

# Proprietary Victims: Holocaust Commemoration and Right-Wing Consolidation in the Netherlands

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## Abstract

In the early 2020s, two seemingly unrelated political developments came to a head in the Netherlands. First, in January 2020, then-Prime Minister Mark Rutte of the center-right VVD party issued an official apology on behalf of the Dutch government for its complicity in the deaths of more than 100,000 Dutch Jews in the Holocaust. Second, in the November 2023 national elections, Geert Wilders's anti-Muslim, pro-Israel PVV party won the highest percentage of votes, leading to the formation of a far-right cabinet under Prime Minister Dick Schoof in July 2024. In this article, we argue that this double consolidation of the historical legacy of the Holocaust and of racist, right-wing politics has put Dutch Jews in a dangerous bind. On the one hand, the memory of the Holocaust and the contemporary safety of Dutch Jews have been elevated as a paramount concern in Dutch institutional, legal, and political life. On the other hand, Dutch Jews have been positioned as the perennial would-be victims of violent antisemitism—virtually always, it is falsely imagined, at the hands of Dutch Muslims. The historical persecution of the Jews in the Holocaust is now used to underwrite a “proprietary” form of Jewish victimhood in the present: non-Jewish white Dutch people position themselves as the saviors of Jews, and thereby claim ownership over their past, their collective fate, and the political means to secure their safety.

**Keywords:** Antisemitism, far right, Holocaust, Israel, memorialization, Muslims, the Netherlands, philosemitism

In the leadup to the 2024 Dodenherdenking (Remembrance Day) on May 4<sup>th</sup>, multiple groups raised the idea of protesting what is considered the most solemn ceremony on the Dutch national calendar. The Dodenherdenking, which memorializes Dutch civilians and soldiers killed or murdered in war situations or during peace-keeping operations during and since the outbreak of World War II, has long been understood as a site of negotiation for those communities who either see themselves reflected in national understandings of the past or for those communities still attempting to gain recognition (see Van de Reijt 2010; Raaijmakers 2018). This was evident in 2011 when the word “murdered” was added to the memorandum guiding the character of the commemoration after Jewish organizations criticized the absence of explicit language regarding the Holocaust in the Netherlands. While the potential for controversy exists each year at Amsterdam’s Dam Square, the 2024 Dodenherdenking was notable for the multiple, competing claims on historical memory. The plan for the Speaker of the House, Martin Bosma of the far-right Partij voor Vrijheid (PVV, Freedom Party), to lay a wreath struck the Center for Information and Documentation Israel (CIDI), leftwing political party DENK, and left-wing activist Frank van der Linde as tarnishing the spirit of the ceremony (Hielkema and Wagemakers 2024). Meanwhile, two hundred mosques, part of the united regional partnership of mosques organized under the name K7, asked Amsterdam Mayor Femke Halsema to make an explicit connection between the ceremony’s remembrance of the Second World War and the Holocaust and the current plight of Palestinians in Gaza under Israel’s genocidal war during her speech at the ceremony (Trouw 2024a).

Halsema ultimately refused this request, arguing that the Dodenherdenking centered on Dutch victims and that a political statement would lead to a heightened political atmosphere. Due to the potential for multiple protests, Halsema enacted a demonstration ban and placed a limit on the number of attendees. As a result, the pages of newspapers were once again filled with commentaries on the character of the Dodenherdenking and perspectives on whether protest should be allowed at such an important event. In an article for *De Volkskrant*, Michael Persson argued the ceremony was not the time for a noise demonstration by protesters wanting to draw attention to conditions in Gaza because the two minutes of silence was a sacred moment that was itself an act of acknowledging injustice. In starting his article with the statement, “First of all, we commemorate the victims of the Holocaust: 104 thousand Jews from the Netherlands,” Persson (2024) took for granted the association of the Dodenherdenking with an explicit commemoration of Holocaust victims. It is this phenomenon, the cult-like

memorialization of the Holocaust, which is exploited to serve as the *raison d'être* for the contemporary European nation-state, that Holocaust historian David Wertheim (2024) discussed in his op-ed, “Auschwitz’ is dead,” in the aftermath of the Dodenherdenking. Wertheim reached the conclusion that what he perceived as the waning ability of the Holocaust to function as a sacred event at the heart of liberal democracy, as evidenced by a history of protests on the day, was not due to a lack of education, but rather to an ongoing politicization of commemoration.

