

= The Holocaust in Belgium =

The Holocaust in German @-@ occupied Belgium refers to the persecution and attempted extermination of Jews and Roma between 1940 and 1944 during World War II .

At the start of the war , the population of Belgium was overwhelmingly Catholic . Jews made up the largest non @-@ Christian population in the country , numbering between 70 ? 75 @,@ 000 out of a population of 8 million . Most lived in the cities of Antwerp , Brussels , Charleroi and Liège . The vast majority were recent immigrants to Belgium who had fled persecution in Germany and Eastern Europe , and , as a result , only a small minority actually possessed Belgian citizenship .

Shortly after the invasion of Belgium , the Military Government passed a series of anti @-@ Jewish laws in October 1940 . The Belgian Committee of Secretary @-@ Generals refused from the start to co @-@ operate on passing any anti @-@ Jewish measures and the Military Government seemed unwilling to pass further legislation . The German government began to seize Jewish @-@ owned businesses and forced Jews out of positions in the civil service . In April 1941 , without orders from the German authorities , Flemish collaborators pillaged two synagogues in Antwerp and burned the house of the chief rabbi of the town in the Antwerp Pogrom . The Germans created a Judenrat in the country , the Association des Juifs en Belgique (AJB ; " Association of Jews in Belgium ") , which all Jews were required to join . As part of the Final Solution from 1942 , the persecution of Belgian Jews escalated . From May 1942 , Jews were forced to wear yellow Star of David badges to mark them out in public . Using the registers compiled by the AJB , the Germans began deporting Jews to concentration camps in the General Government (the occupied portion of Poland) . Jews chosen from the registration lists were required to turn up at the newly established Mechelen transit camp ; they were then deported by train to concentration camps , mostly to Auschwitz . Between August 1942 and July 1944 , around 25 @,@ 000 Jews and 350 Roma were deported from Belgium ; more than 24 @,@ 000 were killed before the camps were liberated by the Allies .

From 1942 , opposition among the general population to the treatment of the Jews in Belgium grew . By the end of the occupation , more than 40 per cent of all Jews in Belgium were in hiding ; many of them were hidden by Gentiles , particularly by Catholic priests and nuns . Some were helped by the organized resistance , such as the Comité de Défense des Juifs (CDJ ; " Committee of Jewish Defence ") , which provided food and refuge to hiding Jews . Many of the Jews in hiding joined the armed resistance . In April 1943 , members of the CDJ attacked the twentieth rail convoy to Auschwitz and succeeded in rescuing some of those being deported .

= = Background = =

= = Religion and anti @-@ Semitism = = =

Before the war , the population of Belgium was overwhelmingly Catholic . Around 98 per cent of the population was baptized and around 80 per cent of marriage ceremonies were held with traditional Catholic services , while politically the country was dominated by the Catholic Party .

The Jewish population of Belgium was comparatively small . Out of a population of around 8 million , there were only 10 @,@ 000 Jews in the country before World War I. The interwar period saw substantial Jewish immigration to Belgium . By 1930 , the population rose to 50 @,@ 000 , and by 1940 it was between 70 @,@ 000 ? 75 @,@ 000 . Most of the new Jewish immigrants came from Eastern Europe and Nazi Germany , escaping anti @-@ Semitism and poverty in their native countries . The Roma population of Belgium at the same time was approximately 530 . Few of the Jewish migrants claimed Belgian citizenship , and many did not speak French or Dutch . Jewish communities developed in Charleroi , Liège , Brussels and , above all , Antwerp , where more than half of the Jews in Belgium lived .

