

RIGHT TO REPLY

To our readers

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In its issue of December 2012, the *Journal of Belgian History* published a critical essay by Lieven Saerens, analysing Insa Meinen's book on the persecution of the Jews during WWII in Belgium¹. The German historian, in turn, wished to give us her point of view. We hereby present to our readers her right to reply.

This debate is certainly far from over. There were also other critical reactions to Meinen's book². As Lieven Saerens has already pointed out, historical research on this topic started later in Belgium than other European countries, but the last 30 years have witnessed a growing number of relevant publications. However, up to the present – as the reaction published here clearly indicates – the topic continues to elicit intense discussion. And beyond historiography, the issue of the responsibilities of Belgians and Germans, and their influence on the persecution and deportation of Jews, continues to feed public controversy. In 2007, CEGESOMA produced a substantial book (in 2 volumes) entitled "*La Belgique docile*"³. It was the result of an official request by the Belgian Senate, and as such its focus and research angle centered on the attitudes and responsibilities of Belgian authorities. These research results have also been made available in a book by Anne Roekens, aimed at a more general readership⁴. Unfortunately, none of

the above-mentioned volumes is available in English. Both the book by Insa Meinen and *La Belgique docile* foreground elements related to the attitudes of the German occupier and the Belgian authorities, as well as the survival strategies of Jewish people themselves. But today, we are far removed from a consensus, and new research is underway. In its role as a platform for modern and contemporary history, the JBH will of course follow these ongoing debates and return to any new scholarly results. Pending this, we think it important to publish here the reaction of German historian Insa Meinen.

1. See JBH, XLII, 2012, 4, pp. 200–217 (also accessible online at <http://www.journalbelgianhistory.be/fr/author/lieven-saerens>). 2. See NICO WOUTERS, "La Shoah en Belgique : un *Historikerstreit* belge", in *La Revue nouvelle*, June 2013, (a freely accessible digital version is available at www.journalbelgianhistory) and PIM GRIFFIOEN'S REVIEW, "The Shoah in Belgium", in *Yad Vashem Studies*, 39/1, 2011. 3. RUDI VAN DOORSLAER (ed.), EMMANUEL DEBRUYNE, FRANK SEBERECHTS, NICO WOUTERS & LIEVEN SAERENS, *La Belgique docile. Les autorités belges et la persécution des Juifs en Belgique durant la Seconde Guerre mondiale*, Bruxelles, Éditions Luc Pire, 2007. 4. ANNE ROEKENS, *La Belgique et la persécution des Juifs*, Bruxelles, SOMA-CEGES/Renaissance du Livre, 2010.

Why the Belgian Perspective Cannot Account for the Holocaust : A Response to Lieven Saerens' Critique of My Book on the 'Shoah' in Belgium⁵

Insa Meinen

The recent English-language issue of the *Journal of Belgian History* featured a review of my book on the *Shoah* in Belgium by Flemish historian Lieven Saerens⁶. A response may be of interest, as the disagreement between Saerens and myself touches upon questions that are fundamental to the historiography of the Holocaust. As far as the crux of the matter is concerned, most of our differences of opinion can, in my view, be expressed in terms of a single question : is our topic 'the Belgians and the persecution of the Jews' or do we want to write a history of the *Shoah* in Belgium? Thus it is no accident that our quarrel turns upon *La Belgique docile*, the research report on the Belgian authorities' role in the persecution of the Jews that was compiled some years ago by the Centre for Historical Research and Documentation on War and Contemporary Society (Cegesoma) in Brussels⁷. In what follows, I will show that some conclusions drawn in this research report are not tenable. This aside, my response limits itself to a discussion of the major criticisms formulated by Saerens; I pass over some contentious issues and minor errors, particularly as length reasons made it necessary to shorten the present text.

Some positive remarks aside, Saerens' review is characterised by the fact that he presents the main findings of my book so reductively as to render them unrecognisable; at the same time, he puts forward an entire catalogue of allegedly absent themes that are not the object of my book. He also attributes claims to me that I have never made, and intentions that are pure invention. Where he dispenses with counter-arguments altogether, the reviewer criticises my 'rhetoric' or resorts to polemical formulations.

Even in the opening sentences with which Saerens prefaces his critique of my publication, one false assumption follows another : "In her study, Meinen starts by saying that she regrets the fact that in Belgian historiography the cooperation of Belgians in the Jewish persecution has gained centre stage. According to her, this does great injustice to the history of the Judeocide in Belgium. This is why she aims her focus on the acts of the Germans, all the most because, according to Meinen, 'there has hardly been any attention to this in German research literature until recently'" (Saerens, p. 202). Apart from the half sentence quoted at the end – a sentence found, incidentally, not in the introduction but in the concluding passage – not one of the claims listed can be found in my book. I have neither lamented the development of Belgian historiography nor identified any major injustice within it. And I am far from justifying a focus on the occupiers by invoking moralising considerations or the

5. Translated from the German by Max Henninger. 6. INSA MEINEN, *La Shoah en Belgique*, traduit de l'allemand par Sylvaine Gillot-Soreau, Waterloo, La Renaissance du livre, 2012 (original German edition published by Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft in Darmstadt, 2009; Dutch translation published by De Bezige Bij in Antwerp, 2011) – cited below as : Meinen; LIEVEN SAERENS, "Insa Meinen : the Persecution of the Jews in Belgium through a German Lens", in *JBH*, vol. XLII (2012), 4, p. 200-217 (cited below as : Saerens). 7. RUDI VAN DOORSLAER, EMMANUEL DEBRUYNE, FRANK SEBERECHTS & NICO WOUTERS, with the cooperation of Lieven Saerens, *La Belgique docile. Les autorités belges et la persécution des Juifs en Belgique pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale*, Brussels, La Renaissance du livre, 2007; Dutch edition published by Lannoo in Tiel, 2007 (cited below as : *La Belgique docile*).

fact that German Holocaust scholars have until recently displayed virtually no interest in the actions of the Germans in Belgium.

Instead, I begin from the key question of how the Jews that the occupying power deported to Auschwitz were arrested. In my view, the collaboration of the Belgian authorities was less significant than the available scholarly work suggests. As a matter of fact, the third chapter of my book, which is essentially based on an essay first published in 2005, focuses explicitly on German administrative organs and civil servants. But this is by no means true of the book as a whole.

The Arrest of the Jews in Belgium

Why is the question of how the Jews were arrested so important to analysis of the 'final solution of the Jewish question' in Belgium? The German authorities relocated the genocide to the Eastern periphery of the European territories that they occupied. But it was on the territory of occupied Belgium that they committed the crime that immediately preceded the murder of almost 25,000 men, women and children from Belgium as a *conditio sine qua non*: in order to deport the Jews to the site of their death, the German police first needed to seize them and place them in the transit camp at Mechelen. In doing so, and by its own admission, the German police encountered considerable difficulties.