Yet the notion that politics had suddenly been inserted into what had formerly been an apolitical process of remembrance does not reflect the reality that Dutch Holocaust memory has always been contested, from the very end of World War II itself, and including among Dutch Jewish communities themselves (Contreras 2020). The emergence of the resistance narrative in the aftermath of liberation, the idea that the entirety of the Dutch populace suffered under the Nazi occupation and collectively resisted its policies, established a chilling effect on Jewish articulations of Holocaust and postwar experiences. Over time, challenges by the Jewish second generation to national understandings of the Second World War forced a broadening of wartime memory to include the specific persecution of Jews, and to a lesser extent, Sinti and Roma. What has shifted with the cementing of national Holocaust memory since 2020—when both King Willem-Alexander and then-Prime Minister Mark Rutte issued official apologies on behalf of the Dutch crown and the Dutch government—are the ways that conceptions of Jewish victimhood are imagined and deployed in the increasingly racialized politics of Dutch national belonging against Dutch Muslims, Dutch people of color, and even Dutch Jews themselves.

In this article, we argue that this double consolidation of the historical legacy of the Holocaust and of racist, right-wing politics has put Dutch Jews in a dangerous bind. On the one hand, the memory of the Holocaust and the contemporary safety of Dutch Jews have been elevated as a paramount concern in Dutch institutional, legal, and political life. On the other hand, particularly with the success of the far-right, “philosemitic” politician Geert Wilders in the November 2023 parliamentary elections, Dutch Jews have been positioned as the perennial would-be victims of violent antisemitism—virtually always, it is falsely imagined, at the hands of Dutch Muslims. The historical persecution of the Jews in the Holocaust is now used to underwrite a “proprietary” form of Jewish victimhood in the present: non-Jewish white Dutch people position themselves as the saviors of Jews, and thereby claim ownership over their past, their collective fate, and the political means to secure their safety. In this proprietary form, moreover, Jewish victimization is

simultaneously feared—something to be militantly protected against—and fantasized about, insofar as it confirms a larger narrative claim of victimhood on the right: that “real” (white, Christian-background) Dutch people are *themselves* the ultimate victims of their unwanted Muslim fellow citizens, of the supposed failures of European political integration and “multiculturalism,” and of the Islamic world beyond.

## The Nationalization of Holocaust Memory

The early decades of Holocaust and wartime memorialization in the Netherlands followed a similar pattern as neighboring Western European countries, in that initial postwar narratives about World War II purposefully avoided separating out Jewish experiences or emphasizing a distinct victimhood. Studies of the emergence of Holocaust memory in the Netherlands challenge the “myth of silence” by demonstrating how the state in fact subsumed Jewish initiatives and expressions of memory under the national narrative of victimhood and resistance against the Nazi occupation (see Van Vree 1995; De Haan 1997; Van Ginkel 2011). The social consequences of the state’s emphasis on universal victimhood and unity directly impacted the Jewish survivors and ultimately shaped individual willingness to speak out about their wartime experiences, the conditions they met upon return to the Netherlands, and the trauma they faced as survivors (Hondius 2003). While cracks in the resistance narrative began to appear in the 1970s, with the establishment of increased financial and psychological initiatives for war victims, cultural representations of specific resistance heroes, and a more active Jewish second-generation willing to challenge the government line on WWII memorialization, the first government apology to the Jewish community did not appear until 2000 (Van Vree 2023). Prime Minister Wim Kok’s apology for the ‘cold reception’ Jews faced when they returned home came only under pressure in the aftermath of the 1997 LiRo affair, during which it was revealed that in the 1960s, the Ministry of Finance held an auction selling off Jewish property stolen by Nazi occupiers, rather than returning it to Jewish owners or family members (Arian 1997).

While Prime Minister Rutte was not willing to make an official apology to the Jewish community in 2012 when faced with questions from other political parties during a parliamentary debate on delayed Jewish restitution for the Holocaust, eight years later, he would make history as the first government official to acknowledge the government’s inaction and complicity in the deportation and murder of 104,000 Jews. For many Jewish organizations, Rutte’s apology at the Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremony came as a

welcome surprise and a necessary step to restoring the relationship between the Jewish community and the Dutch government, but it did not prevent Jewish leaders from questioning why it arrived so late. Rutte has always maintained that there was previously not enough advice or consensus from the Jewish community regarding an apology (Van Soest 2020). According to Centraal Joods Overleg (Central Jewish Consultation) chairman Eddo Verdoner, “It remained a thorn in our side how the government had let Jews down during the Second World War. The demand for an apology has always been there” (Dujardin 2020).

