

Distant Neighbours. Jews and non-Jews in the Shadow of the Holocaust (summary)

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This study addresses the coexistence of Jews and non-Jews in Twente (a region in the east of the Netherlands) and the adjacent region in Germany from the 1920s through the 1950s. Social processes before and after the extermination of the Jews are analysed, but not the actual mass murder itself. The focus is on the day-to-day interaction of Jews and non-Jews, as this micro-level cohabitation is where ‘macro’ processes such as exclusion and dehumanisation are both expressed and realised. Everyday interactions in the years of the Third Reich confirmed a fundamental shift in the existing order, but over and beyond that, the shift was also caused by these very interactions.

The most important questions that this study attempts to answer are: (1) what social dynamics occurred in Jewish/non-Jewish cohabitation in Nazi Germany and in occupied Holland in the period before the actual mass murder of the Jews? And (2) how was cohabitation re-established after the mass murder, when the survivors returned to their erstwhile homes?

The study looks on one hand at the reality of the *concrete relations and interactions* between Jews and non-Jews, and on the other investigates how such relations and interactions were *experienced* by both Jews and non-Jews. A central theme in this respect is that of ‘normality’: when and why were interactions experienced as normal or abnormal by either Jews or non-Jews? By linking developments in concrete social relations to changes in the life-world of both Jews and non-Jews, we gather a deeper understanding of the connection between social processes and moral shifts — in this case, in the prelude to and aftermath of the Holocaust.

The evolution of Jewish/non-Jewish coexistence is analysed in the context of the German-Dutch border region that encompasses the regions of Twente (in the Netherlands) and Westmünsterland and Bentheim County (in Germany). The coexistence is examined from both comparative and transnational perspectives.

Comparative means that the coexistence is viewed in the context of national linkages and developments, i.e., as the micro level of the national space. Using this perspective, one might consider Jew/non-Jew relations on the German and Dutch sides of the border as representative of wider national relations in each country, and that they may as such be compared with each other.

Transnational means that Jewish/non-Jewish relations are analysed as cohabitation in an autonomous historical space, and in the context of historically evolved regional relationships. In this approach, the central prism is that of the boundary; what did the simultaneous proximity and separation mean for the coexistence of Jews and non-Jews?

The most important sources for this study are some forty interviews by the author, and another ca. sixty interviews with Jewish and non-Jewish persons from the Twente-German border region taken from earlier studies and others’ projects. In addition, use has been made of regional and local Nazi reports on popular opinion; egodocuments such as letters, diaries and memoirs; and local histories and ‘grey literature’.

In Chapter 2 the research is placed historiographically and the theoretical framework is presented. The concept of 'normality' in existing research on daily life in the Third Reich is discussed, among other things. What is at stake here is the issue of to what extent one may speak of an everyday life in Nazi Germany and the occupied territories, and if one may label such life as 'normal'. To look at this question, I start with the contributions of sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann concerning the social construction of reality. They posit that everyday life consists of rituals and routines that connote underlying assumptions, but that these assumptions don't continuously emerge in consciousness. This study builds on this insight by differentiating between existential assumptions of consistency and coherence on the one hand, and, on the other, moral assumptions of good and evil, and of appropriateness and inappropriateness. People experience their daily lives as normal when their experiences fit within their existential as well as their moral expectations. Hence we distinguish here between existential and moral normality.

The experience of *existential normality* is based on the presence of patterns and predictability. Those are the schemata, routines, and repetitions that logically order our world; things *always* happen thus, and, since they do, one may trust they will also do so next time, hence one no longer needs to reflect on them. *Moral normality* is bound up with an existing moral order, i.e., with values of good and evil and of appropriateness. What is at stake is not that something always happens thus, but also that it *ought* to happen thus. When we live through experiences that do not fit in with our moral assumptions, the world starts to feel 'abnormal' in a moral sense. However, if such reprehensible experiences repeat themselves regularly, if a pattern or a certain logic may be read into them, they become normal in an existential sense. One can function, then, in a world that is being experienced as 'abnormal' in the sense of despicable and yet 'normal' in the sense of 'coherent and predictable'.

As more and more moral and existential anchor points come loose, and the world begins to feel ever-more abnormal in both the moral and existential senses, a moment will arrive when the known normality is definitively broken. In the wake of this breached normality, a new structure for meaning has to be built. Often, silence is established in order to enable such construction.