The Interwar period also saw the rise in popularity of Fascist New Order parties in Belgium . These were chiefly represented by the Vlaams Nationaal Verbond (VNV ; " Flemish National Union ") and Verdinaso in Flanders , and Rex in Wallonia . Both Flemish parties supported the creation of an

ethnically Germanic " Dietse Natie " (" Greater Dutch State ") from which Jews would be excluded . Rex , whose ideology was based on Christian Fascism , was particularly anti @-@ Semitic , but both VNV and Rex campaigned under anti @-@ Semitic slogans for the 1938 elections . Their stance was officially condemned by the Belgian authorities , but prominent figures , including King Leopold III , were suspected of holding anti @-@ Semitic attitudes . From June 1938 , Jewish illegal immigrants arrested by the Belgian police were deported to Germany , until public condemnation halted the practice after Kristallnacht in November 1938 . Between 1938 and the start of the war , with the influence of Fascist parties declining in Belgium , the country began accepting more Jewish refugees , including 215 from the MS St. Louis who had been refused visas elsewhere .

= = = German invasion and occupation = = =

In the interwar period , Belgium followed a strict policy of political neutrality . Though the Belgian Land Component was mobilized in 1939 , the country only became involved in the war on 10 May 1940 , when it was invaded by Nazi Germany . After a campaign lasting 18 days , the Belgian military , along with its commander @-@ in @-@ chief Leopold III , surrendered on 28 May . Belgium , together with the French province of Nord @-@ Pas @-@ de @-@ Calais , were grouped together under the German Military Administration in Belgium and Northern France (Militärverwaltung in Belgien und Nordfrankreich) . Because the country was under military occupation , it initially fell under the control of the Wehrmacht rather than Nazi Party or Schutzstaffel (SS) authorities . In July 1944 , the Militärverwaltung was replaced with a civilian administration (Zivilverwaltung) , greatly increasing the power of the more radical Nazi Party and SS organisations until the Allied liberation in September 1944 .

= = The Holocaust = =

= = = Early discrimination and persecution , 1940 @-@ 41 = = =

On 23 October 1940 , the German Military Administration adopted anti @-@ Jewish legislation for the first time . The new laws , similar to the Nuremberg Laws adopted in Germany in 1935 , coincided with the adoption of similar legislation in the Netherlands and in France . The laws of 28 October forbade Jews to practice certain professions (including the civil service) and forced Jews to register with their local municipality . On the same date , the German administration announced a definition of who was regarded as Jewish . Jewish @-@ owned shops or businesses had to be marked by a sign in the window , and Jewish @-@ owned economic assets had to be registered . From June 1940 , a list of Jewish businesses had already been drawn up in Liège .

In 1940 , the German government began to liquidate Jewish businesses . Some were transferred to German ownership in a process termed Aryanization . Some 6 @, @ 300 Jewish @-@ owned businesses were liquidated before 1942 , and 600 were Aryanized . Around 600 million Belgian francs was raised from the seizures , much less than anticipated .

In total , between 28 October 1940 and 21 September 1942 , 17 anti @-@ Jewish ordinances were proclaimed by the Military Administration .

= = = Association des Juifs en Belgique = = =

The " Association of Jews in Belgium " (AJB) was a Judenrat created by the Germans to administer the Jewish population of Belgium from November 1941 . Though directed by the Germans , the AJB was run by Jews and acted as an " organizational ghetto " , allowing the Nazis to deal with Belgian Jews as a unit . The AJB played a major role in registering Jews in the country . In total , 43 @, @ 000 Jews were registered with the AJB . This number represents only half of the total Jewish population , reflecting the community 's mistrust of the organization , but it was the figure that SS @-@ Obersturmbannführer Adolf Eichmann presented as the total number of Jews in Belgium at

the Wannsee Conference in January 1942 .

During the deportations , around 10 @, @ 000 Jews were arrested based on their affiliation to the AJB . The AJB , closely supervised by the SiPo @-@ SD (Sicherheitspolizei und Sicherheitsdienst ; " Security Police and Intelligence Service ") , was also responsible for the administration of the transit camp at Mechelen . The AJB played a major role in persuading Jews to turn up voluntarily for deportation , though whether they knew the fate awaiting the deportees is disputed . From 1942 , following the assassination by the Resistance of Robert Holzinger , an AJB leader , confidence in the association declined and it was regarded with increasing suspicion .

After the war , the leaders of the AJB were tried and acquitted of complicity in the Holocaust .