Just as in other countries, and for obvious reasons, historians have focused on the mass round-ups and other major arrest operations of 1942. However, a critical verification of

the relevant figures that I have undertaken on the basis of the findings of Belgian scholars forces a reassessment of the scale of the major arrest operations and shows that of the total of 25,000 Jews deported to Auschwitz by the occupation authorities between 1942 and 1944, more than half were arrested individually or in small groups⁸. This is a remarkable finding, insofar as the situation in Belgium was completely different from those in France and the Netherlands, where major arrest operations were the rule. Moreover, conducting many thousands of small arrests presupposes countless initiatives and individual actions. The question therefore arises of who the responsible actors were. How did the German police manage to take more than 13,000 women, men and children to the transit camp in Mechelen without conducting major round-ups?

With regard to the arrest of the Jews, the most important actors in Belgium by far were the offices of the *Sicherheitspolizei* and the *Sicherheitsdienst* (Sipo-SD). This is hardly surprising, as they were the outposts of the *Reich* Security Main Office (*Reichssicherheitshauptamt*), the Berlin central office for terror and the murder of the Jews, which was subordinate to the head of the German police, *Reichsführer-SS* Heinrich Himmler. But the civil servants of the Sipo-SD were far from being the only perpetrators. Rather, they cooperated with other German offices; some of these belonged to the *Wehrmacht*, others to the *Reich* Finance Administration. For several years, emphasis has been placed, within international Holocaust scholarship, on the

8. Even during the period of the mass arrests, between August and October 1942, when two thirds of all victims were deported, the Germans arrested more than 38 per cent of their victims individually or in small groups. Saerens appears to have overlooked this finding when he states, erroneously, that my research on individual arrests is concerned with the period after October 1942 (SAERENS, p. 207).

understaffing of the German occupation apparatuses, or of those offices within them that were concerned with the persecution of the Jews. In fact, in contemporary German reports, there is no lack of references to limited personnel. Of course, such claims did not necessarily correspond to reality. For in Belgium, the Germans were able to conduct two major and several minor round-ups in Brussels without any support from the local police; they also conducted the round-up in Liège without Belgian law enforcement agencies. One needs to take into account that the German authorities disposed of a number of police bodies that contributed to the arrest of Jews. In addition to this, in the case of individual arrests, the Sipo-SD required a relatively small number of agents; such arrests were conducted by means of small commandos.

In their anti-Jewish investigations and arrests, almost all German police organs relied on informal helpers and collaborators (Belgian and Jewish police informants or auxiliary police forces). Saerens' insinuation that I ignore the denunciation of the Jews by the Belgian population is not accurate⁹. Here, I can only emphasise again the problem that scholarship is faced with, namely that we lack valid sources for information about the authors and, more importantly, the scale of denunciations of Jews. In contrast with Saerens (p. 212), I do not believe that a percentage figure cited by the Flemish collaborator

Lauterborn in his post-war interrogation can be considered a reliable indication of the number of denunciations, or indeed provide historical research with any valuable insight. In reality, Saerens' own publication, to which he refers in this context, shows as much as my book that where this important question is concerned, we are unable to discover very much at all¹⁰.

With regard to members of Belgian collaborating organisations that participated in the arrest of Jews, more source materials are available. We even have access to the communications of the 'Rex' police force at the time. My book features several examples of participation by Rex members and records more arrests than had hitherto been noted in the scholarly literature, although this does not alter the fact that Rex's role in the preparation of the 'final solution' was, on the whole, marginal¹¹. Saerens does not mention these findings; instead, he regrets the absence of a discussion of the Rex press in my book (Saerens, p. 213).

It has been known for some time that members of the Flemish SS played a far more important role in the arrest of Jews than members of Rex. Saerens has elaborated on the profile of these individuals in detail, and described their activities in Antwerp and its environs. My book is the first to discuss in greater detail the participation of a contingent of Flemish SS members in individual arrests

9. SAERENS, p. 203. Cf. MEINEN, p. 175, 194, 247, note 70, p. 252, note 55, and p. 157, 160. Moreover, and contrary to Saerens' claim (SAERENS, p. 213), I have not written that calls for denunciation were to be found *exclusively* in the publications of the *Volksverwerking* organisation. **10.** Cf. LIEVEN SAERENS, *De Jodenjagers van de Vlaamse SS*, Tielt, Lannoo, 2007, p. 188-89, 194. Saerens' criticism that I ignore the role Belgian customs officials played in the arrest of Jews (SAERENS, p. 212) follows a similar pattern. It would be useful to know what hitherto unpublished facts Saerens has in mind or believes he can investigate. I am not familiar with a single reference to Jews being arrested by Belgian customs officials. **11.** MEINEN, p. 175, 179, 196, 253, note 63.

in Brussels, and the context of those arrests¹². Saerens appears not to have taken note of this; instead, he remarks critically that, in contrast with my putatively erroneous account, the Flemish SS members officially held executive powers (Saerens, p. 213). Even if he should be right in making this claim, there remains the crucial and conspicuous fact that as a rule, the occupying authorities did not allow Flemish SS members to arrest Jews independently of German or Belgian members of German offices. This is true of the operation in Brussels I have examined; it also emerges from Saerens' own account of the arrests in Antwerp¹³. This fact is an important indication that – like police informers – the Flemish SS members literally acted as auxiliary forces aiding the German perpetrators. Thus the responsibility of the Germans is not to be overlooked.

Saerens decidedly opposes this historiographical distinction, and in doing so he largely dispenses with matter-of-fact arguments. Instead, he writes : 'The responsibility of the Germans : this is the dogmatic mantra which recurs throughout Meinen's entire body of research. At the same time, through an ambiguous game of words, the responsibility of those Belgians who actively supported the hunt for Jews in swept under the rug' (Saerens, p. 213-14). The reviewer fails to recognise the significance of this issue when he takes my nuanced approach to be a 'dogmatic mantra' or a 'game of words'. I have not in the least negated the responsibility of the Belgian collaborators; their participation increased the number of victims, as I emphasise¹⁴. On the contrary, I have defined their role as precisely

as possible, as is essential when analysing a crime involving multiple actors.

When one compares the division of labour in the persecution measures that preceded the deportation of the Jews from Western Europe, important differences strike the eye. In occupied France, the Germans were able to rely, for a time, on the Vichy police conducting the arrests of Jews almost autonomously, within the framework of collaboration between German and French authorities; and in the Netherlands, the Dutch administrative officials of the so-called *Kolonne Henneicke*, which was subordinate to a German office, but operated without German participation, arrested thousands of Jews, for example¹⁵. The participation of the Flemish SS collaborators differed significantly from both cases. In Belgium, the occupation authorities were far more concerned to remain at the helm themselves. This is reflected in the typical German-Belgian arrest commandos, in which command functions were exercised by the Germans¹⁶. The reason these differentiations are so important is that they show that the occupiers succeeded, under very diverse conditions in each of the Western European countries, in implementing the 'final solution'.