Chapter 3 is a methodological chapter that explains the sources used, and examines a number of methodological considerations related to the use of oral sources. Memories are not unambiguous representations of the past, because people recall and interpret the past from the standpoint of the present. Recalling is thus a product of current interpretation as much as of past experience. This means that the memory narrated by an interviewee is not so much fictitious as constructed. In principle, three partly interconnected levels of (re)construction may be distinguished: (1) the memory itself; (2) the shape assumed by the memory (i.e., the narrative used), and (3) the relationship between interviewer and interviewee. Despite complications inherent in reconstruction, this study tries to approach the past precisely by unmasking the influence of the reconstruction process on all three levels. This means identifying and analysing signs that point to a reconstruction process, and, also, selecting out certain types of memories that are relatively less susceptible to deformation. This means that in analysing the interviews, the focus is on statements about concrete interactions with specific people.

Chapter 4 is the first of the four empirical chapters that constitute the core of this study. It describes Jewish/non-Jewish coexistence in the Twente-German border

region in the years before the Nazi seizure of power. The cohabitation had many similarities on both sides of the border. Twente and the part of Germany it borders on, had since long constituted a region characterized by a good deal of cultural and religious exchange and cross-border contact. The Jewish minority was part of a larger social reality intersected by various boundaries of religion and class, but it maintained a certain distance from the other religious communities. Throughout the region, anti-Jewish prejudice was widespread yet relatively mild. This prejudice had religious but, moreover, social manifestations, with Jews branded as 'foreign' and apt to commit 'Jew tricks' in business affairs.

There were also differences between the situations on either side of the German-Twente border. On the Twente side, Jews and non-Jews shared a common life-world where 'pillarisation' (politico-denominational segregation) and class distinctions coloured day-to-day contact, but without fundamentally questioning the emancipation of the Dutch Jewry. By contrast, Germany had already long been experiencing an evolution toward a more political anti-Semitism, based on race distinctions that questioned Jews' 'Germanness' and patriotism on the most elementary level. In reaction, many Jews emphasised their patriotism, hoping to counteract anti-Semitism by good behaviour and far-reaching acculturation. Thus German Jews and non-Jews shared a normality in which 'Germanness' and love of the nation were even more important normative criteria than class or religion.

Chapter 5 centres on the cohabitation on the German side of the border in the era of National Socialism. In the years under Nazi rule, non-Jews were progressively lowering Jews' ranking in the moral order, dropping them from consideration as equal citizens and human beings. On the level of everyday interactions, there existed a gamut of exclusionary practices that may be divided into three categories: isolation, degradation, and exploitation. Individual non-Jews still disposed, in the early years in particular, of a certain leeway to determine how far they would emphasise (or alternatively, minimise) the new inequality in their interactions — and thus the degree to which they would actively isolate, degrade, or exploit their Jewish acquaintances.

Since Jews constituted but a tiny minority, for many non-Jews exclusion meant nothing more than passive isolation; Jews simply 'disappeared' from the public field, and thus from their perception. On the other hand, those who had daily contact with Jews faced the shifts in the moral order head-on, and had to negotiate their own positions in these shifts. This was no problem for those who enthusiastically embraced the new regime. Others, however, would experience moral dissonance, as old values clashed with new ones. Many found avoidance to be an appropriate strategy; phasing out existing contacts allowed for a minimal show of power inequality.

The ambivalent position of many non-Jews resulted in a wide range of Jewish experiences of exclusion. As growing exclusion turned their world ever more abnormal in a moral sense, Jews tried their best to keep their world normal in an existential sense; they continued to look for logic and consistency in the attitude of the outside world, and for control over their own lives. While they held on to old values and logic, they also looked for fresh moral benchmarks to make sense of changes in their life-world. Thus a kind of habituation took place to the 'abnormal normality' of exclusion. For those Jews who had not yet left Germany, the November 1938 pogrom signified a moment of rupture that showed in a definitive manner that they had no further future in Germany. Those who then still stayed behind were

mostly people whose way out had been blocked or who were too old or ill to emigrate.

Chapter 6 shifts the attention to the Jewish/non-Jewish cohabitation on the Dutch side of the border in the 1933-1945 era. Thanks to the proximity with Germany, Twente inhabitants were relatively well informed in the 1930s about Nazism and the persecution of Jews. However, in Twente the Nazis were both not greatly popular, nor seen as a major threat. Despite the existence of many cross-border contacts, the border was experienced as a clear demarcation; while on one side it had been possible for Nazis to seize power, this was considered unthinkable on the Dutch side.

