

ANTI-SEMITISM THROUGH THE AGES

From the Early Church to 1400

Antisemitism has persisted in many forms for over two thousand years. In the first millennium of the Christian era, leaders in the European Christian (Catholic) hierarchy developed or solidified as doctrine ideas that all Jews were responsible for the crucifixion of Christ, and that the destruction of the Temple by the Romans and the scattering of the Jewish people was punishment both for past transgressions and for continued failure to abandon their faith and accept Christianity.

In the tenth and eleventh centuries, these doctrines about Jews were hardened and unified in part because of the following: the threat to the Church hierarchy from the impending split between Roman Catholicism and Greek Orthodoxy (1054); successive waves of Muslim conquest; end of millennium fervor; successes in converting the heathen ethnic groups of northern Europe; and military-spiritual zeal of the Crusades.

Seeking to retain their beliefs and culture, Jews became bearers of the only minority religion in Christian Europe. In some countries, Jews were welcomed from time to time, but they found themselves increasingly isolated because faith was perceived as the principal form of identity and intensely influenced both public and private life. Jews do not share the Christian belief that Jesus is the Son of God, and many Christians considered this refusal to accept Jesus' divinity as arrogant. For centuries the Catholic Church taught that Jews were responsible for Jesus' death, not recognizing (as most historians do today), that Jesus was executed by the Roman government because officials viewed him as a political threat to their rule. As outsiders, Jews were objects of violent stereotyping and subject to violence against their persons and property.

Among the myths about Jews that took hold in this period was the "blood libel," a myth that Jews used the blood of Christian children for ritual purposes. Other myths included the idea that Jewish failure to convert to Christianity was a sign both of service to the anti-Christ as well as of innate disloyalty to European (i.e. Christian) civilization. Conversely, the conversion of individual Jews was perceived as insincere and as having materialistic motives.

This teaching provided the grounds upon which a superstructure of hatred could be built. Theological antisemitism reached its height in the Middle Ages. Among the most common manifestations of antisemitism throughout the ages were what we now call *pogroms* (riots launched against Jews by local residents, and frequently encouraged by the authorities). In desperate times, Jews often became scapegoats for many natural catastrophes. For example, some clerics preached and some parishioners believed that Jews brought on the "Black Death," the plague that killed millions of people in Europe in the 14th Century, as divine retribution for their allegedly blasphemous and satanic practices.

The Early Modern Era, 1300–1800

During the first centuries of the early modern era in Europe, Jews were invited to settle in central and eastern Europe with certain permissions and protections as well as restrictions on residence and occupation. Under the "protection" of early modern rulers and landholding aristocrats, Jews were permitted and encouraged to perform managerial and commercial tasks that the ruling classes had neither the skills nor inclination to perform themselves. Since the Catholic and Orthodox Churches banned usury (lending money at interest) and generally looked down upon business practices as immoral, Jews came to fill the vital but unpopular role of moneylenders for the Christian majority.

Jews were permitted to engage in commerce, supply, manufacturing, finance, handicraft manufacturing, and the free professions—including art, music, literature, theater, and, as it developed, journalism. Jews also were permitted to work as managers on landed estates and tax collectors. A small minority of Jewish individuals and families did very well and were therefore conspicuous. Most

Jews engaged in commerce and handicrafts production for the local market, and were often as poor as the peasantry among whom they lived and who bought their wares.

However, central and east European rulers forbade the Jewish settlers from owning land, from serving as officers in the military, and from holding positions in state service unless they converted to Christianity. Absolutist rulers consolidated modern states in the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries and loyalty to a nation increasingly competed with religious confession as a central human identifying marker in the nineteenth century. Jews, who still endured the above restrictions, did not become associated in the popular mind with the most "noble" professions of early modern central and eastern Europe: landed aristocracy, military service, and state service.

As central and east European guilds increasingly denied membership to Jewish handicraftsmen unless they converted, Jews were increasingly forced out of small-scale manufacturing. Among the stereotypes that were developed or reinforced by these special permissions and restrictions on the Jews were that 1) Jews did not work hard or produce goods with their hands; 2) Jews chose to work with money and to trade in goods they did not produce because of their skills, their greed, and their desire to manipulate and cheat Christians; 3) Jews were cowards in a fair fight and avoided military service; 4) Jews preferred meaningless study and frivolous entertainment to hard, creative work; and 5) Jews were insincere and potentially disloyal in that they converted to Christianity to obtain material benefits.

The Era of Nationalism, 1800–1918

Beginning in the eighteenth century with Great Britain and ending with the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans, the European nations established in constitutions the principle of equality under the law and dropped all restrictions on residence or occupational activities for Jews and other national and religious minorities. At the same time, the societies of Europe underwent rapid economic change and social dislocation. The emancipation of the Jews allowed them to live and work among non-Jews, but exposed them to a new form of political antisemitism. It was secular, social, and influenced by economic considerations, though it often reinforced and was reinforced by traditional religious stereotypes.