The Belgian Authorities

Far from focusing exclusively on the German occupiers, my book also features an overall assessment of the Belgian authorities' collaboration in the arrest of the Jews. Saerens does not mention that mine is the first such overall assessment. Instead, he points out that Dutch historians Pim Griffioen and Ron Zeller arrive

12. *Idem*, p. 192. 13. *Ibidem*; SAERENS, Jodenjagers (as cited in note 5), pp. 48, 153 and following, 186, 188. 14. MEINEN, p. 186. 15. SERGE KLARSFELD, *Vichy-Auschwitz. La "solution finale" de la question juive en France*, Paris; Fayard, 2001 [*La Shoah en France*, vol. 1 (original editions : 1983, 1985)]; AD VAN LIEMPT, *Hitler's Bounty Hunters. The Betrayal of Jews*, Oxford, Berg, 2005. 16. MEINEN, p. 187, 191-192.

at the same conclusion as I do. He does not mention that the passages of their dissertation that deal with Belgium are essentially based on the available secondary literature and were published two years after the German edition of my book, whose findings have informed their work (Saerens, p. 207).

All summons, arrests and extraditions considered, about one fifth of the Jews deported to Auschwitz from Belgium ended up at the mercy of the German *Sipo-SD* with the aid of Belgian administrative and police authorities¹⁷. Thus the role of the Belgian police in the run-up to the deportations differed markedly from that of the French police, which arrested the majority of the Jews deported from France. Since only a minority of the victims in Belgium were arrested by the Belgian police, cooperation between the German and the Belgian authorities was, in my view, not the *decisive* factor in the deportation of the Jews.

By contrast, the fact that the number of registered Jews from Antwerp who fell victim to the Holocaust is disproportionately high by comparison with those from Brussels is traced back by Saerens (and, following Saerens' dissertation, by Maxime Steinberg, the pioneer of Belgian Holocaust research who passed away four years ago) primarily to Antwerp's administration and police; Steinberg views the participation of the municipal police in the Antwerp round-ups of the summer of 1942,

which he compares to the largest Paris round-up, as the main cause¹⁸.

Clearly, the participation of Antwerp's police force contributed to the large number of victims from Antwerp's Jewish community. And in much the same way, the refusal of the Brussels police to participate in the arrest of Jews contributed to the comparatively high chances of survival of Jews in Brussels, as Saerens now writes in his review. But the role of the Antwerp authorities can hardly be the decisive factor to explain why the proportion of the registered Jewish community deported to Auschwitz from Antwerp was far higher than the proportion deported from Brussels, as Saerens and Steinberg were still claiming in their publications a few years ago. Less than 11 per cent of the victims of the *Shoah* in Belgium were arrested during the major round-ups in Antwerp. Even if one takes into account that the Antwerp authorities were heavily involved in the deportation of Jewish forced labourers to northern France, many of whom the Germans deported to Auschwitz a short time later, it remains beyond doubt that only a minority of the victims ended up in the custody of the German police with the aid of Antwerp offices. With regard to this point, Saerens now agrees with me in his review¹⁹.

That the significance of the Belgian police should not be overestimated is confirmed by new research findings on the divergent numbers

17. One should speak of this occurring 'with the aid of' the Belgian authorities, since in many cases – such as that of the first round-up in Antwerp – the Belgian administration or police did not conduct arrests on its own, but rather assisted the German police. Apparently, Saerens does not consider such a distinction necessary; with reference to my book, he erroneously states that 4,300 Jews were arrested by the Belgian authorities (p. 207). 18. LIEVEN SAERENS, *Vreemdelingen in een wereldstad. Een geschiedenis van Antwerpen en zijn joodse bevolking (1880-1944)*, Tielt, Lannoo, 2000, p. 747; MAXIME STEINBERG, *La Persécution des Juifs en Belgique (1940-1945)*, Brussels, Éditions Complexe, 2004, p. 13, 24-25. 19. When he goes on to claim that no one has ever argued otherwise (SAERENS, p. 207), this is true insofar as he has never made any effort to present a comprehensive overview that relates the number of arrests by the Antwerp police to the overall number of arrests, establishing the quantitative relations between the two.

of victims from the major cities Brussels and Antwerp, where virtually the entire Jewish population resided. According to Saerens' calculations, 65 per cent of Antwerp's and 37 per cent of Brussels' total Jewish population were deported. In my book, I suggest verifying this finding on the basis of additional sources, as it is questionable whether the registry used by Saerens, one compiled by the compulsory Association of Jews in Belgium (AJB), can be considered representative of the situation in Brussels. The registry has been preserved only in a very incomplete form; the original files were probably used by the Sipo-SD when conducting arrests.

I have now undertaken a comparison with the 'registries of Jews' (*Judenregister*), which were compiled by the Belgian municipalities on German orders and have been preserved. The results largely confirm the proportions stated by Saerens. Moreover, I was able, on the basis of both sources, which cover 88 per cent of all victims, to determine for the first time how many of the Jews deported from Belgium resided in Brussels and how many in Antwerp. From this survey it emerges that about 44 per cent were registered in Brussels and roughly 48 per cent in Antwerp²⁰. In other words, German police forces only arrested slightly fewer Jews in Brussels than in Antwerp. These findings do not alter the fact that the risk of falling prey to the Germans was far higher in Antwerp than in Brussels,

but they are nevertheless remarkable. For in Brussels – and I return to this point below – the Belgian police was not available to assist in arrests of Jews.

Were Antwerp's Authorities Indirectly Responsible?

Saerens (p. 208) writes: "Meinen fails to place the attitude of the Antwerp police in a broader picture". To be sure, what the reviewer means by a 'broader picture' is nothing to do with who arrested the victims; he wishes rather to demonstrate that Antwerp's authorities were indirectly responsible even for the arrests they did not themselves conduct. I do not wish to deny that the political climate in the city on the Scheldt probably affected the German decision to conduct most mass arrests there²¹. The two hypotheses on the Antwerp authorities' indirect responsibility for the murder of the Jews that Saerens has formulated, hypotheses he reiterates in his review and which he argues I ought to have taken into account, are however far from convincing. Why do I not think these two assumptions are valid?

One of Saerens' two hypotheses concerns the assistance provided to Jews. Since the leading representatives of the Antwerp authorities neither called for assistance to the Jews nor acted in such a way as to inspire such assistance, they were, according to Saerens, partly responsible for the fact that fewer cases

20. INSA MEINEN & AHLRICH MEYER, assisted by Jörg Paulsen, *Verfolgt von Land zu Land. Jüdische Flüchtlinge in Westeuropa 1938-1944*, Paderborn, Ferdinand Schöningh, 2013, p. 305, notes 56, 57. One must assume that the registries used inadequately reflect the migration of Jews from Antwerp to Brussels, such that the share of deportees made up of Jews from Brussels was probably greater, and that made up by Jews from Antwerp smaller. Moreover, while it is true that arrests did not always occur in the arrested person's place of residence, we know for certain that the number of Jews arrested in Antwerp was not higher than that of the victims registered there. After all, the Jews fled from Antwerp to Brussels – not the other way around.

