

## Introduction

In March and April 2024, a television series on the Dutch Jewish Council (*De Joodsche Raad voor Amsterdam*, JR) was broadcast. While there exist a handful of documentaries on the JR, this was the first time this delicate topic was presented as a drama. The series was a major hit, with favorable reviews, solid television ratings, and, most important of all, it cultivated a more nuanced understanding of the difficult position of the Dutch Jewish Council leadership under Nazi occupation among the wider public. This is perhaps best embodied by the statement of Binyomin Jacobs, Chief Rabbi of the Netherlands, who claimed that based on the series, he had changed his opinion of the JR. While he had been raised with the idea that the organization consisted of traitors responsible for the deportation and murder of more than 100,000 Jews in the Netherlands under German occupation, he now understood that the story was more complex and that the council's functionaries had cooperated in order to "prevent worse" and to "save whatever could be saved."<sup>1</sup>

A drama series of five episodes succeeded in what historians and documentarists had failed to achieve for decades. The positive public response contrasted with the more lukewarm reception of Claude Lanzmann's last major documentary *The Last of the Unjust* (2013). In 1975, during the preparation of his successful film *Shoah* (1985), Lanzmann conducted a multi-day interview of the last Jewish Elder of the Theresienstadt ghetto Benjamin Murmelstein. The complex story that emerged from this interview did not, in the end, make it into the celebrated documentary, but Lanzmann returned to the footage almost forty years later, producing another nearly four-hour-long documentary. A shadow hung over Murmelstein after the war as "the only survivor" among wartime

1 Binyomin Jacobs and Rob Oudkerk, interview by Hannelos Pen, *Het Parool*, April 16, 2024.

Jewish Elders. Lanzmann could not hide his initial distance, even hostility, toward Murrelstein, but by the end of their long discussions, he had embraced Murrelstein's side of the story, and the final version of the documentary clearly intended to clear Murrelstein's name. Yet reviewers and historians remained sceptical, unwilling to fully accept Murrelstein's defense.<sup>2</sup>

Wartime Jewish Councils and other Jewish representative bodies under the Nazis and their allies continue to polarize historians. The fact that in the Netherlands it took almost eighty years after the Second World War for a more moderate view on the JR to spread to the wider public shows how contentious the topic still is. This is not surprising given that the function of the JR and the decisions of its leaders both in public and scholarly discourse have often been tied to the 75 percent murder rate of Jews in the Netherlands (compared to 40 percent in Belgium and 25 percent in France). In the Netherlands, more than in any other country in Western Europe, the Jewish leadership has been held responsible for the deportation of Jews from the country.<sup>3</sup>

Additionally, there are persistent misconceptions that keep being repeated, including the idea that JR functionaries were responsible for compiling the deportation lists.<sup>4</sup> As some contributions in this volume—such as those by Jan Láníček and Doron Rabinovici—show, the perspective on other “Jewish Councils” in Europe has been similarly blurred. In German-occupied Poland, discussions about Jewish leaders' level of influence over who would be deported and who would receive a (temporary) exemption from deportation had been at the core of discussions about *Judenräte* already during the war. They often overshadowed Jewish functionaries' desperate efforts in the first war years to provide social welfare

2 Ronny Loewy and Katharina Rauschenberger, eds., *“Der Letzte der Ungerechten”: Der Judenälteste Benjamin Murrelstein in Filmen 1942-1975* (Frankfurt a. M.: Campus Verlag, 2011).

3 Dan Michman, “Commonalities and Peculiarities of the Return to Life of Holocaust Survivors in their Home Countries: The Dutch and Greek Cases in Context,” *Historiein* 18, no. 1 (2019): 1-15.

4 The most recent example of this is *The Betrayal of Anne Frank: A Cold Case Investigation* (New York: HarperCollins, 2022). Apart from unfounded claims regarding the individual who was supposedly the betrayer of Anne Frank, this book—which was widely reported on in both the Dutch national and international media—contains false information about the work of the Jewish Council. Soon after this book's publication, a group of Dutch scholars presented a counter-report. A part of the report, which explicitly addressed the false claims regarding the Jewish Council, was published separately. See: Bart van der Boom and Laurien Vastenhout, “Réfutation du livre *The Betrayal of Anne Frank (Qui a Trahi Anne Frank?)* de Rosemary Sullivan,” *Revue d'Histoire de la Shoah* 2, no. 2016 (2022): 335-58.

and secure other basic necessities for hundreds of thousands of their “coreligionists” imprisoned in ghettos. As will be reflected upon more thoroughly later in this introduction, it is the aim of the present volume to overcome these misconceptions and instead show the multifaceted nature of “Jewish Councils” across Nazi Europe. The precise number of “Jewish Councils” established by Nazi authorities and in Nazi-allied countries is not known yet, but it is assumed to be (by Dan Michman) around 1,200.<sup>5</sup>

To thoroughly examine “Jewish Councils” room for maneuver and how the contexts in which they were forced to operate affected their choices, it is necessary to use a comparative perspective. By studying similarities and differences across cases, we can better explain the variety of Jewish responses as well as the different nature of Jewish representative bodies in various localities. The need for more comparative studies on “Jewish Councils” became clear first and foremost from Isaiah Trunk’s pathbreaking study *Judenrat*, published in 1972, which focused on the Jewish Councils in Poland and the Baltic states.<sup>6</sup> Even though, as Dan Michman has pointed out, this book was not comparative in nature, Trunk’s discussion of case studies allowed for a more thorough understanding of how local conditions shaped the form and function of the councils, and how these distinctions influenced the choices of their leaders.