Placing Rutte’s apology within the wider context of the contestation of Holocaust memory in the Netherlands makes one thing clear: by offering formal apologies for the Dutch government’s role during the Holocaust, Rutte’s government had finally nationalized Holocaust commemoration. A key function of any national commemoration is to bestow recognition of belonging, to signal that a certain group or event does indeed figure into conceptions of national identity (see Wiedmer 1999; Burke 2020; Kook and Tirosh 2024). As James Young (2016, 15) argues, “The more fragmented and heterogeneous societies become, it seems, the stronger their need to unify wholly disparate experiences and memories with the common meaning seemingly created in common spaces.” The process of nationalizing Holocaust memory, evident in the new National Holocaust Monument (2021) and the opening of the National Holocaust Museum (2024), communicated the centrality and importance of Holocaust memorialization to the Dutch state, but it did not put an end to debates over the meaning of these memorial spaces and the use of these sites as prisms with which to filter contemporary human rights concerns. In fact, by cementing Holocaust memorialization as a central marker of Dutch identity, it allowed right-wing politicians and the white-majority public to claim historical memory of the Holocaust as a tool to gauge the assimilatory potential of immigrant communities.<sup>1</sup> Even before the process of nationalization was complete, the narrative of Muslim students rejecting Holocaust education in schools, which took anecdotal evidence as fact, shaped public perception of Dutch Muslims as incompatible with Dutch values.<sup>2</sup> This perception paved the way for far-right figures, such as Wilders, to take up the mantle of protecting Dutch values—and Dutch Jews—by demonizing Dutch Muslims.

1 Dirk Moses (2021) and Krijn Thijs (2024) both detail the consequences of marrying state representation and Holocaust commemoration.

2 Mihai Martoiu Ticu (2021) shows how Eddo Verdoner, the National Coordinator for Combating Antisemitism, falsely claimed in a *Volkskrant* article that teachers in big cities skip lessons on the Holocaust because Muslim students have difficulty with it.

## Philosemitism, Israel, and the Remaking of the Dutch Far Right

The national consolidation of Holocaust memory in the Netherlands not only transformed historical narratives of Dutch and Dutch-Jewish victimhood, but also attitudes toward the figure of “the Jew” in the non-Jewish Dutch imagination and discourse. Although Prime Minister Rutte’s official apology in 2020 was a necessary and momentous step in taking accountability on a national scale, it paradoxically left less space for Dutch Jews to negotiate their own relationship to the Holocaust and its legacies for the present. This tension became clear during the Dodenherdenking later that year, when the Dutch-Jewish writer Arnon Grunberg delivered the official address (Grunberg 2020). As the son of two survivors, Grunberg was shocked when he started receiving brazenly antisemitic messages from readers of his newspaper column, which he took as a warning sign that Dutch society had not really achieved what the rituals of remembrance claimed to have achieved, 75 years after the end of World War II. Remembrance is an empty platitude, he said, if it does not serve as a warning against the politics of exclusion in the present.

While Grunberg’s formal address refrained from naming specific politicians, the subtext was clear. His shock at the antisemitic messages he had received as a columnist, he realized, had been naive:

And it is also logical that if certain population groups are spoken about in a manner that is reminiscent of the darkest history of the twentieth century—if that has become normal—sooner or later, it will also become acceptable to speak that way about Jews. For me, it was clear from the beginning: if they are talking about [Dutch] Moroccans, then they are talking about me (Grunberg 2020).

Linking his own experience of antisemitism directly with public racism toward Dutch Moroccans—a synecdoche for Dutch Muslims or Muslim-background Dutch people, who make up approximately 6% of the Dutch population—Grunberg pointed toward the political platform and discourse of far-right leaders like Wilders.

Grunberg’s single sentence connecting antisemitism with racism toward “Moroccans” set off a media firestorm, garnering outrage from right-wing politicians. Grunberg appeared on a major Dutch talk show several days later with Abdelkader Benali, a prominent Moroccan-Dutch novelist, and right-wing JA21 politician Joost Eerdmans to discuss the speech (Op1 2020). In a heated exchange, Eerdmans accused Grunberg of making an

offensive and false equivalence between the persecution of Dutch Jews in the Holocaust and the contemporary treatment of Dutch Muslims. Grunberg was naive, Eerdman said, not to see the threat posed to him, as a Jew, by Moroccan-Dutch people. To drive this point home, Eerdman made a bizarre proposition, suggesting that he, Grunberg, and Benali all wear kippahs and go walking through Rotterdam on a Friday night, suggesting that they would surely be threatened or even attacked on the streets by Dutch Muslims.

