

**Ad van Liempt.** *Hitler's Bounty Hunters: The Betrayal of the Jews.* J. Leinbach. Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers, 2005. x + 277 pp. \$34.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-84520-203-3.



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"... in its final phases the hunt for Jews in the Netherlands acquired a new dimension: for a few highly motivated men, it became a money-making enterprise" (p. 18).

In 1986, just one year prior to his suicide, Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi published what has proven to be virtually the most influential essay on the Holocaust. In "The Grey Zone," Levi describes his metaphorical concept as "the space which separates (and not only in Nazi Lagers) the victims from the persecutors," a realm with "ill-defined outlines which both separate and join the two camps of masters and servants." [1] Essentially, Levi's ideas on the "grey zone" are a reflection on the ambiguity of human nature in general and have frequently been appropriated as such in the areas of Holocaust Studies, philosophy, law, theology, feminism and popular culture. [2] Levi focuses on Jewish prisoners in the camps and ghettos who he felt had "compromised" themselves due to the unprecedented circumstances in which they found themselves. He makes it clear, however, that many other groups might be situated within the blurred boundaries of the "grey zone," includ-

ing some perpetrators and the collaborating institutions and individuals in Norway, Vichy France, and Italy, "right down to the Ukrainian and Baltic mercenaries employed elsewhere for the filthiest tasks." [3] Many Dutch policemen, as well as male and female volunteers, also played their part in the mass extermination of European Jewry. The behavior of these individuals, the compelling subject of Ad van Liempt's recent volume, can also be fitted into Levi's "grey zone."

The most well-known story of a Jew's experience in the Netherlands, immortalized in *The Diary of Anne Frank*, [4] encourages one to focus on the helpers of persecuted Jews, but assistance to victims was far from a universal phenomenon during the war. A significant number of the more than 100,000 Dutch Jews exterminated by the Nazi regime were betrayed by fellow non-Jewish citizens for a monetary reward. In effect, the life of a human being was reduced to what today amounts to less than fifty U.S. dollars. These bonuses were paid to diligent members of the Amsterdam police force and officials working at the Central Bureau for Jewish Emigration. Van Liempt tells the dis-

turbing story of the men who diligently, often enthusiastically, collaborated with the Nazi authorities and hence furthered the genocidal goals of Hitler's regime. While the availability of the records of postwar trials of these collaborators has until recently been highly restricted, light is now being shed on this long-hidden facet of the Holocaust and van Liempt's study is a crucial work in this respect. The volume situates detailed case studies of collaborating individuals within a well-informed broader context of the gradual phasing out of Jewish life in Dutch society. Combining thoroughly referenced details from primary documents and statements from interviews conducted decades after war's end with the seminal secondary texts that have already outlined this temporal and geographical terrain, van Liempt constructs an intense narrative. From Willem Briede and Wim Henneicke, the central and ideologically driven leaders of the hunt for Jews, to other dubious characters, such as Sjei Sweeger who maintained that he simply "got sucked into doing it" (p. 114), van Liempt explores with much skill the complexities of Dutch behavior during the Holocaust.

The debate over the motivations of Nazi perpetrator behavior is ongoing,[5] but less attention has been given to the complexities of what caused non-German collaborators to behave in the morally reprehensible way they did. Just as the Goldhagen debate has revealed that antisemitism was not the sole factor influencing Nazi German behavior, non-German collaborators were also motivated by a myriad of factors, including peer and family pressure, career advancement, and greed. The influence of the profit motive is particularly evident in the volume, which can be seen as consistent with Primo Levi's rejection of Manichaean stereotypes in his writing on the "grey zone." Dutch collaborators cannot be characterized merely as fanatical antisemites. While most "Jew hunters" were "profoundly anti-Semitic," van Liempt notes they were "not utterly devoid of humanity, but were nevertheless prepared to go

quite far in following orders" (p. 209). Although the majority of the policemen under discussion were middle-aged, van Liempt tells of twenty-three-year-old Johan Smid, the youngest of the group, "whose mother claimed he sometimes cried at the table 'because he felt so sorry for the Jews'" (p. 199).

The sheer institutionalization of the hunt for Jews unquestionably helped in repressing any moral qualms Dutch policemen might have had. The official nature of the "money-making enterprise," an opportunity offered only to the select few whose occupations already involved implementing anti-Jewish measures, plausibly made it easier to accept the tasks. This element of bureaucratization led to a psychological desensitization clearly evident in the postwar testimony of one of the most active participants in the expropriation of Jews: "I gave one receipt to the Jews whose belongings I had confiscated, while another copy was dropped off at the offices of the *Zentralstelle*. One copy went with the seized property, and another copy stayed in the book, and that one I kept myself until the book was full, at which time it was turned over to the *Zentralstelle*" (p. 27). The casual nature of the account masks the immense ramifications of such deeds. Desensitization was also achieved through the use of euphemisms: "They often avoided using the term 'arrest,' preferring to speak of 'picking someone up' or 'bringing a person in for questioning' or 'escorting someone to the Dutch Theater'" (p. 29). This practice not only disguised the true nature of events from Jews, but was also a common coping mechanism of perpetrators and collaborators throughout the Holocaust.