At approximately the same time, two major conferences held at YIVO in New York City in 1967 and Yad Vashem in Jerusalem ten years later offered broader comparisons of “Jewish Councils” across Nazi Europe.<sup>7</sup> This, in turn, led to a more nuanced understanding of their leaders’ decisions, which was much needed in a historiography that was still inherently moralistic. The benefits of a comparative perspective were further highlighted by Michman, who published several articles on “Jewish Councils” across Nazi Europe in which he outlined the differences and similarities between these organizations.<sup>8</sup> Despite his call for

5 This estimation is based on the fact that according to the Yad Vashem *Encyclopedia of the Jewish Ghettos during the Holocaust* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2009), there were at least 1,140 ghettos, almost all of which had “Jewish Councils.” Additionally, there were places without ghettos where Jewish Councils were established.

6 Isaiah Trunk, *Judenrat: The Jewish Councils in Eastern Europe under Nazi Occupation* (New York: Macmillan, 1972).

7 Rachel Erlich and Max Weinreich, eds., *Imposed Jewish Governing Bodies under Nazi Rule, Yivo Colloquium, Dec. 2-5, 1967* (New York: YIVO, 1972); *Patterns of Jewish Leadership in Nazi Europe, 1933-1945: Proceedings of the Third Yad Vashem International Historical Conference, Jerusalem, April 4-7, 1977* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1979).

8 See, for example, Michman’s work in the following venues: “De oprichting van de VJB in internationaal perspectief,” in *De curatoren van het ghetto: de vereniging van*

more in-depth comparative research on the topic, very few historians have taken up such research.<sup>9</sup>

While not all individual contributions in this volume are inherently comparative, the fact that all authors focus on similar themes—including the German supervision of the “Jewish Councils,” the terminology used to define these organizations, their relations with members of the Jewish communities they claimed to represent, as well as the social position of the Jewish leadership, and the changes in personnel—allows us to draw parallels across Nazi Europe. As such, this volume has a much narrower and in-depth thematic focus than its predecessor, the influential 1979 publication *Patterns of Jewish Leadership in Nazi Europe, 1933-1945*, which was the outcome of the previously mentioned 1977 Yad Vashem conference. This volume also reflects research that has been published in the more than four decades since. A wide range of geographic case studies is brought together, with contributions that have a local focus (Prague, Riga, Minsk, Kraków, Berlin, Sered’), a regional focus (Transnistria and the occupied areas of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, RSFSR), a national focus (Slovakia, Romania, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Germany, Poland), and a focus on individual Jewish leaders (Henrik Fisch and Ernő Munkácsi). Given this breadth, the present volume is an important step toward a more in-depth, differentiated understanding of the Jewish Council phenomenon. We not only see how local (f)actors impacted German policies but also, as will be further elaborated

*de joden in België tijdens de nazi-bezetting*, ed. Rudi van Doorslaer and Jean-Philippe Schreiber (Tiel: Lannoo, 2004), 25-45; Dan Michman, “The Jewish Councils Phenomenon: New Insights and Their Implications for the Hungarian Case,” in *The Holocaust in Hungary: A European Perspective*, ed. Judit Molnár (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2005), 254-64; “‘Judenräte’ und ‘Judenvereinigungen’ unter nationalsozialistischer Herrschaft: Aufbau und Anwendung eines verwaltungsmässigen Konzepts,” *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 46, no. 4 (1998): 293-304; “The Uniqueness of the Joodse Raad in the Western European Context,” *Dutch Jewish History* 3 (1993): 371-80; “De oprichting van de ‘Joodsche Raad voor Amsterdam’ vanuit een vergelijkend perspectief,” in *Derde Jaarboek van het Rijksinstituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie*, ed. Madelon de Keizer and David Barnouw (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 1992), 75-100.

- 9 Exceptions in this regard are Laurien Vastenhout, *Between Community and Collaboration: Jewish Councils in Western Europe under Nazi Occupation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022); Evgeny Finkel, *Ordinary Jews: Choices and Survival during the Holocaust* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017); Pim Griffioen and Ron Zeller, *Jodenvervolging in Nederland, Frankrijk en België, 1940-1945: Overeenkomsten, Verschillen, Oorzaken* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2011). Griffioen and Zeller’s study provides a broader comparative perspective on the Holocaust in Western Europe. The role of the “Jewish Councils” is also included in the analysis.

below, dispose of some repeated misconceptions about “Jewish Councils” and their leaders’ responses to persecution during Nazi rule.