The emancipation of the Jews enabled them to own land, enter the civil service, and serve as officers in the national armed forces. It created the impression for some others—particularly those who felt left behind, traumatized by change, or unable to achieve occupational satisfaction and economic security in accordance with their expectations—that Jews were displacing non-Jews in professions traditionally reserved for Christians. It also created for some the impression that at the same time, Jews were being overrepresented in future-oriented professions of the late nineteenth century: finance, banking, trade, industry, medicine, law, journalism, art, music, literature, and theater.

The collapse of restraints on political activism and the broadening of the electoral franchise on the basis of citizenship, not religion, encouraged Jews to be more politically engaged. Though active all along the political spectrum, Jews were most visible—due to increased opportunities—among liberal, radical, and Marxist (Social Democratic) political parties.

The introduction of compulsory education and the broadening of the franchise toward universal suffrage spawned the development of antisemitic political parties and permitted existing parties to use antisemitic rhetoric to obtain votes. Publications such as the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which first appeared in 1905 in Russia, generated or provided support for theories of an international Jewish conspiracy.

As religious confession became subsumed in European political culture by national identity and nationalist sentiment, a new series of stereotypes that reinforced and was reinforced by older prejudices fueled antisemitic politics: 1) enjoying the benefits of citizenship, Jews were nevertheless secretly disloyal—their "conversion" was only for material gain; 2) Jews displaced non-Jews in traditionally "noble" professions and activities (land ownership, the officer corps, the civil service, the teaching profession, the universities), while they "clannishly" blocked the entry of non-Jews into professions that they controlled and that represented the future prosperity of the nation (for example,

industry, trade, finance, and the entertainment industry); 3) Jews used their disproportionate control of the media to mislead the "nation" about its true interests and welfare; and 4) Jews had assumed the leadership of the Social Democratic, and later, Communist movements in order to destroy middle class values of nation, religion and private property. That these prejudices bore little relationship to political, social, and economic realities in any European country did not matter to those who became attracted to their political expression.

Racial Antisemitism, 1875–1945

With the development during the last third of the nineteenth century of technological progress and scientific knowledge, especially about human biology, psychology, genetics, and evolution, some intellectuals and politicians developed a racist perception of Jews. This perception developed within a broader racist view of the world based on notions of "inequality" of "races" and the alleged "superiority" of the "white race" over other "races."

Belief in the superiority of the "white race" was both inspired and reinforced by the contact of European colonist-conquerors with native populations in the Americas, Asia, and Africa, and buttressed as pseudo-science by a perversion of evolutionary theory known as *Social Darwinism*. Social Darwinism postulated that human beings were not one species, but divided into several different "races" that were biologically driven to struggle against one another for living space to ensure their survival. Only those "races" with superior qualities could win this eternal struggle which was carried out by force and warfare. Social Darwinism has always been the product of bogus science: to this day, despite a century and a half of efforts by racists to find it, there is no biological science to support social Darwinist theory.

These new "antisemites," as they called themselves, drew upon older stereotypes to maintain that the Jews behaved the way they did—and would not change—because of innate racial qualities inherited from the dawn of time. Drawing as well upon the pseudoscience of racial eugenics, they argued that the Jews spread their so-called pernicious influence to weaken nations in Central Europe not only by political, economic, and media methods, but also literally by "polluting" so-called pure Aryan blood by intermarriage and sexual relations with non-Jews. They argued that Jews did this deliberately in order to sap the will and ability of Germans or Frenchmen or Hungarians to resist a biologically determined "Jewish drive" for world domination.

Though secular racists drew upon religious imagery and stereotypes to define hereditary Jewish "behavior," they insisted that alleged Jewish "traits" were handed down from generation to generation. Since "Jews" did not form a religious group, but a "race," the conversion of an individual Jew to Christianity did not change his racial "Jewishness" and was therefore by nature an insincere conversion.

In the late nineteenth century in Germany and Austria, politicians took advantage of both traditional and racist antisemitism to mobilize votes as the electoral franchise widened. In his political writings during the 1920s, Adolf Hitler named two Austrian politicians who most influenced his own approach to politics: Georg von Schönerer (1842–1921), and Karl Lügner (1844–1910). Schönerer brought the racist antisemitic style and content to Austrian politics in the 1880s and 1890s. Lügner was elected mayor of Vienna, Austria, in 1897, not only because of his antisemitic rhetoric, which for him was primarily a political tool, but because of his oratorical skills and populist charisma that permitted him to communicate his message to broad sectors of the population.