Eerdman's dark fantasy of Jewish identification (including the appropriation of symbols of Jewish religiosity) and outrage at Grunberg's naivete toward the supposed threat of Dutch Muslim violence illustrate some of the troubling dynamics that fall under the category of "philosemitism," or "love of Jews," particularly on the far right, which has sought to distance itself from its long history of antisemitism. Among critics, "philosemitism" rightfully draws scrutiny for its essentializing tendencies and, in the aftermath of the Holocaust, its desire to expiate feelings of guilt by European Christians through a kind of appropriating identification with Jews (Cohen 2017). This is not to say that philosemitism is synonymous with antisemitism or is invariably antisemitic. The historians Jonathan Karp and Adam Sutcliffe (2011) argue that philosemitism may, at times, reflect "genuine sympathy" for Jews. "Nevertheless," Evelien Gans points out, "idealisation implies that those idealised can take a deep tumble once they no longer meet the ideal image" (Gans 2017a, 157).

Perhaps no figure embodies the ambivalences of Dutch philosemitism more than Geert Wilders, whose PVV unexpectedly won the largest percentage of votes in the November 2023 parliamentary elections and, after months of negotiations, formed a right-wing government cabinet in July 2024 under Prime Minister Dick Schoof.<sup>3</sup> Both personally and in terms of his political ideology, Wilders may well display such a form of "genuine sympathy" for Jews of the type that Karp and Sutcliffe (2011) identify, rather than a simple form of disguised antisemitism. Throughout his political career, however, Wilders has mobilized a "selective philosemitism" that serves primarily as a weapon against Dutch Muslims, his primary political target (Gans 2013). Moreover, there is a further tension between the idealization of Jews as such, and of Israeli Jews specifically, that is elided in this apparent affection from Wilders. As Gans (2017a, 161) demonstrates, after the June 1967 war

3 This right-wing government included the Freedom Party (PVV), the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), New Social Contract (NSC), and the Farmer-Citizen Movement (BBB). The government fell on June 3, 2025, after Wilders pulled the PVV's support, complaining that the other parties refused to endorse its harsh immigration and asylum plan.

between Israel and the surrounding Arab states, the locus of philosemitism became “detached from ‘the Jew’ or Jewry. This time [it] seems to imply an almost unconditional embrace of Israel.” Simultaneously, “‘the Jew’ and Israel would remain intertwined,” such that Dutch Jews were only fully legible with respect to an idealized image of Israel, and not in their own right (Gans 2017a, 161).

Nor have Wilders and the PVV entirely avoided associations with the traditional antisemitism of the far right. Wilders has cultivated ties with Jean-Marie Le Pen’s daughter, Marine Le Pen, who formally distanced herself and the Front National party from her father’s antisemitism; still, Wilders has not been unequivocal in disavowing Jean-Marie Le Pen’s legacy (Gans 2013, 6-7). Long-time PVV member and current Minister of Health, Welfare, and Sport, Fleur Agema, was revealed to have posted to the neo-Nazi website Stormfront under her own name in 2004 (Dohmen 2007). Most recently, Wilders congratulated the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party, a party that has also used philosemitism to attract Jewish voters and distract from its neo-Nazi rooted ideological platform (Kahn 2022), on its second-place results in the February 23, 2025 federal Bundestag elections (DutchNews.nl 2025). In other cases, the links between antisemitism and the PVV have been indirect but no less consequential: seeking to eliminate halal slaughter out of antipathy for Muslims through support for a 2011 parliamentary bill, kosher slaughter came under attack as well, and the political discussion generated both anti-Muslim and antisemitic commentary online (Gans 2013, 7-8). As early as 2014, *The Times of Israel* asked if the “honeymoon” between Wilders and Dutch Jews had ended, particularly in light of his infamous racist attacks on Dutch Moroccans that year, which liberal Dutch Jews viewed as an attack on a fellow minoritized group (Liphshiz 2014). His solution to criticisms from parts of the Dutch-Jewish community has been to turn his focus elsewhere—Israel—while still claiming the mantle of protecting Jews as a whole. While this turn could be read as simply hypocritical in light of the PVV’s ongoing failure to distance itself successfully from antisemitism, Wilders’s proprietary relation to Jewish victimhood stakes a deeper, more insidious claim: the assertion that ethnonationalism is the solution to Jewish “weakness,” as embodied historically in the Holocaust (Gans 2017b) and today under the threat of Dutch Muslims.