Last, this volume reflects on the terminology used in the context of “Jewish Councils.” As has been pointed out by various scholars, including some featured in this volume, not all these Jewish organizations were referred to as “Jewish Councils” (*Judenräte*). In both Romania and Slovakia, for example, the term “Jewish Center” was used, while we see the use of “Central Jewish Council” in the context of Hungary. In Vienna and Prague, the compulsory Jewish representative organizations were eventually referred to as “Council of Jewish Elders” (*Ältestenrat der Juden*), whereas in both Germany and Belgium, the term “Association” was employed. In France, in turn, “Jewish Council” was referred to as a “Union.” In the Netherlands, the Polish example was followed, with a translation of the term “Judennrat” in Dutch (“*Joodse Raad*”) used by both German authorities and Jewish communities themselves. While one of the aims of this volume is to highlight the pluriform nature of these imposed Jewish organizations and differentiate between them, “Jewish Councils” is such a widely used and understood concept in the field of Holocaust studies and beyond that in this introduction, we decided—also out of practical necessity—to use the term in quotation marks whenever general references are made to these organizations across this volume. In reference to individual case studies, we have chosen to give the authors the freedom to use the terminology they found most appropriate.

### *A Historiographical Overview*

The historiography of the “Jewish Councils” is extensive. Whether exclusively dedicated to the Jewish Council phenomenon or more generally to Jewish communities under Nazi rule, the first studies on the topic were published soon after the war’s end.<sup>10</sup> In the first two postwar decades, scholars such as Hans G. Adler, a survivor of Theresienstadt and Auschwitz, first and foremost took a moral approach as they tried to establish whether Jewish Council leaders had been “good” or “bad.” In the early 1960s, Hannah Arendt and Raul Hilberg left an indelible mark

10 See, for example: Koert Berkley, *Overzicht van het ontstaan, de werkzaamheden en het streven van den Joodschen Raad voor Amsterdam* (Amsterdam: Plastica, 1945); Heinz Wielek [=E. Kweksilber], *De oorlog die Hitler won* (Amsterdam: Amsterdamse Boeken Courantmij, 1947).

on the scholarship by accusing wartime Jewish leaders of contributing to the destruction of European Jews.<sup>11</sup> In the decades that followed, primarily in response to Adler, Arendt, and Hilberg, many scholars offered a more balanced perspective. These included Isaiah Trunk, Israel Gutman, Aharon Weiss, Yehuda Bauer, and Leni Yahil.<sup>12</sup> Far ahead of its time was the scholarship of Philip Friedman, whose publications—partly due to the fact they were in Hebrew—never gained traction in the international literature.<sup>13</sup> Friedman asserted that there was a need to understand local variations in Jewish Councils and include bottom-up Jewish perspectives on the councils to better understand their functioning.<sup>14</sup>

Since the 1990s, Holocaust research in general has significantly expanded. New generations of scholars joined the field, many archives became accessible (especially in the wake of the downfall of communism in Europe), and public interest in the Holocaust promoted a number of research initiatives. These developments changed the understanding and conceptualization of the Holocaust. For years, scholars who had tried to explain how and why the Holocaust happened could roughly be divided in two schools: 1) the “intentionalists,” such as Lucy Dawidowicz, Eberhard Jäckel, and Gerald Fleming, who believed the Holocaust was the unfolding of the ideology and intentions of the National-Socialist leader-

11 Hans G. Adler, *Theresienstadt: 1941-1945. Das Antlitz einer Zwangsgemeinschaft. Geschichte, Soziologie, Psychologie* (Tübingen: Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1955); Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, revised and enlarged edition (New York: Viking Press, 1964); Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of European Jews* (New York: Quadrangle, 1961).

12 Trunk, *Judenrat*; Yisrael Gutman, *The Jews of Warsaw, 1939-1943: Ghetto, Underground, Revolt* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982); Aharon Weiss, “Jewish Leadership in Occupied Poland—Postures and Attitudes,” *Yad Vashem Studies* 12 (1977): 335-65; Yehuda Bauer, “The Judenräte—Some Conclusions,” in *Patterns of Jewish Leadership in Nazi Europe 1933-1945. Proceedings of the Third Yad Vashem International Historical Conference, Jerusalem, April 4-7, 1977*, ed. Yisrael Gutman and Cynthia J. Haft (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1979), 393-405; Leni Yahil, *The Holocaust: The Fate of European Jewry, 1932-1945*, trans. by Ina Friedman and Haya Galai (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

13 On the importance of Friedman, see: Roni Stauber, *Laying the Foundations for Holocaust Research: The Impact of Philip Friedman* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2009). For Friedman’s work, see: Philip Friedman, “Preliminary and Methodological Problems of the Research on the Jewish Catastrophe in the Nazi Period, Part One: Problems of Research on Jewish ‘Self-Government’ (‘Judenrat’) in the Nazi Period,” *Yad Vashem [sic!] Studies on the European Jewish Catastrophe and Resistance* 2 (1958): 95-113. Also see Friedman’s various essays collected and published in *Roads to Extinction: Essays on the Holocaust* (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1980).

