

Abstract:

The Rescue and Survival of Jews in Occupied Western Europe – A Reappraisal

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Jewish rescue and survival in Western Europe during the Holocaust period has been discussed from a number of different perspectives, and there are many salient factors that have been suggested to explain the widely differing mortality rates between France, Belgium and the Netherlands. These include the differences in the structures of German rule, the nature of the Jewish communities involved, and the national and regional circumstances of Nazi occupation. A comparative examination of self-help and rescue in these countries as one issue in this analysis does suggest that the ability of Jews to be assisted in hiding, or to hide themselves, was conditioned by a number of factors that have been overlooked or underplayed in previous studies. These were the traditions of rescue and help to travellers; the persistence of independent Jewish organisations; the incidences of co-operation between Jewish and non-Jewish organisations; the nuancing of responses to persecution by Christian leaders, and the role of Church and social leadership in particular communities.

To put this in context, it could be argued that the existing historiography of rescue has served to skew our understanding of how Jews managed to escape the ‘final solution’. There are, of course, the many autobiographies, testimonies and writings of the survivors themselves but in most cases, such narratives profess only a limited knowledge of the wider context of the survival they record. Thus they highlight the role of the known individual rather than the unknown supporting network. In identifying ‘Righteous among the Nations’ Yad Vashem has served to bring non-Jewish help to the forefront of discussions on Jewish survival during the Holocaust, but it has fostered the publication of rescuer narratives with little attention being paid to the geographical or political context in which the rescues took place, or any wider analysis for the explanations behind them save for some broad categorisations. This trend has been accentuated by the use righteous rescuers as the basis for sociological studies on the origins of altruism, and on the highlighting of Christian motivations behind particular acts of rescue. More recent works have compared and contrasted behaviour patterns in an attempt to draw overarching conclusions about the impact of Christian belief and moral values on this behaviour as well as analyses of altruism. This concentration on non-Jews as a factor in rescue has also served to mean that Jewish resistance in local and national contexts has been considered separately and the links between the two have been understated.