21. Cf. MAXIME STEINBERG, *Un Pays occupé et ses Juifs. Belgique entre France et Pays-Bas*, Gerpennes, Quorum, 1999, p. 91-96; SAERENS, *Vreemdelingen* (as cited in note 13), p. 747; MEINEN, p. 184-185.

of assistance on the part of the non-Jewish population are documented for Antwerp than for Brussels. It may be secondary that I believe the causal relationship between the authorities responsible and other residents posited by Saerens is questionable, and that international research has, in the 25 years since the publication of the literature cited by Saerens, rendered our view of the motives of those providing assistance significantly more nuanced.

First and foremost, Saerens' conjecture is nothing to do with the issue I discuss : that of the forces that participated in the crime and of the role played by the collaboration between German and Belgian authorities. It appears necessary to point out that there is a fundamental difference between participation in the persecution of the Jews and denial of assistance. When the distinction is blurred, this involves the risk of downplaying collaboration in the deportation of the Jews, notwithstanding the fact that this is the last thing a historian like Saerens would want to do.

The other hypothesis presented by Saerens, one he considers part of the 'broader picture' of the role of the Antwerp police whose absence in my work he notes critically, concerns the deportation of Jewish forced labourers to northern France²². On the basis of his research into 152 families, he assumes that the wives and children of 1,500 Jews deported as forced labourers, wives and children who remained in Antwerp, fell victim to the Holocaust to a greater extent than the local Jewish community as a whole. Saerens holds Antwerp's police force partly responsible for

this. Because it was involved in the deportation to northern France of Jewish men whose wives and families typically continued to reside at their registered addresses, instead of going into hiding, the municipal police 'ensured that 1,000 to 1,500 families in Antwerp were basically held hostage' (Saerens, p. 208). The entire argument is shaky, as Saerens provides no information on when, where and under what circumstances the women and children in question were arrested. He relies purely on his own assumptions about the behaviour of the wives who were later deported, and upon circular reasoning. While he has made no effort to investigate the reactions of these women, he assumes that the number of them who abandoned their registered addresses was lower than that of other women during the same period. This assumption is in no way substantiated; in an earlier essay, Saerens attempted to bolster it by means of his finding that an above-average number of these women were deported²³. Now he refers back to this essay and argues by implication that his 'own research confirms' that the wives of forced labourers 'were much less inclined to move or to go into hiding with their children', and that this led to a higher number of victims within this group (*ibidem*).

In my view, such conjecture about the reactions of the persecuted Jews is thoroughly out of place in scholarly work. Moreover, it lags behind the current state of research. Many Jews were murdered by the Germans *in spite of* having undertaken the greatest efforts to escape the 'final solution', *in spite of* living in hiding, disposing of counterfeit documents, ceasing to wear the yellow star, and the like.

22. With regard to Saerens' claim that I have passed over these deportations in my earlier work, I wish to clarify that I have taken them into account in each of my essays on the arrest of the Jews in Belgium. 23. LIEVEN SAERENS, "De Jodenvervolgving in België in cijfers", in *Cahiers d'Histoire du Temps présent*, 17, 2006, p. 233 and following.

Demonstrating this fact was one of my main concerns in writing my book. Saerens appears not to have noticed this.

Jewish Self-Defence and the Belgian Population

While the participation of Jews in the resistance to the German occupation and the support structures of the *Comité de Défense des Juifs*, whose most important effect was to make possible the rescue of Jewish children, have been thoroughly researched, in particular thanks to Maxime Steinberg, there have so far been no in-depth studies of the individual survival strategies of those parts of the Jewish population that were not organised within the resistance: studies, for example, of Jews who went into hiding or escaped abroad. Saerens concludes from a half-sentence, which may have been rendered ambiguously in the Dutch translation, that I wish to investigate the concrete circumstances and causes of such escapes, and he claims that I have hardly succeeded in doing so (Saerens, p. 215). In reality, my book is the first to shed systematic light on how and to what extent the Jewish masses in Belgium attempted to escape arrest and deportation.

When it comes to investigating the reactions of the Jews and their attempts to save themselves, international Holocaust research generally focuses on the survivors, since their testimonies can serve as sources. As a result, those who never returned from the extermination camps are lost from view. It is not just the saved, however, but also the drowned who often did everything they could to carry themselves and their family to safety before being seized by the *Gestapo* after all. This is impressively demonstrated by the

documents on individual arrests contained in my book. For these documents show how those victims of the *Shoah* who never had the opportunity to give testimony defended their lives. While the false notion of victims who were 'led like sheep to the slaughter' is now probably obsolete, there is still a widespread perception that for the most part, those Jews who were deported and murdered made no attempt to escape the German police. Saerens' above-mentioned hypothesis on the reactions of the wives of Jewish forced labourers is a typical example.

How little consideration Saerens gives to these issues and my relevant findings can be seen from the fact that he considers my explicitly justified choice to deliberately investigate the self-defence of those Jews who ultimately failed and were murdered a shortcoming. To the extent that I refer 'solely' to the deported Jews, Saerens writes (p. 209), I lose sight of the survivors. Thus, in Saerens' review, an innovative research perspective becomes the indication of a deficit.

Moreover, and in contrast with what Saerens claims, my book does present a general picture of the ways in which Jews sought to defend themselves against deportation, the development of such self-defence, its extent and its interaction with the manhunt of the perpetrators. An important source is provided by the reports the Brussels Sipo-SD produced in the summer of 1942; these reports, which have hitherto escaped scholarly attention, demonstrate that Eichmann's agents continuously observed the Jewish population's attempts to save itself and dispatched detailed reports on such attempts to Berlin²⁴.

24. MEINEN, p. 204-208, 216 and following.

Incidentally, the Sipo-SD also recorded those Belgian reactions that made it more difficult for the German police to arrest the Jews. Saerens (p. 214) objects to my few statements on the Belgian population, and claims that research has shown how the population took less and less interest in the persecution of the Jews over the years; but the opposite is the case, as Steinberg's nuanced analyses show. The reviewer would have had to do no more than consult the work of the doyen of Belgian Holocaust studies to find that the Belgian public did in fact express indignation over the deportation of the Jews, and that if its reactions were downplayed in a report penned by the military administration in the late summer of 1942 (a report Saerens cites in his review and erroneously takes at face value), this was the result of transparent political manoeuvring before the responsible authorities in Berlin²⁵. We know from a document from the same period, penned by the Brussels representative of the German Foreign Office, that in their efforts to escape from their registered addresses, the Jews 'were supported by a considerable part of the Belgian population'. Like the report cited by Saerens, this document is one of the long-familiar key documents on the *Shoah* in Belgium, and it can be found in the relevant compilation of sources, which Saerens cites in his review²⁶.