14 Friedman, “Preliminary and Methodological Problems of the Research on the Jewish Catastrophe in the Nazi Period,” 96-97.

ship (Hitler in particular), and 2) the “functionalists,” including Karl Schleunes, Uwe Dietrich Adam, Hans Mommsen, and Christopher Browning, who focused more on the decision-making processes of lower-ranking individuals who radicalized policies by taking initiative. Starting in the 1990s, there was more room to integrate these two perspectives, and a consensus was reached by “moderate functionalists” that the Holocaust can be explained by a variety of factors, both top-down and bottom-up.<sup>15</sup> The acceptance that local Nazi leaders also influenced the process of Jewish persecution by either radicalizing (“attritionists”) or temporarily slowing it down (“productionists”) opened up new avenues for understanding how they interacted with local “Jewish Councils.”<sup>16</sup> If we accept that persecution policies were not linear and differed from place to place, then we also need to continue asking whether the policies and responses of Jewish leaders could have made a difference in the local context. Consequently, historians began to pay more attention not only to the outcome of the persecution and the perceived failure of the Jewish leaders but also to the policies and motivations that underpinned their choices.

In this developing field, new studies on local Jewish communities and their wartime leaders emerged.<sup>17</sup> Yet while these studies have unearthed new sources and insights, not all new scholarly understandings regarding the Holocaust have been integrated into research on the “Jewish Councils,”

15 For an overview of Holocaust research since 1990, see: Dan Michman, *Holocaust Historiography between 1990 to 2021 in Context(s): New Insights, Perceptions, Understandings and Avenues—An Overview and Analysis* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2022); a shorter version was published as: “Characteristics of Holocaust Historiography since 1990 and Their Contexts: Emphases, Perceptions, Developments, Debates,” in *A Companion to the Holocaust*, ed. Simone Gigliotti and Hilary Earl (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2020), 211–32.

16 Christopher R. Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939–March 1942* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2004).

17 It is impossible to outline here the many monographs and encyclopedic studies on the topic that have been carried out in a number of European countries. Some examples include Michal Unger, *Reassessment of the Image of Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2004); Sara Bender, *The Jews of Białystok During World War II and the Holocaust* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2008); Guy Miron and Shlomit Shulhani, eds., *The Yad Vashem Encyclopedia of the Ghettos During the Holocaust* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2009); Ilya Altman, chief ed., *Kholokost na territorii SSSR: entsiklopediia* [The Encyclopedia of the Holocaust in the USSR] (Moscow: Rosspen, 2009); Martin Dean, ed., *Ghettos in German-occupied Eastern Europe*, vol. 2 of *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos*, ed. Geoffrey P. Megargee (Bloomington: Indiana University Press in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2012); Randolph L. Braham, ed., *The Geographical Encyclopedia of the Holocaust in Hungary* (Chicago, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2013).

and some assumptions that existed in the first postwar decades still persist. In the past two decades, some studies have offered new (comparative) insights into the Jewish Council phenomenon. These include works by Rudi van Doorslaer and Jean-Philippe Schreiber, Evgeny Finkel, Pim Griffioen and Ron Zeller, Wolf Gruner, Beate Meyer, Doron Rabinovici, David Silberklang, and Laurien Vastenhout.<sup>18</sup> However, a comprehensive, transnational, and comparative study of “Jewish Councils” across Europe is still lacking.

### *Overcoming Misconceptions about “Jewish Councils”*

A few repeated misconceptions regarding “Jewish Councils” can still be identified to this day both in the academic literature and among the wider, non-academic public. One such example is that the establishment of the “Jewish Councils” can be seen as a new stage in the escalation of the linear path to the so-called Final Solution to the Jewish question. This is an intentionalist interpretation generated with the benefit of hindsight. After all, at the time councils were established, the mass murder of the European Jews, most historians would agree, had not yet been decided.

A second issue is that the term “*Judenrat*” has often been used to describe the organizations imposed on the Jewish communities, whereas German and local authorities used different concepts and terminologies in different geographic locations and at different moments in time. As the contributions of Irina Rebrova and Wolfgang Schneider in this volume show, in occupied parts of the Soviet Union, we can find the terms “Jewish Council,” “Jewish Committee,” “Council of Elders,” “Community Board,” “*Kagal*” (the Russian pronunciation of the Hebrew word *Kahal*, which was the traditional term for the Jewish community board used in many Jewish communities), and “*Idnrat*” (or *Yidnrat*—both in Yiddish) concurrently in Russian sources. In Transnistria under Roma-

18 Jean-Philippe Schreiber and Rudi van Doorslaer, eds., *Les Curateurs du Ghetto. L'Association des Juifs en Belgique sous l'occupation Nazie* (Brussels: Labor, 2004) is a collective volume resulting from a research project; Doron Rabinovici, *Eichmann's Jews: The Jewish Administration of Holocaust Vienna, 1938-1945* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011); David Silberklang, *Gates of Tears: The Holocaust in the Lublin District* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2013); Beate Meyer, *A Fatal Balancing Act: The Dilemma of the Reich Association of Jews in Germany, 1939-1945* (New York: Berghahn, 2013); Wolf Gruner, *The Holocaust in Bohemia and Moravia: Czech Initiatives, German Policies, Jewish Responses* (New York: Berghahn, 2019); Vastenhout, *Between Community and Collaboration*.



nian administration, terms like “*primaria*” (mayor’s officer), “*obshchina*” (community), or “*komitet*” (committee) were used.

