

Die Schweiz und die deutschen Lösegelderpressungen in den besetzten Niederlanden.

Vermögensentziehung, Freikauf, Austausch 1940–1945. Beitrag zur Forschung

Switzerland and German Ransom Demands in the Occupied Netherlands. Confiscation of Assets, Extortion, and Exchange (1940–1945). Research Contribution
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Summary

Between 1940 and 1945, German officials in the Reich Commissariat Netherlands («Reichskommissariat Niederlande») demanded foreign currency and other valuables from Jews seeking exit permits. This often took place with the involvement of Swiss individuals and banks. For reasons explained in the following, the Independent Commission decided to research this issue using the example of Holland. With the exception of the General Government in Poland, financial compensation for exit documents was demanded and received more often in the Netherlands than in any other occupied territory. Nearly 400 individual cases of ransom demands in the Netherlands, amounting to at least 35 million Swiss francs, have been documented. In contrast to Poland, about half of these cases involve Switzerland in some way, be it through intermediaries, official Swiss agencies, or Swiss banks. The demands for money, in effect ransom, brought these deals to the attention of the Allies who felt obliged to take action against Swiss intermediaries, including banks.

This report describes the positions of the three primary figures in the German ransom demands: the German Reich and its occupation administration in the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the Allied powers Great Britain and the United States.

The significance of this topic within the framework of the ICE mandate can be seen through the following circumstances: blackmailing persecuted Jews who wanted to leave German occupied areas, or their relatives and acquaintances abroad, offered Nazi Germany the opportunity to acquire Jewish money both within and outside the German areas of power. The Germans were extremely interested in free currency, which is why ransom negotiations were almost always on the basis of Swiss francs. For both the persecuted and the perpetrators, it made sense to use the services offered by intermediaries in neutral Switzerland. And yet, only a few of those whose freedom was purchased actually ever reached Switzerland. In most cases, Switzerland, the financial center, was only a transfer site for the money involved.

Swiss foreign and refugee policy touched only indirectly on German ransom demands. As a protecting power for Germany, Great Britain, and the United States, Switzerland mediated between the warring powers and organized the exchange of civilian prisoners. Citizens of Allied powers who were inside the German Reich and inhabitants of Palestine, under British mandate, were exchanged for German citizens who had been imprisoned by the Allies. In many cases the individuals exchanged had been in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp and were Jews who had earlier been forced to make payment to the Germans in foreign currency. There was a close relationship between the ransom demands and the involvement of Dutch Jews in the German-Allied exchange of civilian prisoners that had its roots in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.

Thus, the ransom issue is the place where refugee policy and currency transfers intersect. It is also an explosive topic because of the tense relationship between humanitarian goals and

war-related goals in the nations involved, both in the Allied countries and in Switzerland. This could not fail to have an influence on the fate of the individuals in question.

The study first examines the background of the ransom demands, that is, the economic conditions under which Jewish forced-emigration from the German Reich took place and the foreign policy conditions of Switzerland's function as a protecting power. This is followed by an outline of the situation in the Netherlands, with the various phases of ransom demands, against the background of the persecution and murder of Jews. A further chapter describes what the Allies knew as well as how this policy of «black lists» functioned and what avenues stood open to them regarding possible attempts to save Jews. Finally, the activities of Swiss intermediaries – private individuals, lawyers, and banks – are examined and the position taken by Switzerland is analyzed with regard to implications for the Swiss policy of neutrality and also for the perception of these activities in the Netherlands. The conclusion provides a short overview of the postwar period.

In summary, the following results can be stated: the large number of documented cases of blackmail indicate the importance of purchased exit visas for Nazi German policy. In about half of the cases, a connection to Switzerland can be traced. However, few of those whose freedom was purchased actually reached freedom. This is primarily because the Nazi regime placed a higher priority on exterminating Jews than on «selling» them. An additional factor was the harsh wartime economic measures imposed by the Allies. Finally, the Allies often had reservations about German offers of exchange, even civilian exchanges, which led to decreased German interest in carrying out the exchanges.

Swiss officials concerned themselves only tangentially with ransom demands. As a protecting power, Switzerland in some cases made use of its freedom to act by helping individual Jews flee to third countries. As a financial center, Switzerland was used as a transfer point for ransom payments until Allied countermeasures were put into place. The motivation behind the Swiss intermediaries acting at various levels of the transactions can be determined only in individual cases. They ranged from collaboration with Nazi Germany for personal gain on the one side, to commitment to humanitarian ideals on the other.

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