judgment, based primarily on Nazi sources, proved to be untenable upon closer examination. In reality, it turned out that there were enormous differences between the *Zwangsgesellschaften* (coercive organizations) that the Germans created in different parts of Europe to carry out their policy of isolation, segregation, and eventual extermination, and which are conveniently lumped together in the literature under the heading “Jewish councils.” In Eastern Europe, for example, the Nazis opted for local Jewish councils, which operated in very different ways, while in France and Belgium, national umbrella organizations were created. Thus, the picture of the “Jewish

councils” gradually became more nuanced, although the national and moral perspective continued to prevail almost without exception, as did the strong focus on the decisions of Jewish leaders and their alleged role in the deportations.

Laurien Vastenhout’s comparative study of the “Jewish councils” in France, Belgium, and the Netherlands, *Between Community and Collaboration*, aims to break through these limiting perspectives. Drawing on a wide range of literature and sources in several languages, she identifies the specific factors and circumstances in which the actions of the Jewish councils in each country can be understood, beginning with the nature of the occupying regime and the policies of the occupiers, but also addressing the composition and social and political position of the Jewish communities, as well as their place in social organizations and mutual power relations.

The composition and position of the Jewish communities in the various countries was very different. While the Netherlands had a relatively homogeneous and highly integrated Jewish population, the majority of Jews in Belgium had lived in the country for only a short time and moved mainly within their own segregated communities. France was somewhere in between in terms of the composition of its Jewish population. During the German occupation, these enormous differences were reflected not only in the relations between the “newcomers” and the “established” but also in the position and actions of Jewish organizations. For example, the *Joodsche Raad* (Jewish Council) in the Netherlands had much greater control and authority among the Jewish community of the Netherlands than did its Belgian and French counterparts, the *Vereeniging van Joden in België* (Association of Jews in Belgium) and the *Union Générale des Israélites de France* (General Association of French Jews), respectively. And while immigrants from Eastern Europe in France and Belgium treated the authorities with suspicion, Dutch Jews, who had lived in a relatively safe environment for centuries, showed greater trust in the authorities. This produced both a far-reaching respect for the authorities and greater self-confidence among the presidents of the Jewish Council.

Equally important were the differences in the nature of the occupying regimes, which created a fundamentally different force field within which Jewish organizations had to operate. The Netherlands, for example, was under a civilian administration of committed Nazis who, though regularly at odds with the actual executors of the persecution of the Jews—the Security Police and Security Service (SiPO-SD)—ultimately shared the same goal: the elimination of Jews from society. Conversely, in Belgium and the occupied part of France, which had been placed under military administration, there was a constant struggle for power. This was even

more the case in the part of France under the authority of the collaborating Vichy regime, which incidentally also had control over the occupied part of the country in civil matters. The Jewish organizations in Belgium and France, thus, operated in a much more complex and fragmented environment than did the Jewish Council in the Netherlands, and as a result, the opportunities for delay, sabotage, and evasion were considerably greater there. Partly because of this context, a large number of Jewish organizations in France and Belgium could serve as a cover for illegal and clandestine activities—a fact that, according to Vastenhout, should also be taken into account in order to arrive at a balanced assessment of Jewish *Zwangsgesellschaften* throughout Europe.

By meticulously and systematically weighing and analyzing the various circumstances and factors that influenced their position and functioning, Vastenhout succeeds in providing a clear and convincing analysis of the major differences between the “Jewish Councils” in the Netherlands, Belgium, and divided France, as well as their consequences. In doing so, this study makes an important contribution to both the debate on the phenomenon of the “Jewish Council” but also to the historiography of the persecution of the Jews in individual countries. Especially through this comparative perspective, it becomes painfully clear why the “effectiveness”—in the eyes of the Germans—of the Jewish Council was so much greater in the Netherlands than in Belgium and even more so in France. In short, this is an important book, as confirmed by it being awarded the 2024 *Yad Vashem International Book Prize*.

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