Overall, several types of “Jewish Councils” can be identified: 1) the country-wide model in Germany, France, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, and, as we will see, in the Netherlands and Hungary after an initially “local” council was established; 2) the “local” model that was generally in charge of the Jews in one specific town or city. The councils of Warsaw, Łódź, and Białystok in Poland are well known, but similar councils were set up in Transnistria by the Romanian authorities between 1941 and 1944, and in Hungary in 1944 by the German authorities in cooperation with Hungarian officials after the country was occupied by the Wehrmacht.<sup>19</sup> A subcategory of the local type were “Jewish Councils” in labor camps in Poland (*Lagerstätte*) in the early occupation period, and later, between 1943 and 1945, in the “star camp” (*Sternlager*) of the Bergen-Belsen camp system, where Jews who could be exchanged for Germans abroad were incarcerated, or, as shown by Denisa Nešťáková, in labor camps in Slovakia. 3) Territories where one “Jewish Council”—situated in the capital city or in a major regional city—became an intermediary between the Nazi authorities and other, smaller local “Jewish Councils” in the country. This was, for example, the case of Prague for the Protectorate, Vienna for the Ostmark (German-controlled Austria), Amsterdam for the Netherlands, and Sosnowicz in East Upper Silesia (*Ostoberschlesien*) in occupied Poland.

There were also exceptions to these models. In Riga and Minsk, as Andrea Löw shows, in addition to ghettos for the local population, separate ghettos and “Jewish Councils” were established in the same city for German, Austrian, and Czech Jews, respectively, who were deported from the Greater German Reich. Irina Rebrova, in turn, shows that in the German-occupied parts of Soviet Russia, due to the small size of the Jewish population, “Jewish Councils” failed to adhere to the framework to which German authorities aspired. Very little has been written about either of these cases due to a lack of sources.<sup>20</sup>

19 Gali Mir-Tibon, “‘Am I My Brother’s Keeper?’ Jewish Committees in the Ghettos of the Mogilev District and the Romanian authorities in Transnistria, 1941-1944,” in *The Ghetto in Global History, 1500 to the Present*, ed. Wendy Z. Goldman and Joe William Trotter, Jr. (London: Routledge, 2018), 127-47; László Bernát Veszprémy, *Tanáctalanság. A zsidó vezetés Magyarországon és a holokauszt, 1944-1945* [Bereft of a Council: The Jewish Leadership in Hungary and the Holocaust, 1944-1945] (Budapest: Jaffa Kiadó, 2023).

20 For an exception, see: Kiril Feferman, *The Holocaust in the Crimea and the North Caucasus* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2016), and various entries in the Russian-language *Holocaust Encyclopedia* edited by Ilya Altman (2009).

The nature of some “Jewish Councils” changed over time. In the Netherlands, for example, the Jewish Council, whose official name was “the Jewish Council for Amsterdam,” was initially a local organization. But after several months, its authority was expanded to the entire country, with local representations in each province as well as council representatives in towns with a substantial Jewish community. As the contributions of Doron Rabinovici and Jan Láníček show, we can draw parallels between the Netherlands, Austria, and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia in this regard as the jurisdiction of these “Jewish Councils” was initially geographically limited to the capital city, while later on, they supervised provincial and local divisions or “Jewish Councils.” These three councils were also all subordinated to a local Central Office for Jewish Emigration (*Zentralstelle für jüdische Auswanderung*).

A third idea that needs to be refined is that the Polish “*Judenrat*” model was the prototype for the Jewish Council phenomenon. In this context, Heydrich’s *Schnellbrief* from September 21, 1939 and Governor General Hans Frank’s follow-up decree on November 28 are generally referred to as “foundational” orders that led to the emergence of the Jewish Councils. However, as some scholars have shown, and this is elaborated on in the present volume, not only were Jewish representative organizations already established prior to these orders (in local communities in Poland, as well as in Germany—the Reich Association for Jews in Germany; Austria—the *Kultusgemeinde* [Religious Community], and the Protectorate—*Židovská náboženská obec/Israelitische Kultusgemeinde* [Jewish Religious Community]), “Jewish Councils” of a completely different nature were also established in other geographic contexts.<sup>21</sup> This necessitates a non-Polanocentric view. Moreover, as Katarzyna Person emphasizes in her essay, Jewish Councils in occupied Poland were not always established in the context of the ghetto. Instead, in the territories occupied in the autumn of 1939, Jewish Councils usually already functioned prior to the creation of ghettos, and in some ghettos, Jewish Councils were never established. This conclusion confirms Dan Michman’s earlier research.<sup>22</sup>

21 In the context of Poland, Michman has pointed out that SS officials appointed Jewish leaders (*Obmänner*) in various communities shortly after the German occupation of these territories, the first one already on September 6, 1939, i.e., before Heydrich’s infamous *Schnellbrief*. See: Dan Michman, “Why Did Heydrich Write the ‘Schnellbrief’?: A Remark on the Reason and on its Significance,” *Yad Vashem Studies*, no. 32 (2004): 434–37.

22 Dan Michman, *The Emergence of Jewish Ghettos during the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

From the perspective of SS authorities across Europe, the Polish local *Judenrat* was not considered a model that should be imposed everywhere. Instead, the Nazis weighed local conditions—for example, whether Jewish communities had a centralized or decentralized leadership; whether Jews lived concentrated in ghettos; and whether there were local government authorities that wished to collaborate in the establishment and supervision of the councils—and Jewish representative organizations were imposed accordingly. The nature and structure of the “Jewish Councils,” and the decision to impose such organizations in the first place also depended on timing and geography. One of the main initial tasks of the “Jewish Councils” in Vienna and Prague was to support the emigration of the Jews when this was still possible, and when it was in fact the preferred solution of the Nazis (until autumn 1941). Such concerns did not exist further to the east, where the main aim was the segregation, concentration, and, eventually, the deportation of Jews.