The Belgian population's assistance to Jews escaping into illegality is also evidenced by Sipo-SD reports, one of which is quoted in my book. My systematic research into the individual fates of Jews has also confirmed that there were a great many possibilities for going into hiding in Belgium²⁷. In my conclusion, I pick up on this point by mentioning that in many cases (the German original reads '*vielfach*'), the Belgian population acted in solidarity with the efforts of the Jews to save themselves. In the Dutch version of my book, these 'many cases' have become 'a large part of the population'. This unfaithful translation prompts Saerens to place my historiographical work on a level with a journalistic publication that was explicitly intended to 'rescue the honour of the Belgians'. Once again, fact-based argument yields to polemics²⁸.

Saerens overlooks that Steinberg already emphasises the solidarity of the non-Jews and considers it a key factor in the survival of more than half the Jews registered in Belgium²⁹. Most importantly, however, he appears not to be aware that the key question for Holocaust research is whether or not the Jews were *able* to go into hiding. Whoever looks beyond the Belgian frontier and takes into account, say, the situation in Germany or the Netherlands knows that less illegal accommodation was available elsewhere, even given the requisite financial means³⁰.

25. MAXIME STEINBERG, *La question juive, 1940–1942 (L'Étoile et le fusil, vol. 1)*, Brussels, Vie ouvrière, 1983, p. 167-183; ID., *Les cent jours de la déportation des Juifs de Belgique (L'Étoile et le fusil, vol. 2)*, Brussels, Vie ouvrière, 1984, p. 159 and following. 26. SERGE KLARSFELD & MAXIME STEINBERG (eds), *Dokumente. Die Endlösung der Judenfrage in Belgien*, New York/Paris, s.d. [1980], p. 45-46; the original document is also reproduced in MEINEN, p. 61-62. 27. Cf. MEINEN, p. 206, 169, 208 et *passim*. 28. 'Meinen talks in very vague terms about "the solidarity of a large portion of the Belgian populace", a vision already propagated much earlier by another German author, journalist Marion Schreiber, who, like Meinen, also resided in Belgium for a long time [*sic!*] and whose book on the Jewish persecution was written as an attempt to defend "the honour of the Belgians"' (SAERENS, p. 214). 29. STEINBERG, *La Question juive* (as cited in note 20), p. 183. 30. On the Netherlands, see PIM GRIFFIOEN & RON ZELLER, "Judenverfolgung in den Niederlanden und in Belgien während des Zweiten Weltkriegs (Teil II)", in 1999. *Zeitschrift für Sozialgeschichte des 20. und 21. Jahrhunderts*, 12, 1997, 1, p. 34

The Belgian Perspective

One of the main reasons for the differences of opinion between Saerens and myself consists in the fact that Saerens considers the history of the *Shoah* in Belgium primarily from a Belgian perspective. This begins with the fact that in contextualising my book, he makes reference only to Belgian scholarship and the politics of remembrance in contemporary Belgium, as if I had written my book in order to assume a contrary position within this context. And yet it emerges clearly from the introduction that my monograph was intended primarily to remedy the fact that until 2009, there did not exist in Germany a single (!) historical account of the *Shoah* in Belgium, and that Belgium is also underrepresented in international Holocaust studies.

Even more important is Saerens' contentual accusation that I minimise the role of 'the Belgians' – by which he sometimes means the authorities, sometimes the collaborators and sometimes the general population – thereby throwing engagement with the persecution of the Jews in Belgium back several decades (Saerens, p. 203). The reviewer overlooks the fact that the title of my book is not 'The Belgians and the Persecution of the Jews'. There are sound reasons for writing a history of the *Shoah* that presents the role of Belgian authorities, organisations and individuals differently from the way in which they are presented in some Belgian studies; this is true not only with regard to the significance of the Antwerp

round-ups, the participation of Belgian collaborators in arrests and the possibilities of going into hiding. Rather, the issue is of a fundamental nature, as I wish to show below.

La Belgique docile

In his conclusion, Saerens writes that taking the perspective of the accomplices, spectators or helpers – i.e. the Belgian perspective – as the starting point of one's research would be as legitimate as starting from the perspective of the Germans (Saerens, p. 216-217). Every sort of research is of course legitimate, and it is beyond doubt that in his own work on the persecution of the Jews in Antwerp, which focuses on the Antwerp authorities, the Flemish SS and other Belgian collaborators, Saerens has made fundamental contributions to our understanding of the Holocaust in Belgium. It is important, however, to integrate the various perspectives into the larger history of the 'final solution'. Otherwise, a skewed impression results; this is especially evident in parts of the research report *La Belgique docile*.

For example, the account the research report gives of the material expropriation of the Jews is such as to suggest a significant degree of participation on the part of the Belgian authorities. But in reality, and contrary to the situation for example in occupied France, the plundering of the Jews and their exclusion from the economy was essentially decreed, organised and implemented by the German military administration³¹. The authors' deci-

and following; French translation in *Cahiers d'Histoire du Temps présent*, 5, 1998, p. 73-132. See also *Id.*, *Jodenvervolging in Nederland, Frankrijk en België 1940-1945. Overeenkomsten, verschillen, oorzaken*, Amsterdam, Boom, 2011. 31. Military commander for Belgium and northern France, chief of military administration, final report, part 16 (trust assets), s.d. [1944], Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg, RW 36/227. Cf. "Les Biens des victimes des persécutions anti-juives en Belgique. Spoliation – Rétablissement des droits". Résultats de la Commission d'étude. Rapport final, Brussels, Services du premier Ministre, 2001 (<https://www.combuysse.fgov.be>). See also RUDI VAN DOORSLAER, "Spoliation et Restitution des biens juifs en Belgique", in CONSTANTIN GOSCHLER, PHILIPP THER & CLAIRE ANDRIEU (eds), *Spoliations et restitutions des biens juifs en Europe*, Paris, Autrement, 2007, p. 216-235. Compare *La Belgique docile*, p. 404-449, 481 and following.

sion, in this section and elsewhere, not to analyse the significance of the details they cite in the larger process of persecution may be due to their official mandate, that of researching – exclusively, and within a very narrow time frame – the role of the Belgian authorities. The published version of the report, however, is conceived, according to the text on its back cover, as ‘the standard work on the persecution of the Jews in Belgium’. With regard to this issue, it would have been imperative to assess the relative significance of the actions of the Belgian actors.

If we are to understand the Holocaust in Belgium, we need to know how the Jews ended up in the death trains to Auschwitz. As far as the situation in Brussels is concerned, where most Jews in Belgium resided at the time, focusing on the Belgian police leads one astray. This can be seen – as will be shown below – from the chapter of *La Belgique docile*, written by Nico Wouters, that is dedicated to the ‘Hunt for the Jews’.

In his critique, Saerens notes that I dismiss as exceptions the individual arrests of three (*sic*) Jews in which the Brussels police was involved between 1942 and 1944, and which are referred to by Wouters, as well as in earlier publications. The fact is that these arrests were, beyond doubt, exceptions³². For the other cases cited in *La Belgique docile* result from erroneous claims by Nico Wouters. Instead of objecting to this blunder, Saerens sharply chides me for claiming that the research report contains errors (Saerens, p. 217). I am left with no other choice but to expand on some of these errors; in my book,

they are not so much emphasised as hidden in the notes.