Indeed, if Wilders’s philosemitism does contain “genuine sympathy” for Jews, it is expressed primarily in the form of admiration for Israel. As a young adult, Wilders lived in Israel for two years, and he has visited the country many dozens of times since (Wertheim 2017, 280). He has built alliances with leading right-wing politicians and activists in the Israeli settler movement,

referring to the occupied West Bank as “Judea and Samaria” (Wertheim 2017, 280). Unlike evangelical Christian Zionist leaders in the U.S. (Goldman 2018), however, Wilders himself is not motivated by messianic dreams about returning all of the world’s Jews to Israel to catalyze the Apocalypse and second coming of Christ (although he does seem to attach great cultural significance to the city of Jerusalem as a “Judeo-Christian” possession). Instead, he views Israel as a bulwark for “the West” against the Islamic world (Subotić 2022).<sup>4</sup> When he evokes “Judeo-Christian values,” then, his ideological vision is based little on theology and far more on a rigid sense of separation between the supposedly enlightened West and the supposedly fundamentalist Islamic world (Wertheim 2017, 281).

As Wertheim argues, Israel plays an additional role in Wilders’s political imagination beyond serving as a “bulwark” between “the West” and the Islamic world, for it also offers a positive model for European nation-states. In a speech in Los Angeles in 2009, Wilders argued that whereas Europeans had learned the wrong lessons from World War II—the need for pluralism and international cooperation, in opposition to virulent nationalism—the Zionist project, here conflated with the Jewish people as a whole, did “exactly the opposite”:

*The Jewish people...realized that without a nation-state of their own there could be no safety for their people.... My friends, what we need today is Zionism for the nations of Europe. The Europeans need to follow the example of the Jewish people and reestablish their nation-state (Wertheim 2017, 282).*<sup>5</sup>

Note that Jewish people are depicted as wholly separate from Europe or any other countries besides Israel; just as Israel is the proper home for the Jewish people writ large, so should Europe develop into its own strong ethnostates. Despite his self-proclaimed role as their defender, then, Wilders

4 In this respect, Wilders has much in common with other far-right leaders in Europe, such as Hungary’s Victor Orbán, whose antisemitism is far more explicit. Jelena Subotić (2022, 468) argues that it is a mistake to interpret these political movements’ pro-Israel stances as philosemitic, because their stances are instrumentalizing and rely on antisemitic tropes about Jews as powerful figures. Still, Wilders’s decades-long personal relationship with Israel suggests a more complex relationship with the state—even though he simultaneously invokes the antisemitic conspiracy theories within Europe that are carefully detailed by Subotić.

5 Emphasis added. To be sure, many mainstream Dutch-Jewish institutions and Dutch-Jewish people support Zionism and the State of Israel in some form. Wilders, however, treats “the Jewish community” as monolithic and claims to speak on its behalf.

puts Dutch Jews in precisely the ambiguous position that Gans warned about in the dynamics of philosemitism: admired in relation to Israel as a model ethnostate, yet subject to feelings of disappointment and even betrayal if failing to live up to the philosemites' rigid idealizations. This ambivalence has threatened to break down into outright hostility toward Jews who are critical of Israeli policy in the aftermath of the October 7, 2023 Hamas attacks, as evident in two events that sparked international controversy: the invited speech by Israeli President Isaac Herzog at the opening of the National Holocaust Museum in Amsterdam on March 10, 2024, and the acts of public violence instigated by football hooligans from the Maccabi Tel Aviv team before, during, and after a match with the Ajax team in Amsterdam on November 7, 2024.

### **Sites of Memory, Sites of Protest**

Before World War II, Amsterdam's Jodenbuurt (Jewish Quarter) was home to a vibrant working and middle-class Jewish community. Today, this neighborhood is known as the Jewish Cultural Quarter, its name pointing to the transformation of a living community into a commemorative one. It is here that one can find, within walking distance from each other, the Portuguese Synagogue, Jewish Museum, Never Again Auschwitz Monument, Namenmonument (Holocaust Names Monument), and the Hollandsche Schouwburg. On March 10th, 2024, the National Holocaust Museum joined the ever-growing list of nationalized commemorative and educational spaces in the Quarter. The Museum, over twenty years in the making, provides the first comprehensive history of the Holocaust in the Netherlands. Its opening provided an opportunity for the public to reflect on the place of the Holocaust within Dutch memorial politics. As Karen Till explains in her study of Berlin's memorial terrain, "Cultural practices of social memory take place and define a public space through which groups debate their understandings of the past and contemporary social relationships to that past" (Till 2005). In the case of the Holocaust Museum, the invitation of Israeli President Isaac Herzog added another layer of memory politics to an already fraught memorial landscape, intertwining a past genocide with one in the present.