We can therefore question whether there existed a “typical Nazi-style *Judenrat*,” as Ștefan Ionescu asks in his contribution on the Jewish Center in Romania in this volume. The fact that the Jewish Center tried to help Jews by, among other things, petitioning for their rights and distributing aid to impoverished community members does not mean that it cannot be considered a typical “*Judenrat*.” Most of the original “Jewish Councils” tried to slow down the progress of persecution and also established social and welfare services for destitute Jews. Apart from the fact that this volume shows that “a typical *Judenrat*” indeed did not exist, we can also establish that the numerous forms of support offered by “Jewish Councils” across Nazi Europe require us to finally move away from the idea that the organizations were merely instruments in the hands of the Germans, aiding in the process of identification, registration, despoliation, and deportation. Instead, as the contributions of Jan Láníček, Wolfgang Schneider, Laurien Vastenhout, Agnieszka Gawlas-Zajaczkowska, and others show, “Jewish Councils” carried out many social welfare tasks that were no longer provided by their governments and local non-Jewish authorities, such as health care, financial support, and education. Jewish Councils in ghettos in Poland also carried out municipal tasks such as sanitation, street cleaning, and policing. Above all, as most authors in one way or the other emphasize, the “Jewish Council” leadership across Europe was caught between their desire to aid Jewish communities and increasing pressure to fulfil the orders of German officials (and their local collaborators).

Another (fourth) established notion that needs to be overcome, and this relates to Holocaust historiography more broadly, is that there is a

tendency to speak generally of “the Germans” or “the Nazis” who established and oversaw the councils. This deflects attention from the individuals who represented specific institutions within the Nazi (or local) bureaucracy and were responsible for establishing and supervising these organizations in each locality. This is in line with the functionalist or structuralist view of the so-called Final Solution, especially its initiation and implementation. It is necessary to differentiate between these individuals and institutions in order to hold them accountable. Besides, German authorities were not in all cases (exclusively) responsible for the day-to-day functioning of these councils. This volume shows that even though they were generally established on the initiative of (or pressure from) SS authorities, some “Jewish Councils” were directly supervised by local (non-German) authorities. In Romania, for example, the Jewish Center was directly overseen by a Government Appointee for Resolving the Jewish Question (later the Commissioner for Jewish Affairs). In Slovakia, local (non-German) authorities, directly subordinate to President Jozef Tiso and in coordination with the German Advisor for Jewish Affairs Dieter Wisliceny, oversaw the establishment and day-to-day functioning of the Jewish Center. In both Belgium and France, local (non-German) authorities were similarly involved in the supervision of the “Councils.” In Vichy France, the General Commissariat for Jewish Questions headed by General Commissioner Xavier Vallat was responsible for the establishment and supervision of the *Union Générale des Israélites de France* (UGIF). In some cases, as Gawlas-Zajackowska’s article on Kraków shows, it is not possible to offer a definitive answer to the question of who specifically was responsible for the council’s establishment as testimonies regarding this issue vary, and no clear official document discussing this issue exists.

### *Less-Explored Territories*

This volume includes contributions on “Jewish Councils” that have been hitherto largely unexplored. As Andrea Löw rightly mentions in her chapter, the study of “Jewish Councils” is characterized by a persistent focus on specific councils about which a plethora of sources is available (including those in Warsaw, Theresienstadt, and Amsterdam), whereas the histories of other councils (especially the numerous local councils in smaller towns and cities across eastern Europe) remain largely untold, in part because of the scarcity of sources. But as the contributions by Andrea Löw, Irina Rebrova, Katarzyna Person, and Wolfgang Schneider

show, even with limited sources, some aspects of the histories of these “Jewish Councils” and their leaders can be reconstructed. This is necessary to provide better insight into both German or local authorities’ intentions concerning these organizations and Jewish responses to them. Furthermore, examining new case studies also produces new answers, as well as generates new questions and calls for new approaches.

For example, a persistent topic in the historiography of “Jewish Councils” is whether these organizations can be considered continuities or breaks from prewar social structures. Löw’s study shows that practical reality and coincidence, rather than carefully considered choices about who could best represent the Jews, defined who would take up the leadership and membership of the German “Jewish Councils” in Riga and Minsk. That is, Jewish leaders were appointed based on who the Gestapo assigned to be leaders on transports from the Reich (*Transportführer*).<sup>23</sup> These “Jewish Council” leaders could, therefore, not build on prewar authority, social structure, knowledge, or relationships. The situation of these German “Jewish Councils” was extraordinary on many levels because their functionaries had to fulfill the same tasks as other local Jewish Councils in occupied Europe while operating in an environment entirely unknown to them. Also, in the occupied territories of Russia, people were frequently appointed to be “Jewish Elders” only because they knew German and, thus, the occupying forces could communicate with them.