While van Liempt's analysis of the Dutch policemen assigned to hunt Jews is both perceptive and thorough, he does not hesitate to note the limitations he encounters. Van Liempt demonstrates that whether coming from a disadvantaged upbringing or an exemplary childhood, whether law-abiding citizens or possessing a criminal his-

tory, "Jew hunters" came from various walks of life. While van Liempt makes some generalizations, he shows there is no definitive way to categorize them or fully explain their behavior. For example, van Liempt dedicates an entire chapter to the case of Eddy Moerberg, a pseudonym, who he describes as "a gentle character" with a pleasant, privileged background, who nevertheless participated actively in the arrest of Jews. Reflecting on Moerberg's persistent denial after the war of having taken part in any such actions, along with his family's sheer amazement that he had done so, van Liempt can only out of necessity conclude that his subject remains a "bundle of contradictions" (p. 127). Although the vast majority of the actions of Dutch collaborators are reprehensible and portrayed as such, van Liempt takes care to note potential moments of "humanity" amidst the overwhelming atmosphere of moral decay. For example, when the daughter of a woman hiding Jewish children was made to accompany the children and the policemen who discovered them to the train station, the daughter, who justifiably did not expect to return home ever again, was surprisingly released, hearing "nothing more from the men" (p. 4). Devoting a chapter to the crucial question, "What Did the Jew Hunters Know?" (pp. 166-72), van Liempt concludes that more was known about the fate of Jews targeted for deportation than has generally been assumed, though this matter remains difficult to judge on an individual basis. In any case, the presence of indifference towards the plight of Dutch Jews is unquestionable.

Significantly, van Liempt avoids the risk of portraying Jews solely as helpless and anonymous victims, individualizing them where possible to describe particular people and their, generally fatal, treatment at the hands of the Dutch collaborators. Most importantly, the volume helps to qualify the overly optimistic reputation that Dutch behavior towards Jews during the Holocaust has sustained. While van Liempt acknowledges the complex network of "trustworthy families" and

resistance groups willing to aid Jews (p. 2), the unstable environment of secrecy, suspicion, fear, and corruption is only too evident. Primo Levi wrote in his essay that the "obscene or pathetic" figures of the "grey zone" are "indispensable to know if we want to know the human species, if we want to know how to defend our souls when a similar test should once more loom before us." [6] In this regard, Ad van Liempt's volume is a valuable addition to the already vast literature on the Holocaust, a literature that has in the past often glossed over such sensitive issues. Exploring the complexities of Dutch behavior during the war, it serves to amplify Levi's warning about what human beings may become, if only given the opportunity.

#### Notes

[1]. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, tr. Raymond Rosenthal (London: Abacus, 1986, 2003), 25, 27.

[2]. For specific examples of the influence of the "grey zone" in these areas, see Jonathan Petropoulos and John K. Roth, eds., *Gray Zones: Ambiguity and Compromise in the Holocaust and its Aftermath* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2005); Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, tr. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone, 2002); David Luban, "A Man Lost in the Gray Zone," in *Law and History Review*, 19 (2001), 161-76; John K. Roth, "In Response to Hannah Holtschneider," in *Fire in the Ashes: God, Evil, and the Holocaust*, ed. David Patterson and John K. Roth (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), 53-54; Claudia Card, "Groping Through Gray Zones," in *On Feminist Ethics and Politics*, ed. Claudia Card (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999); Bryan Cheyette, "The Uncertain Certainty of *Schindler's List*," in *Spielberg's Holocaust: Critical Perspectives on Schindler's List*, ed. Yosefa Loshitzky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

[3]. Levi, 27-28. Importantly, Levi makes it clear that although perpetrators and collaborators

may be situated within the "grey zone," this does not put them on an equal footing with the victims, who invariably faced indescribable levels of coercion. While vast, if not insurmountable, obstacles are encountered when passing moral judgment on those Jews who Levi, hastily, terms "collaborators," this does not place others who assisted the Nazis under much different circumstances beyond judgment. Dutch policemen faced a range of choices irrevocably different from their Jewish victims.

[4]. See *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*, tr. Susan Massotty (London: Penguin, 2001).

[5]. For key figures and works in this debate, see Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (London: Abacus, 1996); Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Aaron Asher, 1992).

[6]. Levi, 25-26.

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