According to Wouters, the Brussels Police arrested Jews up until spring 1942. These individual arrests were ‘simply continued’ in the period that followed, despite the fact that the mayors of Brussels refused to issue the yellow star badge at the beginning of June 1942³³. Even after this, the Brussels Police still provided ‘active assistance’ in turning over individual Jews, who had been arrested, to the Sipo-SD, even though the mayors twice declined to be involved in major operations to arrest Jews in summer 1942. Furthermore, in Wouters’ description of events, two Brussels police officers were involved in the only large-scale round-up to take place in Brussels in 1942 as part of the ‘final solution’.

The author offers no proof for these claims. Instead, for the period up to May 1942, he quotes a corresponding German order to penalise infringements of anti-Jewish legislation. He seems to have overlooked the fact that the routine transfer of such German orders to Brussels police stations via the Chief of the Brussels Police did not mean they were automatically implemented. This difference between written directive and actual implementation is particularly important in the case under discussion, because it seems that, under the German directive, which contradicted Belgian legal provisions, the Brussels Police were regularly unable to find the people they were supposed to arrest³⁴. Furthermore, the author infers from the fact that the Brussels Police Chief explicitly refused to arrest two

32. See MEINEN, p. 255-256, note 90. For Wouters’ recurrent references to these three arrests, see *La Belgique docile*, p. 595, 639, 654. 33. *La Belgique docile*, p. 393-394, 551, 651, on the following; *Idem*, p. 654-655. 34. This also emerges from examples cited by Wouters himself; *Idem*, p. 393-394.

Jews in May 1942 that such arrests had taken place previously – without actually being able to cite a single case. On the contrary, the files reveal that an arrest of this kind had indeed been refused at an earlier stage³⁵.

Apart from the three exceptions noted above, with reference to the following period, Wouters exclusively cites events that did not actually take place. For example : he incorrectly construes the arrest of members of the Flemish SS for harassing Jews in the Marolles neighbourhood of Brussels as the arrest of Jews³⁶. Or he ascribes part of the responsibility for deporting a Jewish woman, who had been under police surveillance, to the Brussels Police because he fails to notice that the Brussels Police had in fact suspended the surveillance and thus enabled the woman to flee³⁷. The author also confuses one of the most famous rescue operations in the history of the *Shoah* in Belgium – the kidnapping of a group of Jewish girls by Brussels partisans from their hiding place in a Catholic convent in Anderlecht, which had been discovered by the Germans – with an arrest by the Gestapo. This allows him to criticise the response

of the Brussels Police whose report he cites incorrectly³⁸. At the same time, Wouters quite irresponsibly states that the children, who had been saved, had been deported, without having at his disposal a shred of evidence that this was the case.

Finally, with regard to the large-scale round-up in Brussels in September 1942, here, too, the source Wouters cites provides no evidence for his claims. When he formulates, in detail, the tasks the Belgian police officers are supposed to have assumed ('and they actually block off some of the streets during the round-up and stop people from leaving the district'), he moves into the realm of pure fantasy³⁹.

These errors, and the fact that I have discovered only one other arrest operation involving a Brussels police officer in the numerous other sources I have consulted to investigate individual arrests, show that the few arrests of Jews by the Brussels police were without doubt exceptions⁴⁰.

It remains to add that Wouters subsumes under the rubric 'Hunt for the Jews' a number of other

35. Brussels chief of police to *Oberfeldkommandantur Brüssel*, 26 March 1942, Brussels city archive, police 40-44, box 39. 36. Report, Brussels police (second division), 13 June 1942, Brussels city archive, police 40-45, box 41; *La Belgique docile*, p. 595, p. 1339, note 1955. 37. Report, Brussels-Schaerbeek police, 22 June 1943, Brussels city archive, police 40-45, box 38; *La Belgique docile*, p. 638-639. 38. Report, Brussels police (ninth district, first division), 21 May 1943, Brussels city archive, police 40-45, box 53; *La Belgique docile*, p. 640. On this rescue operation, see for example MAXIME STEINBERG, *La Traque des Juifs (L'Étoile et le fusil*, vol. 3), tome I, Brussels, Vie ouvrière, 1986, p. 157 and following. 39. Report, Brussels police (second division), 3 September 1942, Brussels city archive, police 40-45, box 41; *La Belgique docile*, p. 596, 654. When Brussels-based historian Benoît Majerus, the first to suspect that two officers were involved in the round-up in one way or another, makes reference to the German translation of the French police report to support his hypothesis, this is, in my view, misguided. Why should a translation, produced by a third party, be more reliable than the original document? This apart, it is by no means the case that the German words chosen by the translator provide evidence for the two officers having participated in the round-up. BENOÎT MAJERUS, "Logiques administratives et persécution anti-juive. La police bruxelloise et les arrestations de 1942", in *Cahiers d'Histoire du Temps présent*, 12, 2003, p. 208-209. See also Steinberg, *La Persécution des Juifs* (as cited in note 13), p. 287. A pertinent German testimony lists the agencies that participated in the round-up and makes no mention of Belgian officers (MEINEN, p. 57-58). 40. Cf. MEINEN, p. 202-203.

facts and circumstances whose relevance to the arrests is questionable and never established by him. For example, Wouters discusses in the chapter on arrests the fact that the Brussels police followed the request of the German military administration and made available to it the registered addresses of individual Jews, as well as lists of Jews with certain nationalities; Wouters also emphasises that such actions ‘in fact had practical consequences’⁴¹. What consequences? Once again, Wouters provides no evidence for his claim, and it remains highly questionable whether the information provided by the Brussels police led to arrests.

What is more, registered addresses were only of very limited use to the Germans when arresting Jews; as early as the beginning of autumn in 1942, the Sipo-SD was citing the escape of Jews from their homes as the reason why round-ups were no longer feasible. While the ‘registries of Jews’ (*Judenregister*) the Belgian municipalities compiled on German orders were undoubtedly used for the purposes of persecution, they were only of limited use in preparing the deportations, since the files were organised by names of persons, whereas the Sipo-SD required a file organised by neighbourhoods and streets in order to conduct group arrests. The Sipo-SD called not on the municipalities, but on the compulsory Jewish association, the AJB, to compile the basic data for such a file.

Under the rubric ‘Hunt for the Jews’, Wouters surveys those specific developments that the Brussels police was involved in between 1942 and 1944, either in reality or in his opinion, but he does not ask what facts were relevant

to the manhunt; consequently, the historical events that led to the murder of Brussels Jews largely remain in the dark. No other example shows as clearly that the Belgian perspective cannot account for the Holocaust.