In his discussion of the Jewish leaders in Transnistria, another under-researched region, Wolfgang Schneider takes a theoretical approach to the concepts of “leadership” and “headship,” both of which have been used to describe the position of the Jewish functionaries who took up leading roles in the councils. He questions Dan Michman’s use of “headship” in the context of the “Jewish Councils” and proposes instead the notion of “legitimacy.” Scheider’s contribution offers a unique theoretical perspective that allows us to move away from the discussion of councils’ continuity or break with prewar social structures. In doing so, he argues that the legitimacy of Jewish chairmen or Elders depended on other factors including whether different groups were represented in the Jewish administration; whether they spoke the language of the occupier; whether they had charisma; and whether they were successful in providing material aid to the Jewish communities.

23 For those who have focused on the level of (dis)continuity with prewar social structures in the Jewish community, see, for example: Weiss, “Jewish Leadership in Occupied Poland,” 335-65; Vastenhout, *Between Community and Collaboration*, 92-141; and the contributions of Doron Rabinovici and Jan Láníček in this volume.

In addition to the aforementioned case studies, little is known about the “Jewish Councils”—presumably hundreds of them—in the occupied territories of the Soviet Union, especially places further to the east and southeast of Russian territory. As the absence of official wartime records has made it difficult to investigate the role of these organizations, Irina Rebrova’s contribution on the “Jewish Councils” in the occupied zones of the RSFSR, one of the fifteen Soviet Republics, is particularly valuable. Based first and foremost on interviews and the documentation of the Extraordinary State Commission (ChGK), which includes information about the establishment of the ghettos and Jewish life inside them, Rebrova has been able to reconstruct the position of the “Jewish Council” leaders. She shows that compared to other Soviet republics and eastern European countries, the role of the “Jewish Councils” in Russia was minimal.

Apart from little-explored geographic territories, there are also thematic approaches that deserve more attention. While most authors focus on the persistent question regarding “Jewish Council” leaderships’ level of cooperation or collaboration with German authorities, Denisa Nešťáková instead focuses her contribution on the notion of resistance. In line with the developing historiography on “Jewish resistance,” which generally has come to include a wide variety of acts that opposed the Nazi goal to destroy European Jewry and their culture, she argues that the Jewish Center’s development of a public health system in Slovak labor camps can be considered a daring act of resistance against the policies of both Nazi and Slovak authorities.<sup>24</sup> Although scholars have employed different understandings of the concept of “Jewish resistance,” we must establish that given the legal nature and function of “Jewish Councils,” it is particularly interesting to examine how Jewish functionaries attempted to act against the interests of German authorities.<sup>25</sup> In this context, Jan Láníček also raises the question of Jewish resistance in Prague while simultaneously acknowledging the limits of Jewish leaders’ efforts to resist Nazi policies.

24 Yehuda Bauer, “Jewish Resistance: Myth or Reality?,” in *Rethinking the Holocaust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 119-42; Dan Michman, *Holocaust Historiography: A Jewish Perspective. Conceptualizations, Terminology, Approaches and Fundamental Issues* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2003), 217-48; Robert Rozett, “Jewish Resistance,” in *The Historiography of the Holocaust*, ed. Dan Stone (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 341-63.

25 See also: Vastenhout, *Between Community and Collaboration*, 192-242.

## *A Pan-European Perspective on “Jewish Councils”*

In his 1975 interview with Lanzmann, Benjamin Murmelstein characterized the position of Jewish leaders under the Nazis as situated between the hammer and anvil. They were pressured by the SS on the one hand, and, on the other, by the wider Jewish communities they were forced to represent. While the different positions of Jewish leaders force us to differentiate them according to their room for maneuver—those in western Europe, for example, could resign from their position without being punished, whereas the refusal to comply in eastern Europe often led to deportation or direct murder—scholars have indeed pointed to the “Catch 22” Jewish leaders confronted across Nazi Europe. We can identify key similarities in the case studies included in this volume. These include—to identify a few—the fact that “Jewish Councils” were all established to unite and represent Jewish communities; that pressure from their Nazi superiors increased during the war; and that Jewish leaders’ room for maneuver significantly decreased when the mass deportations commenced. Both Andrea Löw and Philipp Dinkelaker refer to Lawrence Langer’s notion of “choiceless choices,” that is, council leaders continuously had to reassess their choices, only to find out that, indeed, their options were very limited and eventually almost non-existent.<sup>26</sup> Ferenc Laczó uses Primo Levi’s concept of the “grey zone” to define and describe the morally ambiguous position taken by the Hungarian “Jewish Council” during the war.<sup>27</sup> From some of the articles it becomes clear that Jewish leaders took strikingly similar approaches—“buying time,” “delaying,” “race against time,” and “procrastination” to the extent possible—even using the exact same wording to describe their policies.

This volume, furthermore, shows that working for the “Jewish Councils,” even though it supposedly offered (temporary) protection from deportation and therefore “safety,” placed Jewish functionaries in a vulnerable position. An oft-repeated claim is that Jewish leaders acted in their own self-interest and sought to work for these organizations to protect themselves and their families. Yet numerous examples show that precisely because these Jewish functionaries and their whereabouts were known to German authorities and they interacted daily with the Nazis,

26 Lawrence L. Langer, “The Dilemma of Choice in the Death Camps,” *Centerpoint: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 4, no. 1 (1980): 53-59.