= = = Radicalisation , 1941 @-@ 42 = = =

= = = Antwerp Pogrom = = =

On 14 April 1941 , after watching the German propaganda film Der Ewige Jude , Flemish paramilitaries from the Volksverwering , VNV and Algemeene @-@ SS Vlaanderen began a pogrom in the city of Antwerp . The mob , armed with iron bars , attacked and burned two synagogues in the city and threw the Torah scrolls onto the street . They then attacked the home of Marcus Rottenburg , the town 's chief rabbi . The police and fire brigade were summoned , but they were forbidden to intervene by the German authorities .

= = = Yellow badge = = =

As in the rest of occupied Europe , compulsory wearing of the yellow badge was enforced from 27 May 1942 . The Belgian version of the badge depicted a black letter " J " (standing for " Juif " in French and " Jood " in Dutch) in the centre of a yellow star of David . The star had to be displayed prominently on all outer clothing when in public and there were harsh penalties for non @-@ compliance . The decree sparked public outrage in Belgium . At great personal risk , the Belgian civil authorities in Brussels and Liège refused to distribute the badge , buying time for many Jews to go into hiding .

The German authorities in Antwerp attempted to enforce the wearing of badges in 1940 , but the policy was dropped when non @-@ Jewish citizens protested and wore the armbands themselves .

= = = Deportation and extermination , 1942 @-@ 44 = = =

From August 1942 , the Germans began deporting Jews , using Arbeitseinsatz (" recruitment for work ") in German factories as a pretext . Around half of the Jews turned up voluntarily (though coerced by the German authorities) for transportation although round @-@ ups were begun in late July . Later in the war , the Germans increasingly relied on the police to arrest or round up Jews by force .

The first convoy from Belgium , carrying stateless Jews , left Mechelen transit camp for Auschwitz on 4 August 1942 and was soon followed by others . These trains left for extermination camps in Eastern Europe . Between October 1942 and January 1943 , deportations were temporarily halted ; by this time 16 @, @ 600 people have been deported on 17 rail convoys . As the result of Queen Elisabeth 's intervention with the German authorities , all of those deported in this first wave were not Belgian citizens . In 1943 , the deportations resumed . By the time that deportations to extermination camps had begun , however , nearly 2 @, @ 250 Belgian Jews had already been deported as forced laborers for Organisation Todt , a civil and military engineering group , which was working on the construction of the Atlantic Wall in Northern France .

In September , armed Devisenschutzkommando (DSK ; " Currency protection command ") units raided homes to seize valuables and personal belongings as the occupants were preparing to report to the transit camp , and in the same month , Jews with Belgian citizenship were deported for the

first time . DSK units relied on networks of informants , who were paid between 100 and 200 Belgian francs for each person they betrayed . After the war , the collaborator Felix Lauterborn stated in his trial that 80 per cent of arrests in Antwerp used information from paid informants . In total , 6 @, @ 000 Jews were deported in 1943 , with another 2 @, @ 700 in 1944 . Transports were halted by the deteriorating situation in occupied Belgium before the liberation .

The percentages of Jews which were deported varied by location . It was highest in Antwerp , with 67 per cent deported , but lower in Brussels (37 per cent) , Liège (35 per cent) and Charleroi (42 per cent) . The main destination for the convoys was Auschwitz in German @-@ occupied Poland . Smaller numbers were sent to Buchenwald and Ravensbrück concentration camps , as well as Vittel concentration camp in France .

In total , 25 @, @ 437 Jews were deported from Belgium . Only 1 @, @ 207 of these survived the war . Amongst those deported and killed was the surrealist artist Felix Nussbaum in 1944 .

= = Belgian collaboration in the Holocaust = =

Members of Belgian fascist political parties actively attempted to assist in the deportation of Jews . The VNV and Algemeene @-@ SS Vlaanderen encouraged the deportations , while an association known as La Défense du Peuple / Volksverwering (" The People 's Defence ") was specially formed to bring together Belgian anti @-@ Semites and to assist in the deportations . During the early stages of the occupation , they campaigned for harsher anti @-@ Jewish laws . Both Rex and the VNV routinely published anti @-@ Semitic articles in their party newspapers .

