

Background

Four researchers will examine the history of Dutch antisemitism since the end of the Second World War, taking four relevant communities into consideration.

The project:

- will analyze the chemistry between Dutch 'traditional' and post-Holocaust anti-Jewish stereotypes and those within the Moroccan, Turkish and Polish communities
- will explore, in depth, various expressions of antisemitism in relation to anti-Zionism, criticism of Israel, and Holocaust denial
- takes a globalised approach moving from the Netherlands to Morocco, Poland, and Turkey and back again
- will relate these issues to the ongoing debate on antisemitism pursued by, among others, journalists, opinion leaders, and academics.

Studying antisemitism

Jews have a long history of being represented as the quintessential 'Other'. Consequently, the stereotypical Jew has been made the incarnation of conflict. 'The Jew' in all guises has provided a meaningful frame for a wide variety of discontented people to analyze frustrating and threatening events in their lives, environments, nations, and in the world at large. Antisemitism brings the complexity of reality back to a clear, unambiguous model, offering a superficial but powerful explanation of all evil.

Antisemitism should not be approached in an essentialist way, as if it were an undying, omnipresent, fixed phenomenon. Jews have known times and places of relatively favorable life. Still, antisemitism seems to be a light sleeper, easily awoken. A fundamental characteristic of antisemitism is its flexibility. It should be analyzed as a multi-faceted practice for framing all sorts of conflicts in society. In its huge reservoir of stereotypes there are always some that 'serve the purpose'. To take this concept of antisemitism on, the programme consists of four separate yet closely interconnected projects. These aim to investigate the transfer and appropriation of representations of Jews between and within communities, taking Dutch society as a departure point, yet with a clear view of the global aspects of antisemitism.

To examine when and how stereotypes are introduced and at which point the frame turns antisemitic, researchers will investigate the history of three migrant communities, focusing in particular on the introduction and transmission of images of Jews and anti-Jewish stereotypes in the interaction between migrant communities, the motherlands, and the Netherlands.

Research will furthermore focus on contemporary debates developing in the public forums where citizenship is expressed and contested: the opinion-producing and reproducing media old and new (general and group-oriented newspapers, magazines, internet discussion groups, blogs and forums; political institutions (on the local, national and international levels), groups of stakeholders and scholars, and scholarly institutions). The research will pinpoint public, semi-public, and candid contributions to debate, and will explore the mobilization of opinion and social influence across communities and across borders.

Antisemitism in the Netherlands

The Netherlands present a most interesting opportunity to study the Western-European perspective, owing to its long-standing pragmatic acceptance of a Jewish population and to the shifts of contemporary attitudes. Before the war, the acceptance of Jewish communities coexisted with Christian anti-Judaism and a kind of everyday antisemitism (risjes). During the German occupation 75% of the 140.000 Jews in the Netherlands were deported and murdered. The contrast between the traditional image of Dutch tolerance and the high number of Jewish deportees has spawned the concept of the 'Dutch paradox'. After the German occupation, antisemitism got a new boost when old stereotypes resurfaced in a new social context. People said that returning Jews were digging up their hidden money and recapturing the best jobs. Apart from the Nazi propaganda, this was mainly due to the mechanism of 'blaming the victim' and the economic and social competition regarding reclaimed houses, jobs, money and properties in post-war Netherlands.

'Gentile /goyish envy' has been one of the key elements of traditional anti-Jewish sentiments and ambivalent feelings towards Jews: envy of supposed Jewish qualities, talents and privileges. After the Shoah a new form made its entry: the envy of the ultimate victim who was assumed to monopolize suffering.

Secondary antisemitism

In this respect the phenomenon of secondary antisemitism is a relevant instrument of analysis. The main thrust of the concept is that the Jews embody, just by existing, the awkward, inconvenient memory of Auschwitz and of the national or European crimes committed against the Jews. Even more provocatively, it has been held forth that 'The Germans will never forgive the Jews for Auschwitz'.

At first, the post-war Dutch elite made a conscious effort to fix the social memory of the war. Later on, in collective memory the common resistance against the foreign invader became the norm and the Shoah was made a key element of World War II commemoration. 'Never again' was the battle cry to overcome a sense of past failure. In this climate, feelings of guilt and shame toward the Jewish population, and outright philosemitism counterpointed the remnants of latent antisemitism. The extreme right never stopped their assaults on Jewish cemeteries and the like. In wider Dutch society, however, it was during the 1980's that the dominant World War II narrative and the central position of the Shoah were challenged once again.

Changing attitudes

The change of attitude toward Jews in the Netherlands in the 1980's can also be related to a change in public opinion about Israel. Identification with the Jewish state ran deep in the Netherlands, and the disillusion about the policies of Israel was correspondingly large. Zionism and Israel became increasingly, concretely and symbolically, main issues in a war of sorts, taking place in the forum of international politics and to no lesser degree in the academic world, at schools, on the street and, later on, in the virtual world of the Internet. Criticism of Israel started to blend with old and newer anti-Jewish stereotypes, with anti-Zionism (the denial of the legitimacy of Israel's existence as a Jewish state) and the equation of Nazism and Zionism, creating a fatal triangle of antisemitism, anti-Zionism and criticism of Israel. The shifts occurring in this triangle were strongly influenced by the presence of immigrant communities, particularly those with Muslims in their ranks.

Debating antisemitism

This project will address complex issues and touch upon fierce debates. In connection with the academic debate on New Antisemitism, researchers will deal with the connection between 'traditional' post-Holocaust anti-Jewish stereotypes and those introduced by recent migrant groups. What images of the Jews and which stereotypes are transferred to and prevail among Turkish and Moroccan communities in the Netherlands? What is their function and through which channels are they transmitted? In this respect, the outline of the research programme includes attention for Islamic as well as Christian forms of religious antisemitism.

A second issue concerns the underplaying versus overplaying of contemporary antisemitism. Is there a relationship between antisemitism, racism and Islamophobia on the one hand, and philosemitism and diehard support of Israel on the other? Understanding different positions in the debate on antisemitism calls for innovative concepts in addition to in-depth research.

The engagement of Jews

It makes no sense to perceive Jews as victims by definition. The position of contemporary European Jewry is characterized by a mixture of both vulnerability and strength: on the one hand a traumatic past, hidden or outright antisemitism, and a minority position, on the other hand a generally healthy economic position, active social participation, and a rich and valued culture. This combination of strength and vulnerability is confusing for Jew and Gentile alike. Pride of Jewish culture, and of Israel is linked with the painful memory of the Shoah and of murdered loved ones, and anti-Jewish incidents. Antisemitism can function for Jews as well as a frame for looking at the world.