27 Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017).

they were easy targets, especially when German authorities sought to retaliate against or create chaos in the Jewish community.

Löw's article shows that members of the German "Jewish Council" in Minsk were murdered even before mass deportations began. Gawlas-Zajackowska demonstrates that the chairman of the second Jewish Council in Kraków Artur Rosenzweig was deported to Belzec together with his family when German authorities were dissatisfied with the number of people assembled for the first transport. Láníček's article offers a unique example of how the Gestapo threatened Jewish leaders on a day-to-day basis through a so-called *Sterbetafel*, a publicly displayed overview of the Jewish leaders of the Prague Jewish Religious Community. SS-Sturmbannführer Karl Rahm tore off two photos from this board when the registration of Jews was not carried out as effectively as he wanted, which sealed their fate. Similarly, Jewish Elder Paul Eppstein was shot shortly before the start of a series of transports of around 18,400 Jews from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Threatening "Jewish Council" leaders and members was a common practice.

These examples all show that the slightest hint or suspicion of non-cooperation could endanger the lives of Jewish functionaries. Although Marmelstein's claim that he had been the only survivor among Jewish Elders was incorrect, the number of survivors among the hundreds, perhaps thousands, who took up leadership positions was dramatically low. They were uncomfortable witnesses, and even those who fully cooperated with the SS eventually shared the fate of other victims. The murder of Mordechai Rumkowski of Łódź, Moshe Merin of Sosnowiec, and Jacob Gens of Vilno, the most notorious among those accused of collaboration with the Nazis, confirms the hopeless position of Jewish leaders.

Several authors in their chapters also focus on the way ordinary members of the Jewish community perceived the "Jewish Councils" and their leaders. For many, leaders became symbols of compliance and cooperation with the Nazis, and for this reason, members had difficulties comprehending their leaders' conduct. Ionescu uses several diaries to show that their authors perceived Jewish leaders in Romania in a predominantly negative light. These observations are confirmed by Láníček for the Protectorate, although he also shows that some of the Jews recognized the unenviable position of the "Jewish Councils." In the Netherlands, the Jewish Council was often referred to as "*Joods verraad*" (Jewish treason), which sounds almost identical to "*Joodse raad*," the official name of the council.



The murky question of collaboration is further problematized by contributions that highlight the postwar investigations of the “Jewish Councils,” both those initiated by Jewish communities (so-called “honor courts”) and special investigations carried out by state authorities. In some cases, as Ferenc Laczó shows, Jewish leaders were judged according to unrealistic standards. A special court held Ernő Munkácsi—who had never even formally been a member of the Central Jewish Council in Budapest—responsible for the mass murder of the Jews in Hungary. Quite different was the situation in Germany, where, as Dinkelaker argues, a Jewish Honor Court seemed to have maintained double standards in their assessment of the cooperation of Jews with Nazi authorities. Because the Honor Court was partly composed of functionaries who had worked for the “Jewish Council” (the Reich Association of Jews in Germany), they exonerated their former co-workers. But, as Dinkelaker shows, individuals who had engaged in similar acts of collaboration outside the auspices of the Reich Association (so-called *Greifer*) were punished. Honor courts and other forms of transitional justice is a topic that has recently gained more traction among historians thanks to major studies by Dan Porat, Laura Jockusch, and Gabriel N. Finder, among others.<sup>28</sup> All these studies emphasize the need to do comparative research on the relations between Nazi administrators and Jewish leaders and Jewish responses to these during the war, as well as on how Jews attempted to rebuild their devastated communities in the postwar period.

Altogether, the Jewish Council phenomenon to this day remains a sensitive topic in the history of the Holocaust. Even though the subject has been covered extensively in the existing literature, there are many councils that have, heretofore, received little or no attention. Comprehensive studies on the form and function of “Jewish Councils” in

28 Laura Jockusch and Gabriel N. Finder, eds., *Jewish Honor Courts: Revenge, Retribution, and Reconciliation in Europe and Israel after the Holocaust* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2015); Dan Porat, *Bitter Reckoning: Israel Tries Holocaust Survivors as Nazi Collaborators* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2019); Dan Michman, “Kontroversen über die Judenräte in der Jüdischen Welt, 1945–2005. Das Ineinandergreifen von öffentlichem Gedächtnis und Geschichtsschreibung,” in *Der Judenrat von Białystok. Dokumente aus dem Archiv des Białystoker Ghettos 1941–1943*, ed. Freia Anders, Katrin Stoll, and Karsten Wilke (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2010), 311–18. For the case of Rabbi Tzvi Koretz in Salonica, see: Giorgos Antoniou and A. Dirk Moses, “Introduction: The Holocaust in Greece,” in *The Holocaust in Greece*, ed. Giorgos Antoniou and A. Dirk Moses (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 4; Minna Rozen, “Jews and Greeks Remember their Past: The Political Career of Zvi Koretz (1933–1943),” *Jewish Social Studies* 12, no.1 (2005): 111–66.

Nazi-dominated Europe are, moreover, often outdated. This volume addresses these problems. We furthermore hope that this collection will encourage scholars to examine (from a comparative perspective) the many “Jewish Councils” that are still un(der)researched and find new analytical frameworks and methodological approaches to investigate this complex history.