Untenable Conclusions

Wouters’ dubious treatment of the facts has far-reaching consequences for the conclusions drawn in the research report *La Belgique docile*. The fact that in 1942 the responsible authorities in Brussels refused to participate in major operations intended to lead to the arrest of Jews is largely traced back by Wouters to the political circumstances in Brussels at the time, as well as to the military situation; in his conclusion, Rudi Van Doorslaer largely follows the interpretation proposed by Wouters⁴².

In brief, Wouters argues as follows. Until May 1942, the mayors of Brussels participated in the implementation of the Germans’ anti-Jewish decrees. From June 1942 onward, they began to refuse to implement German orders to distribute the yellow star badges, arrest large numbers of Jews and assist the German police in an anti-Jewish round-up; this change of course appeared opportune to the mayors for politico-ideological reasons. The motives of the mayors are mainly to be sought, according to Wouters, in the political constellation of the period: militarily, Germany’s dominant position seemed less secure than it had in 1940; on the local level, the creation, rejected by the mayors, of the administrative unit ‘Greater Brussels’ was imminent, and with it the deposition of the mayors, such that they had nothing left to lose. Their change of course was also motivated by the fact that in early June 1942,

41. *La Belgique docile*, p. 637. 42. *Idem*, p. 552-553, 651 and following, 660, 1136-1137, 1142, 1152.

the German Field Gendarmerie had used a pretence to involve Brussels policemen in the arrest and hostage-taking of former members of the Belgian military. Given this context, the mayors decided to issue a political signal and demonstrate their patriotism by refusing to implement the anti-Jewish orders issued by the Germans, not least because they hoped thereby to give their imminent resignation a patriotic veneer.

Wouters' interpretation stands and falls with the unproven claim that the Brussels police arrested Jews until the spring of 1942, a claim he presents as fact, without having discovered a single case of such arrests actually occurring. For only if the Brussels police had indeed conducted arrests on German orders until the spring of 1942 could the fact that the mayor of Brussels refused collaboration in major anti-Jewish arrest operations in the summer of 1942 be interpreted as a change of course⁴³.

In reality, the chief of the Brussels police was already regularly refusing, with the support of the local senior prosecutor (*Procureur du Roi*), German requests for arrest from mid-1941 onward at the latest, to the extent that implementing such requests would have violated Belgian law. Initially, the German military administration had accepted these refusals. But in June 1942, after the taking of hostages had provoked a conflict, the

military administration attempted to force the Brussels police to comply with its requests for arrest, referring to a relevant decree issued by the German military commander⁴⁴. This German order, which Wouters fails to take into account, was the reason why the chief of the Brussels police called on the mayors of the conurbation to reach a principled decision, which they did in early July 1942. Thus their choice not to comply with the orders of the military administration and to reject German requests for arrest on legal grounds was not an independent Belgian reaction to the hostage-takings, the general political situation in Brussels or the development of the war, but rather due to the military administration breaking with the status quo and ceasing to accept the non-collaboration of the Brussels police, which it had previously tolerated.

Wouters ignores this context and formulates the claim, neither proven nor plausible, that the Brussels police arrested Jews until May 1942. It is only thus that he can interpret the mayor of Brussels' twofold refusal to participate in major anti-Jewish arrest operations or round-ups as an opportune change of course to be traced back to the general political situation in the summer of 1942. Thus Wouters' erroneous claims lead to false conclusions in his text, and these conclusions are not rendered any less false by Van Doorslaer's reiteration of them in his conclusion.

43. To be sure, there is one document that could lead one to suspect such a change of course. In early September 1942, the Brussels police justified its unwillingness to participate in a major German anti-Jewish round-up by communicating to the German Sipo-SD that the mayor of the city of Brussels had decided, following a comparable earlier arrest operation – the reference was to the hostages taken in June 1942 –, that the police forces subordinate to him were to be generally prohibited from participating in German-led arrests. (Cf. MAJERUS [as cited in note 34], upon whose preliminary works Wouters' account rests, and *La Belgique docile*, p. 595-596, 390 and following.) But this statement was primarily intended to provide a member of the Sipo-SD with an ulterior justification for the rejection of arbitrary arrests which had characterised the practice of the Brussels police for some time. **44.** MEINEN, p. 44. Cf. BENOÎT MAJERUS, *Occupations et logiques policières : La police bruxelloise en 1914-1918 et 1940-1945*, Brussels, Académie royale de Belgique, 2007.

Criticism Unwelcome?

In his review, Saerens makes it seem as if I had criticised the scholarly literature too harshly⁴⁵. There is one case with regard to which I am glad to respond to Saerens' remark, as it allows me to rectify a misunderstanding. The reviewer, working from the Dutch translation of my book, incriminates me for claiming that previous research has scarcely taken into account the German offices involved in the arrests; a glance at the original or the French translation suffices to see that my phrase by no means referred to all German offices, but remained indeterminate, and that in the passage immediately following, I refer exclusively to the *Devisenschutzkommando* and to the German border guards, whose participation in individual arrests had indeed previously been overlooked, as Saerens himself concedes⁴⁶.

Apart from this detail, I can only reject Saerens' verdict. It is true that on a number of occasions, my book engages critically with existing research findings and that I refer, in the notes, to publications presenting interpretations different from my own, explaining why I arrive at other conclusions. But objective argument is part of academic custom – including in Belgium, if I am not mistaken – and moves scholarship forward. What I do not do is accuse a colleague of things he or she never wrote, and most importantly, I never attribute base motives to someone for defending a position different from my own. And yet the article by Saerens published in the previous issue of this journal closes with the words: “She [Meinen] gives the impression she

uses a consciously conflictual tone in order to strategically distinguish herself and her book from the rest of Belgian historiography” (Saerens, p. 217).

This statement denies the scholarly intention behind my critique. Originally, it goes back not to Lieven Saerens but to the historian Rudi Van Doorslaer. On 7 December 2011, on the occasion of the presentation of my book on the premises of the Cegesoma, of which he is the director, Van Doorslaer was the first to utter words to the effect that I would not have had to criticise the Cegesoma research report *La Belgique docile* in order to present my own book in a favourable light.

I can only conclude from this that some colleagues at the Cegesoma seem to be acting in accordance with the motto that the best way to respond to criticism is to criticise the critic. This is not conducive to objective discussion, and surely we are all interested in such discussion.

Conclusion

Lieven Saerens accuses me of trivialising, in my book, the participation of ‘the Belgians’ in the persecution of the Jews. But he presents no valid argument to counter my account. Moreover, Saerens repeatedly criticises my work for taking a one-sided German perspective. This accusation is also unfounded.