Although the Belgian civil authorities (especially the police and security service) were officially forbidden to assist the German authorities in anything other than routine maintenance of order , several incidents occurred where individual policemen or police sections assisted in the German arrest of Jews , against orders . In Antwerp , the Belgian authorities facilitated the conscription of Jews for forced labour in France in 1941 and aided in the rounding up of Jews in August 1942 after the SiPo @-@ SD threatened to imprison local officials in Fort Breendonk . Outside Antwerp , the Germans used coercion to force the Belgian police to intervene , and in Brussels at least three police officers disobeyed orders and helped arrest Jews . The historian Insa Meinen argued that around a fifth of the Jews arrested in Belgium were rounded up by the Belgian police .

Nevertheless , the general refusal of the Belgian police to assist in the Holocaust has been cited as a reason for the comparatively high survival rate of Belgian Jews during the Holocaust .

= = Belgian opposition to Jewish persecution = =

Belgian resistance to the treatment of Jews crystallised between August ? September 1942 , following the passing of legislation regarding wearing yellow badges and the start of the deportations . When deportations began , Jewish partisans destroyed records of Jews compiled by the AJB . The first organization specifically devoted to hiding Jews , the Comité de Défense des Juifs (CDJ @-@ JVD) , was formed in the summer of 1942 . The CDJ , a left @-@ wing organization , may have saved up to 4 @, @ 000 children and 10 @, @ 000 adults by finding them safe hiding places . It produced two Yiddish language underground newspapers , Unser Wort (?????? @-@ ????? , " Our Word " , with a Labour @-@ Zionist stance) and Unser Kampf (?????? ????? , " Our Fight " , with a Communist one) . The CDJ was only one of dozens of organised resistance groups that provided support to hidden Jews . Other groups and individual resistance members were responsible for finding hiding places and providing food and forged papers . Many Jews in hiding went on to join organised resistance groups . Groups from left wing backgrounds , like the Front de l 'Indépendance (FI @-@ OF) , were particularly popular with Belgian Jews . The Communist @-@ inspired Partisans Armés (PA) had a particularly large Jewish section in Brussels .

The resistance was responsible for the assassination of Robert Holzinger , the head of the deportation program , in 1942 . Holzinger , an active collaborator , was an Austrian Jew selected by the Germans for the role . The assassination led to a change in leadership of the AJB . Five Jewish

leaders , including the head of the AJB , were arrested and interned in Breendonk , but were released after public outcry . A sixth was deported directly to Auschwitz .

The Belgian resistance was unusually well informed on the fate of the deported Jews . In August 1942 (two months after the start of the Belgian deportations) , the underground newspaper De Vrijschutter reported that " They [the deported Jews] are being killed in groups by gas , and others are killed by salvos of machinegun fire . "

In early 1943 , the Front de l 'Indépendance sent Victor Martin , an academic economist at the Catholic University of Louvain , to gather information on the fate of deported Belgian Jews using the cover of his research post at the University of Cologne . Martin visited Auschwitz and witnessed the crematoria . Arrested by the Germans , he escaped , and was able to report his findings to the CDJ in May 1943 .

= = = Attack on the 20th transport = = =

The best @-@ known Belgian resistance action during the Holocaust was the attack on the 20th rail convoy to Auschwitz . In the evening of 19 April 1943 , three poorly armed members of the resistance attacked the railway convoy as it passed near Haacht in Flemish Brabant . The train , containing over 1 @,@ 600 Jews , was guarded by 16 Germans from the SiPo @-@ SD . Resistance members used a lantern covered with red paper (a danger signal) to stop the train , and freed 17 prisoners from one wagon before they were discovered by the Germans . A further 200 managed to jump from the train later in the journey , as the train 's Belgian driver deliberately kept his speed low to allow others to escape . All three resistance members responsible for the attack were arrested before the end of the occupation . Youra Livchitz was executed and Jean Franklemon and Robert Maistriau were deported to concentration camps but survived the war .

The attack on the 20th train was the only attack on a Holocaust train from Belgium during the war , as well as the only transport from Belgium to experience a mass breakout .

