Topographies of Exclusion
Spatial Politics and Ghettoization in Nazi-Occupied Amsterdam

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USC Humanities Grant Proposal
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I am happy to report that the resources from the Office of the Provost – in this particular case in the form of a 2014 Humanities Grant – have been put to excellent use and have resulted not merely in an academic publication, but also in securing tenure and promotion to Associate Professor of the grant recipient.

To recap, the project entitled “Topographies of Exclusion: Spatial Politics and Ghettoization in Nazi-Occupied Amsterdam” aimed to investigate the failed attempt to establish a ghetto in the Dutch capital in 1941. The determination on the part of Nazi officials to concentrate Amsterdam Jews was remarkable, for ghettoization was not part of Nazi policy in Western Europe. While the Łódź and Warsaw ghettos, where hundreds of thousands of Jews died of starvation and disease during World War II, are infamous in the history of the Holocaust, this type of forced urban segregation has never been understood as a spatial strategy implemented west of Berlin. As the standard histories of Nazi occupation policy show, Jews from Holland, Belgium, France, Italy, Greece, and the German Reich were systematically shipped by train to ghettos, concentration camps, and, after 1941, to death camps located on Polish soil. Creating a ghetto in Amsterdam, where the large majority of Jews had been “organically” concentrated in the popular Jewish neighborhood since the early 1600s, went not only against the occupier’s modus operandi; it also seemed utterly superfluous.

In March, 1941, however, the Nazi commissioner for the city of Amsterdam, Hans Böhmeker, ordered part of the Jewish neighborhood sealed. Local recruits put up barbed-wire barricades at designated areas, raised the drawbridges over the city’s canals that allowed access to and from the Jewish neighborhood, and mounted street signs bearing the German and Dutch designators “Judenviertel” and “Joodsche Wijk” [Jewish Quarter]. Nazi officials then proceeded to discuss various strategies to relocate the many non-Jewish residents from the designated area so as to complete the process of isolation.

Whereas the attempt to establish a ghetto in Amsterdam is fascinating on its own, an equally interesting development is that it failed. The closure lasted only a few days, after which the barricades were removed and the drawbridges lowered. Non-Jewish families continued to live in the area, as did Jewish families in districts other than the Jewish neighborhood. After a second attempt in November 1941, the plans for creating what the American geographer W. A. Douglas Jackson labeled a sealed “pariah landscape” were finally shelved.

My proposal made the argument that a deeper investigation of what happened here would be significant for a variety of reasons. First, it grants us insight into the relationship between Nazi officials, the newly established Jewish Council, the Amsterdam civic authorities, and the larger public. Second, the case of Amsterdam could give us clues to why ghettoization policies were never enforced in Western Europe. Amsterdam is the only place in Western Europe for which we have explicit evidence of debates over the possibility of establishing a sealed ghetto, so an investigation into its collapse illuminates why the occupied urban landscapes of Western Europe were less conducive to Jewish segregation. Finally, this project would add a spatial component to a field of study that has, until recently, been impervious to the merits of multi-disciplinarity.

This project, then, veers beyond textual sources and engages in the mapping and landscape study of the proposed ghetto. While it includes communiqués and reports from the various bodies involved – such as the written correspondence between Böhmeker, the Amsterdam municipality, and others – it will also consider the capital’s geographic profile, its infrastructure, and the ways in which power was exercised through the control of space at a
time of war. Describing the architecture of the ghetto in historical, cultural, and geographic context, in other words, is constructive even if the actual ghetto never fully materialized.

The Humanities Grant allowed me to three things successfully: First, it generously permitted recipients to buy out courses ($10,000), which provided much-needed time to conduct primary source research and to write. As a result of this, an article based on this research has been accepted for publication in one of the most respected journals in the field of Jewish Studies, namely *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*. The article, entitled “An Urban Semiotics of War: Signs and Sounds in Nazi-Occupied Amsterdam” will be forthcoming in Volume 30, 2016. Furthermore, as I have presented this work in academic circles, I have received requests to review newly published work on Dutch Jewry during the Holocaust. I recently reviewed Bernard Wasserstein’s *The Ambiguity of Virtue: Gertrude van Tijn and the Fate of the Dutch Jews* for *Marginalia Review of Books* (September 1, 2015) [http://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/possible-moralities-in-impossible-times-by-saskia-coenen-snyder/](http://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/possible-moralities-in-impossible-times-by-saskia-coenen-snyder/)

Second, the Humanities Grant covered an important research visit to the Netherlands Institute of War Documentation (NIOD) in Amsterdam, whose records served as the basis for my research project. The NIOD holds the correspondence records of Nazi leadership in the Dutch capital, the Amsterdam municipal authorities, and the Jewish Council. It also stores an impressive collection of Dutch resistance pamphlets and underground newspapers, as well as photographic materials of Nazi efforts to ghettoize the Jewish population. Were it not for the Provost’s Office support, I would not have been able to collect these historical documents. The budgeted $4,600 covered air fare, accommodations, and per diem expenses for two weeks.

Lastly, the Humanities Grant strengthened and enriched my Tenure and Promotion file, which was approved unanimously by the History Department, the USC Tenure and Promotion Committee, and the University’s President, Dr. Pastides in the Spring, 2014.

I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to the grant committee members and the Provost’s Office for the continued support, not merely financially, but also professionally. I am fortunate to work at a university that is so generous to its faculty members. Thank you!

Sincerely yours,

~Saskia Coenen Snyder