In response to Herzog's invitation, which was extended prior to October 7th, the Palestinian Community in the Netherlands (PGNL) and the Jewish anti-Zionist organization Erev Rav issued a statement calling for a peaceful protest at Waterlooplein, several blocks from the Museum. In

addition to the organized protest, an association of 200 mosques asked King Willem-Alexander not to host Herzog (Trouw, 2024b). Leftwing coalition GroenLinks-PvDA also weighed in, with MP Kati Piri issuing a statement that presented Herzog's presence at the unveiling as "overshadowing" the importance of the Museum. The statement, which resulted in a turmoil between the two leftwing parties, ended by asking Prime Minister Rutte to have President Herzog answer for his role in the horror in Gaza (NOS 2024a).

In their statement on the protest on Instagram, Erev Rav made clear that they were not protesting the Museum itself, writing: "The resilience of the martyrs of the Holocaust guide our actions—because even our dead deserve to rest without having their killings weaponized to normalize the genocide of the Palestinian people" (@erevrav, March 6, 2024). Their clear articulation of the stakes of Herzog's visit communicated their refusal to view the Holocaust Museum as a site for the whitewashing of Herzog's role in the genocide. In an interview with Leonie van Nierop (2024) two days before the official opening of the museum, Emile Schrijver and Liesbeth Bijvoet, the General and Business Director of the Jewish Cultural Quarter, explained how they've navigated this contested memorial terrain while remaining true to the goals of the Quarter in educating the population about the Holocaust and its contemporary echoes. In addressing the protest, Schrijver stated,

If we stand for the importance of a democratic constitutional state, then the right to demonstrate is part of that and then we must dare to embrace that. We do want the opening ceremony to remain dignified. And that the protest cannot be experienced as threatening in any way by the Holocaust survivors we have invited.

The question of whether the protest was perceived as threatening or 'shameful' became the sticking point in discussions on the significance and impact of the demonstration and was weaponized by far-right figures such as Wilders to cast protesters as dangerous to Dutch society.

When the crowd gathered near Waterlooplein, a spontaneous gathering of protesters, some waving Israeli flags and some waving Palestinian flags, also arrived near the Museum itself. In the crowd positioned around the Portuguese Synagogue, the arrival point for dignitaries and guests, signs reading "Jews against genocide" and "Museum, ja/Herzog, nee" could be seen amongst those chanting "Free Palestine" and "Ceasefire Now" (NOS 2024b). By the end of the day, thirteen people were arrested for disturbing public order and vandalism, which included throwing eggs at police vans

and setting off fireworks (NOS 2024c). But other than these small and isolated acts, the protest at Waterlooplein never devolved into violence. At the protest, Amsterdammers of all ages came together to express their disapproval of Herzog and Israeli actions in Gaza (NOS 2024d).

In the aftermath of the protest, multiple narratives emerged with respect to the actions of protesters. Statements by conservative and far-right politicians and articles in multiple newspapers took the opportunity to accuse the protesters of antisemitism and characterize the protest as one against Holocaust memory and education (NOS 2024e). The outgoing Minister for Justice and Security, Dilan Yeşilgöz-Zegerius, posted on X that she hoped people would visit the Museum, including “those who felt the need to boo Holocaust survivors as they came out of the Portuguese synagogue or entered the museum. A true outrage, extremely painful and unnecessary” (@DilanYesilgoz, March 10, 2024). This line, one which portrayed the protesters as disrespectful to Holocaust survivors and in direct conflict with the Museum’s mission, appeared frequently in the days after. In response to a letter from the board of the Liberal Jewish Community (Roele 2024) in which they expressed their dismay over the protest and the lack of intervention by the City and Police, and the multiple reactions across the political spectrum, Mayor Halsema wrote a letter to the City Council explaining that the protest never posed a danger to guests and dignitaries and Police acted accordingly by not escalating tensions (Velzel 2024). The investigation into antisemitic speech by the Public Prosecution Service, which was launched after a complaint by the Central Jewish Consultation (CJO), could not find evidence of the slogans cited by Museum attendees and dropped their case (NOS 2024f).