When Holland was occupied by Nazi Germany in 1940, initially neither Jews nor non-Jews encountered significant shifts in their mutual relationship. Because of the occupation and a widespread anti-German mood, a moral split arose between 'faithful but oppressed Dutchmen' on one hand, and the 'moffen' (krauts) plus a small group of 'traitors' on the other. Jews were subsumed under the first category, and were therefore not lowered from their categorisation as equal citizens and human beings — in contrast to what had happened to Jews across the border. In everyday interactions, active isolation, degradation or exploitation rarely took place. At the same time, however, a new reality evolved in which Jews were seen as hapless victims, meaning something like 'what is happening to the Jews is terrible and barbaric, but I can't do anything about it, and, fortunately, I am not involved', and sometimes even followed with: 'and the Jews also brought it on themselves a little bit.' Non-Jews would in general react with resignation to persecution and deportation — an attitude that may be characterised as 'sympathising passivity'. Fear of the consequences of offering active support appears to have been an important factor in this passivity.

Since Twente Jews hardly faced active exclusion in their own non-Jewish environment, they identified the threat as coming mostly from the German occupier. Although persecution forced Jews into a reality that was absolutely incomparable with that of non-Jews, both groups continued to share a common moral framework. Although the experience of Jews living in hiding with non-Jews, with the concomitant experience of power inequality, might put that clear-cut, black-and-white framework under pressure, such experiences happened on the level of individuals and therefore did not essentially challenge this shared moral bedrock.

Chapter 7 analyses the cohabitation in the immediate postwar years on both sides of the border. In Twente and in the German border region, Jews and non-Jews constituted collectives with their own very disparate experiences of ruptured normality. They now had to find new ways to live with each other again, and silence about the recent persecution and mass murder played a crucial role in this.

In the German border region, Jewish/non-Jewish contact took place first of all under the stigma of experiences from the Nazi years. Within the context of the complex and tense postwar relations between Jewish survivors and non-Jewish Germans, silence fulfilled a clear function of shielding both non-Jews and Jews from ambiguity, dissonance, and social conflict. This situation may be called a 'pact of silence'.

On the Dutch side of the border, too, silence was kept, but in a different way. Twente Jews did not feel that they were living in the 'house of the hangman'. Here, silence was rather associated with incomprehension stemming from the completely different experiences both groups had gone through. Disappointment in, and eventual

criticism of, non-Jewish attitudes was only formulated *a posteriori*, as returning Jews were confronted with negative experiences — non-Jewish indifference, anti-Semitism, and problems surrounding retrieval of their properties — and as the magnitude and scope of Jewish extermination became apparent. However, this did not change the original ascription of guilt: Germans and Dutch Nazis were seen as the real murderers. Thus, Jewish returnees had to build a new normality in a non-Jewish environment that might have been indifferent to, but was not guilty of, the rupture of their earlier normality. This was hardly a clear framework for re-shaping coexistence with the non-Jewish environment. Also on the Twente side, then, silence was the lubricant that enabled living together.

Chapter 8 is a concluding chapter that puts together the insights gained from this study of Jewish/non-Jewish coexistence. By investigating day-to-day interactions in relation to the lived existential and moral (ab)normalities, it has been possible to reveal the social and moral changes that happened in the years before and after the Jewish extermination on both the German and the Twente sides of the border.

The *comparison* of the coexistence on either side of the border leads us, among other things, to question the oft-repeated supposition that a process of social exclusion of the Jews had been a necessary precondition to their subsequent extermination. In fact, a comparison of both sides of the border shows that despite very different processes (active exclusion on the German side, sympathising passivity on the Twente side), the results were strikingly similar; the majority of Jews was taken away and murdered. The key variable, then, was passivity. The precondition for extermination was not the active participation of the ‘ordinary man’ in exclusion, but rather, his passivity in not preventing persecution.

Regarding the *transnational* approach, it may be concluded that — frequent cross-border contacts and cultural, religious and economic exchanges notwithstanding — the border increasingly functioned as a barrier. Even back in the 1920s and 1930s, social and political differences existed between the German border region and Twente; this divergence in the life-worlds only increased in the ’30s and ’40s. While continuities in cross-border relations may doubtless be observed, in the postwar era such contact happened against a background of demarcation and hostility. The concept of boundary carries the dual meanings of proximity and separation, and the reality of this distancing would remain an important factor for a considerable time to come.