

75 years since the Nazi invasion of the Netherlands

The Westerbork transit camp and the destruction of Dutch Jewry

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May 10, 2015 marked the 75th anniversary of the Nazi invasion of the Netherlands. After the week-long Battle of the Netherlands concluded, the occupying forces began implementing their plans to integrate the Netherlands directly into the German Reich, including the deportation and extermination of Dutch Jews. Over the next five years, tens of thousands of Jews were deported from the Westerbork transit camp to Auschwitz and other camps.

The Dutch government hoped to remain neutral during the World War II, as it had during World War I, but both the Allied and Axis powers considered plans to violate the neutrality of the Low Countries (the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg). Hitler ultimately made the decision to invade the Netherlands to secure potential airfield spots in the flat countryside, guarantee troop movement to northern France, and prevent the Allies from gaining these strategic advantages.

The Battle of the Netherlands began May 10, 1940, with attacks by German paratroops airdropped outside Rotterdam, a cross-border assault, and widespread bombing. The Dutch army was unprepared for the war, in part because of the Dutch ruling class' concentration on "defending" its prize colony, the Dutch East Indies, now Indonesia.

On May 15, 1940, after less than a week of resistance, the Dutch armed forces capitulated and a formal surrender was signed. Fighting continued in the southern province of Zeeland (Zealand) for a few more weeks with the support of French troops, with the last parts of the province occupied by May 27.

The next five years—until the surrender of occupying Nazi forces on May 5, 1945—saw the near-total

destruction of Dutch Jewry, with over 70 percent systematically killed by German imperialism.

Anti-Semitic measures began almost immediately after the occupation began. The Nazi-installed civil government banned Jews from many public positions, including at universities. Physical violence was employed against Jews by fascist thugs, and street fights became common. One supporter of the Nationalist Socialist Movement in the Netherlands (NSB) died from injuries sustained in a fight on February 11, 1941. The Nazi government responded by "ghettoizing" Amsterdam's Jewish quarter and engaging in ruthless pogroms to round up Jews.

In 1942, the occupying government took over the Westerbork refugee camp, which had been established in 1939 by the Dutch government to house German-Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi persecution. Over the next three years (1942-1944), approximately 107,000 Jews were sent to Westerbork, almost all of whom were eventually sent east on the 97 trains that left the camp. The first left for Auschwitz-Birkenau—the most common destination—on July 15, 1942. Over 60,000 Jews were sent to Auschwitz from Westerbork, many of whom were gassed on arrival.

Many other trains went to Sobibór—some 34,000 people were deported there, with only 19 survivors. Nine trains went to either Bergen-Belsen or Theresienstadt.

Approximately 102,000 Dutch Jews died in the Holocaust, with only 5,000 liberated in the camps—almost 1,000 of these survivors were freed from Westerbork, which is located nine kilometers south of Assen near the German border. Notable prisoners at Westerbork included cabaret director Max Ehrlich,

figure skater Ellen Burka and diarist Anne Frank; only Burka survived the war.

Among the Sinti and Roma victims of the Holocaust in the Netherlands was Settela Steinbach, a 9-year-old Dutch Sinti girl who was deported on May 19, 1944 to Auschwitz, where she was gassed. The deportation was captured on film. Footage of the child's face looking out from the cattle car became emblematic of the Holocaust.

Resistance fighters and any detainees who disobeyed were sent to the prison section of Westerbork. In addition to the resistance members sent east, 48 were executed and cremated at Westerbork, along with 4 Jews. Ten additional resistance members were executed elsewhere and cremated at Westerbork.

On April 12, 1945, Canadian troops liberated Westerbork and the remaining 876 prisoners. Westerbork then became an internment camp for members of the NSB or Waffen SS and other Dutchmen accused of collaborating with the Nazis.

The internment camp closed December 1, 1948 and was subsequently used as a training ground for soldiers before they were sent to fight for Dutch control of the Dutch East Indies during the Indonesian War of Independence, and, in the 1960s, as a temporary home for "Moluccan separatists," the remnants of a Dutch proxy army that had aimed at crippling independent Indonesia.

The camp was gradually demolished, and its isolation—which was an important factor in its construction and eventual use as a transit camp—made it the ideal site for radio telescopes. The Westerbork Synthesis Radio Telescope, finished in 1970, now contributes to mankind's understanding of the cosmos through infrared imaging of galaxies. Thus modern technology has been used twice in the same area for wildly different purposes—near-annihilation of an entire people during the Second World War and exploring the universe today.

The Westerbork Museum opened in 1983, with some barracks at the camp partially reconstructed. For each Westerbork inmate that died in the Nazi extermination camps there is a small stone. The 102,000 Jewish victims are indicated with a Star of David, whereas the 245 Sinti and Roma victims are represented by 213 stones topped by a flame. One hundred stones have no emblem and represent the resistance fighters who were

imprisoned at Westerbork before being sent east.

The experience of World War II and the Holocaust in the Netherlands offer lessons for today's workers and youth. Neutrality and living in a minor imperialist power did not save the Dutch population, particularly Dutch Jews, during the Second World War. Nor will a nuclear Third World War spare civilians. The horrors of World War II point urgently at the need to avert a third through the working class waging war on war.



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