During the debate with the City Council, Halsema cited the criticism from politicians who were not present at the unveiling and “did not bother to wait for the facts” (NOS 2024g). Halsema was referencing statements from Wilders, who used the demonstrations and the media’s investigation into the events of the day to further his crusade against the Dutch Muslim population and present himself and his party as the saviors of the Jewish community. In a post on X the day of the protest, Wilders referred to protesters as “ Hamas-fans” and declared, “Why did we ever let this scum into our country? They don’t belong here!” (@geertwilderspvv, March 10, 2024). Wilders, who has appeared in court several times due to his racist anti-Moroccan and Islamophobic statements, has long championed greater restrictions on immigration from Islamic countries (BBC 2020). The protest of Herzog, and by extension Israeli actions in Gaza, provided Wilders with the opportunity to further demonize the Dutch Muslim community under

the guise of cracking down on antisemitism. Tweeting the next day, Wilders doubled down on presenting protesters as antisemites who disgraced the unveiling, but this time, he cast blame on Halsema by suggesting that the protesters' proximity to the Museum was a "political action by the extreme left mayor of Amsterdam" (@geertwilderspvv, March 11, 2024). When Rutte spoke up in support of Halsema, Wilders shot back in another post on X, "Rutte supports Halsema. I support Jewish Netherlands" (@geertwilderspvv, March 11, 2024). Here, Wilders once again casts himself as the sole defender of the Jewish community, deliberately ignoring the role of anti-Zionist Jews in organizing the protest, because those Jews who do not conform to Wilders's philosemitic insistence upon support for Israel forfeit their Jewishness. In purporting to speak for Dutch Jews, Wilders reduces the Jewish community to one-dimensional victims, incapable of speaking and acting on their own behalf, reliant upon the Dutch, Christian population to come to their aid. The process of implicating the left, which he also associates with Dutch Muslims, in degrading the importance of Holocaust memorialization, allows Wilders and his right-leaning former coalition partners to claim that they alone should determine the character of Dutch Holocaust memory. The character of this nationalized memory is one which fits his purpose—to wield as a political tool in determining who is and who is not part of the nation.

### **“The Gaza of Europe”: Conflations of Holocaust Victims and Israeli Football Hooligans**

“If the armies of Hezbollah and Hamas march through the streets of Tel Aviv, Amsterdam and Paris will be lost,” wrote Wilders's right-hand man, Martin Bosma, in his 2010 *The Sham Elite* (Wertheim 2017, 280). From within their apocalyptic framework, Bosma and Wilders's violent dreams seemed to come true in a displaced form when the Maccabi Tel Aviv football team played Ajax in Amsterdam on November 7, 2024. It was not Hezbollah or Hamas that marched the streets in Tel Aviv, of course, but instead, hundreds of Israeli fans who came to the Dutch capital. Trouble began long before the match itself, as groups of Israelis, particularly young men, gathered in city squares and shot off illegal fireworks; pulled down Palestinian flags from the windows of Dutch homes; chanted racist slogans like “Death to Arabs” and “There are no children left in Gaza,” explicitly celebrating the ongoing Israeli genocidal war in Gaza; and assaulted a taxi driver and damaged his vehicle, among other incidents (Henley 2024).

These widespread and sustained provocations were largely ignored in the media coverage of what happened during the night after the game, when physical fights broke out between groups of Maccabi Tel Aviv fans and Amsterdam locals, including verbal altercations and serious physical assaults, leading to arrests of 10 Israelis and 52 Dutch citizens (DutchNews.nl 2024a). What drew almost singular attention was the allegedly widespread antisemitic character of the assaults suffered by Israelis.<sup>6</sup> In some cases, these attacks did show antisemitic animus: screenshots from social media accounts included some uses of the term *jodenjacht*, or “Jew hunt,” by groups of Dutch young men seeking to attack Israeli hooligans.<sup>7</sup> In a press conference on November 8th, in the immediate aftermath of the chaos, Mayor Halsema sought to reassure Jewish Dutch and Israeli people in Amsterdam that city authorities would protect them, adding: “I understand very well that this brings back the memory of pogroms” from Amsterdam’s darkest history (NL Times 2024).

Two days later, however, Halsema expressed regret over this statement, for both anti-Muslim politicians like Wilders and the Israeli government pounced on the term “pogrom,” explicitly conflating the memory of Dutch Jewish persecution during the Holocaust with the violence directed at Israeli football fans. “The Israeli government spoke of a ‘Palestinian pogrom on the streets of Amsterdam’ and in The Hague [,] the words were used to discriminate against Moroccan Amsterdammers, Muslims. That is not what I meant or what I wanted,” she clarified (DutchNews.nl 2024b). Israeli leaders attacked Halsema’s correction as a betrayal of Jewish safety and encouraged Wilders in his ongoing attacks on Halsema’s supposed failure to stand up to Dutch Muslims as a hostile, thoroughly antisemitic population.