= = = Passive resistance = = =

The treatment of Jews by the Germans led to public resistance in Belgium . In June 1942 , the representative of the German Foreign Ministry in Brussels , Werner von Bargaen , complained the Belgians did not exhibit " sufficient understanding " of Nazi racial policy .

The Belgian underground newspaper La Libre Belgique called for Belgian citizens to make small gestures to show their disgust at the Nazi racial policy . In August 1942 , the paper called for Belgians to " Greet them [the Jews] in passing ! Offer them your seat on the tram ! Protest against the barbaric measures that are being applied to them . That 'll make the Boches furious ! "

Discrimination against Jews was condemned by many high @-@ profile figures in the occupied country . As early as October 1940 , the senior Catholic clergyman in Belgium , Cardinal Jozef @-@ Ernest van Roey , condemned the German policy and particularly the legislation from 1942 .

Van Roey made many of the church 's resources available for hiding Jews , but was prevented from publicly condemning the treatment of the Jews by his peers , who feared a Nazi repression of the Church . German attempts to involve the Belgian authorities and local government in its implementation began to arouse protest from 1942 . The Committee of Secretary @-@ Generals , a panel of Belgian senior civil servants tasked with implementing German demands , refused from the outset to enforce anti @-@ Jewish legislation . In June 1942 , a conference of the 19 mayors of the Greater Brussels region refused to allow its officials to distribute yellow badges to Jews in their districts . At great personal risk , the mayors , led by Joseph Van De Meulebroeck , sent a letter protesting the decree to the German authorities on 5 June . The refusal of Brussels ' council , and later that of the city of Liège , to distribute badges allowed many Jews to go into hiding before the deportations began .

In the same year , members of the AJB met with Queen Elisabeth to appeal for her support against the deportations . She appealed to the Military Governor of Belgium , General Alexander von Falkenhausen , who sent Eggert Reeder , his deputy and head of the non @-@ military aspects of

the administration , to Berlin to clarify the policy with Reichsführer @-@ SS Heinrich Himmler . The SS @-@ Reichssicherheitshauptamt (RSHA ; " Reich Main Security Office ") made concessions to Elisabeth , allowing Jews with Belgian citizenship to be exempt from deportation , and Jewish families would not be broken up . The RSHA also agreed not to deport Jewish men over the age of 65 and women over 60 , after Belgian protests that they would be too old to be used as forced labor .

= = Legacy and remembrance = =

In the aftermath of the war , emigration to Israel further decreased the Jewish population of Belgium , which as of 2011 was estimated at between 30 @,@ 000 and 40 @,@ 000 . The population is still concentrated in Brussels and Antwerp , but new smaller communities (such as those in Ghent , Knokke , Waterloo and Arlon) have developed since 1945 . Notable Belgian Holocaust survivors include François Englert , a joint recipient of the Nobel Prize in Physics in 2013 , and Paul Lévy , a well @-@ known journalist (who converted to Christianity) who was also responsible for the design of the European flag .

Since the passing of the Holocaust denial law in 1995 , it is illegal to deny or attempt to justify the Holocaust . The act follows the Belgian Anti @-@ Racism Law , passed in 1981 , which led to the establishment of the Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism , which researches racism and anti @-@ Semitism in Belgium as well as aiding victims of discrimination . Breendonk and Dossin Barracks (at the site of the former Mechelen transit camp) are preserved as museums to the Holocaust and to German repression in Belgium during the occupation .

In 2004 , the Belgian Senate commissioned the Centre for Historical Research and Documentation on War and Contemporary Society (Cegesoma) to produce a definitive historical report on Belgian collaboration in the Holocaust . The report , entitled " Docile Belgium " (La Belgique Docile / Gewillig België) , was published in 2007 . It generated significant public interest in Belgium and abroad . The report 's findings were controversial , as they emphasised the extent to which the Belgian police and authorities had collaborated in the deportation of Jews .

As of 2013 , a total of 1 @,@ 612 Belgians have been awarded the distinction of Righteous Among the Nations by the State of Israel for risking their lives to save Jews from persecution during the occupation .