As far as the Belgian authorities are concerned, I have, on the contrary, been the first to formulate a comprehensive assessment

45. One example: “(...) in many cases she [Meinen] addresses factual details that do not undermine the fundamental analysis of those earlier studies in any way. By using this systematically confrontational mode, Meinen creates a rhetoric which tends to suggest that her own analysis is the ‘sole truth’, and that the Germans were the only real perpetrators” (SAERENS, p. 203). 46. MEINEN, p. 14; cf. SAERENS, p. 217.

of the degree to which they were involved in preparing the deportations to Auschwitz. About a fifth of the victims of the *Shoah* in Belgium fell into the hands of the Sipo-SD and were taken to the Mechelen transit camp with the aid of the Belgian authorities. In emphasising the comparatively marginal significance of the Belgian police, I am not at all concerned with rescuing the 'honour of the Belgians', as Saerens polemically puts it in one passage. Rather, I am concerned with shedding light on the murder of the Jews.

From the international perspective of Holocaust studies, it is a matter of finding out how the crime could be perpetrated, which actors were decisive, what factors determined the magnitude of the number of victims and how many Jews survived. The relevant factors include, as Saerens knows, not just the extent of the participation of local authorities and the behaviour of the non-Jewish population, but also the specific German occupation regime and Jewish responses, to name only the best-known aspects.

Comparative consideration of several *Wehrmacht*-occupied countries can guard against narrowing the analysis down to a single factor and over-hastily taking this factor to be decisive. Thus a glance at France reveals that the French police was much more heavily involved in the arrest of Jews than the Belgian police, and that the proportion of victims from the total Jewish population of France (25 per cent) was much lower than the corresponding proportion for Belgium (42 per cent). This seems paradoxical, but it shows that the

Vichy regime's willingness to collaborate needs to be understood as only *one of several* important factors. One key reason for the different scales assumed by the murder of the European Jews in these two countries is no doubt to be found in the divergent compositions of their Jewish communities, with a lower proportion of foreign and stateless Jews in France. Geographical circumstances surely also played an important role; France provided those who sought to escape the German-occupied part of Europe with a far more favourable starting point than Belgium⁴⁷.

If, however, only a minority of the Jews deported from Belgium were arrested by the local police, there is no way for Holocaust research not to focus its attention on the German authorities. This is particularly true of the major city of Brussels, then home to the largest number of Jews by far. Here the involvement of the local police was next to nil. For this reason, Wouters' account, in *La Belgique docile*, of the Belgian capital and the 'Hunt for the Jews' is not conducive to understanding the history of the Holocaust as a whole. Whoever may have had the idea to declare this research report on the role of the Belgian authorities 'the standard work on the persecution of the Jews in Belgium', they clearly overlooked that such a standard work would have to focus on the question of who arrested the Jews murdered in Auschwitz. When Wouters attempts to prove that the Brussels police was more strongly involved than emerges from the research of other scholars, this leads not only to serious errors, but also to

47. MEINEN & MEYER, *Verfolgt von Land zu Land* (as cited in note 15), p. 279-280. Cf. MAXIME STEINBERG, "Le Paradoxe français dans la solution finale à l'Ouest", in *Annales*, 48, 1993, p. 583-594.

false conclusions being drawn in the research report.

On the other hand, Wouters misses the fact that is genuinely relevant to the situation in Brussels : the Brussels authorities – first the chief of police, aided by the senior prosecutor (*Procureur du Roi*), and then the mayors – decided to refuse to conduct arbitrary arrests. This was the most certain way of guarding against becoming involved in the preparations for the deportations to Auschwitz. After all, the arrests of Jewish men, women and children were arbitrary arrests *par excellence*. Thus the attempt of the occupants to make the Brussels police participate in the major Brussels round-up of September 1942 by appealing to xenophobic feelings of resentment and emphasising that only foreign Jews would be arrested also failed⁴⁸.

How extraordinary the reaction of the responsible authorities in Brussels was can be seen from the fact that in occupied France, the Sipo-SD was able to make the police participate in the arrest of Jews because and for as long as it sought its victims among Jewish immigrants and refugees. Moreover, it is generally true of the destruction of the European Jews that foreigners and stateless persons were most at risk, unless they could count on the protection of a third state power. Thus it is quite remarkable, with regard to the history of the *Shoah*, that the Brussels authorities were not available for the arrest of Jews, because they rejected arrests as incompatible with Belgian law. In this way, even foreign

Jews – who constituted the overwhelming majority within the Jewish community in Belgium – were not abandoned to the Germans; this holds true regardless of whether or not Brussels officials cultivated anti-Semitic or xenophobic feelings of resentment.

Concerning the Belgian collaborators who aided the occupying authorities in identifying the whereabouts of Jews or arresting Jews, it is absurd for Saerens to claim that I downplay their role. Saerens is scarcely interested in the fact that my book contains new findings on the use of these informers and auxiliary police forces, as well as on their way of operating and their significance. He criticises my nuanced perspective, namely the observation that these persons were almost exclusively underlings of the Germans. But just as in the case of the Belgian police, a nuanced assessment is needed if one is to gauge the relative share of various groups in the implementation of a crime characterised by a division of labour. From an international perspective, it is striking that when it came to arresting Jews, the Germans allowed these collaborators to act independently only to a very limited extent. The fact that they made an effort to control their Belgian accomplices means nothing less than that the use of German personnel remained necessary, and that the Germans were by no means capable of fully delegating a large number of arrests to local forces, as they were able to do in France and the Netherlands.

In addition to this, the German police in Belgium – in contrast with the German

48. MEINEN, p. 41-42, 57, 212. On these events, see also the literature cited in note 34.

police in neighbouring Western European countries – arrested the majority of its victims individually or in small groups. The fact that the German police in Belgium conducted only a small number of large round-ups was not due to a shortage of police forces. Rather, the mass escape of Jews from their registered addresses, which began early on, forced the German persecutors to adjust their methods of arrest; this hypothesis, formulated by Maxime Steinberg, is confirmed by newly discovered documents presented in my book. My book also shows that it was by no means only the escaped and the saved, but also the arrested and murdered Jews who did everything they could to avoid being arrested. Thus the German authorities had to fight a running battle against the Jewish population in order to fill the trains to Auschwitz.

Overall, the circumstances discussed caused considerable difficulties, in occupied Belgium, for the implementation of the deportation programme dictated by Berlin. The Sipo-SD was able to enlist the Belgian police only to a limited extent. There was no large-scale use of collaborators as an autonomously operating arrest commando. And large numbers of Jews went into hiding; incidentally, this would have been out of the question without support from the Belgian population and the existence of numerous possibilities for going into hiding in Belgium. Nevertheless, the German occupying authorities succeeded in deporting close to half of the Jews registered in Belgium. This was only possible because they rigorously implemented the ‘final solution of the Jewish question’. It was not only Adolf Eichmann’s local employees, but also other members of the Sipo-SD and of a number of other German offices who contributed to the

arrest of Jews. Thus the Germans were able to seize large numbers of men, women and children even in the Belgian capital, where they could not enlist the municipal police. While many more Jews survived in Brussels than in Antwerp, about 44 per cent of the 25,000 Jews deported from Belgium were last registered in Brussels. This finding also allows for no other conclusion than that the occupiers were quite capable of perpetrating their crime without resorting to the agency of the Belgian police.