As during the protests of President Herzog’s speech at the National Holocaust Museum, Wilders’s attack on Mayor Halsema and on Dutch Muslims claimed the mantle of protecting Jewish victims, despite clear dissent from some Dutch Jews themselves. In an op-ed, Eva Prins, the daughter of Holocaust survivors, wrote that not only were the terms *jodenjacht* and “pogrom” inaccurate; their use insulted the memory of Holocaust victims (Prins 2024). Nor had antisemitism been the motive of the attacks on the

6 Our use of the term “allegedly” is not intended to claim that there is zero evidence of antisemitism at play in specific incidents, which can indeed be found in videos on social media. We do argue, however, that decontextualized claims about antisemitism as the driving factor, and projected onto Dutch Muslims as a whole, are both false and *prima facie* racist.

7 It is worth noting, however, that “we go Jew hunting” was a chant popularized in the 1980s by fans of rival clubs against Amsterdam’s Ajax, which has long had a reputation as a “Jewish” club, due to the relatively large Jewish fanbase prior to the Holocaust (Seijbel et al. 2022, 843).

Maccabi Tel Aviv hooligans, who were not “fans” but rather proud representatives of a regime that is justifiably accused of genocide at the International Court of Justice in the Hague, she argued. For Wilders and for center-right leaders, by contrast, the attacks on the Maccabi Tel Aviv hooligans called for a similar proprietary response toward “their” Jews. At an Amsterdam rally organized by Christians for Israel and numerous Dutch Jewish organizations on November 28, 2024 under the slogan “We stand beside our Jews,” VVD MP Ulysse Ellian posted on X, “We stand for the protection of the Jewish community. Always,” followed by an Israeli flag emoji (@UlysseEllian, November 28, 2024).

Not surprisingly, it was Wilders who made the conflation of Israelis and Jews most forcefully. On the night of the riots, he posted on X, in English: “A pogrom in the streets of #Amsterdam. We have become the Gaza of Europe. Muslims with Palestinian flags hunting down Jews” (@geertwilderspvv, November 7, 2024). The bizarre claim that Amsterdam had become the “Gaza of Europe,” posted during Israel’s ongoing destruction of Gaza, functioned as role reversal of victims and perpetrators in which the white, Christian-background Dutch populace were victims of Muslim violence. In this conceptualization, “Gaza” is not a stand-in for a brutalized Palestinian populace and terrain, but rather a symbol of Israeli trauma. His reference to “pogroms” allows him to couch his true concern, the so-called Islamization of Dutch society, within his supposed concern for the welfare of Dutch Jews, whose victim status is ultimately appropriated. But in declaring that “we have become the Gaza of Europe,” Wilders’s true goal is laid bare. He sees himself and the white-majority populace as victims of a non-existent Muslim crusade to change the very foundations of Dutch culture and society. If he and his party are victims, then whatever actions they take, such as calling for deportation of entire groups of people, is justified. In the end, Jews are mere props—possessions to be mobilized in his underlying mission to create a white ethnostate.

## Conclusion

The nationalization of Dutch Holocaust memory that culminated with the government and crown’s apology to the Jewish community was the result of decades of contestation and negotiation, much of which took place around commemorative days and the construction of new sites of memory. This nationalization fulfilled demands for official recognition of Dutch complicity in the persecution of Jews in the Holocaust. But once achieved,

however, this nationalization became a powerful tool for the far right and its own consolidation of power under Geert Wilders, primarily to demonize Dutch Muslims and to cast his political opponents as antisemitic. Through his philosemitic turn toward Israel and his admiring support for Israeli ethnonationalism, Wilders has both laundered right-wing antisemitism and appropriated the history of Jewish suffering for the right's own narrative of white Dutch victimhood. Where exactly Wilders's embrace of the Israeli right leaves Dutch Jews is ambiguous. In the aftermath of the protests at the National Holocaust Museum, PVV politician Mikael Boon argued during a parliamentary debate (2024) on antisemitism in the lower house, "The lowest point was the anti-Semitic hate orgy that took place at the opening of the Holocaust Museum in Amsterdam. At that moment it became clear to everyone that the same hatred of Jews that caused the Holocaust is now back in our capital." Regardless of their own diverse views on Israel and often critical stance toward Israel's genocidal war on Gaza, Dutch Jews are ultimately figured as proprietary victims in the right's larger narrative, tacitly belonging to the "true" (white, Christian-background) Dutch nation, and perilously suspended between the genocidal past of the Holocaust and their present, supposedly ever-threatened victimhood at the hands of Dutch Muslims.

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