

Anti-Semitism: Its Origins and Popularity

Christian animosity towards Jews has a long history that stems from the time when the Christian sect of Judaism severed its ties with the mother religion and formed its own religion. Since the point of the split, nearly two thousand years ago, Christians have had the desire to isolate, cause financial hardships, make up lies, and even resort to murdering Jews in order to make it clear to them that there was room for only one ideology, one religion in the world, Christianity (Botwinick, p. 10).

Ghettos were usually created to isolate Jews from the Christian masses (Botwinick, p. 13). These ghettos served to keep Christians and Jews separated and helped to ensure that the two worlds did not meet so that the myth that Jews were inferior could be passed down from generation to generation of Christians and, in essence, transform the hatred of Jews into a tradition (Brohmer in Sax, p. 20). Otto von Bismarck capitalized on that myth of Jewish inferiority in his successful efforts to unite German-speaking states into the nation of Germany (Spielvogel, p. 6). Bismarck was able to make the *volk*, the German people, realize that Germans shared a common language, ancestry, and a common belief in Christianity. These shared traits allowed Bismarck to spread the ideals of the *völkisch*, or nationalism, and allowed Germans to realize that “‘the power of the blood’ was more important than the state” (Ibid.).

Völkisch ideology professed that a united German population could be the leader of Europe, but it was argued that it would first be necessary to create a race that was “pure” German (Aryan) to ensure the superiority of the German people over the rest of the world (Ibid.). This patriotic claim was the basis for the creation of racial biology, a modern anti-Semitism as German Wilhelm Marr labeled it in 1873 (Botwinick, p. 20)

with a new, unscientific spin to Charles Darwin's theory of evolution that added the premise that "races...had evolved through time. Some were superior, others were inferior" (Spielvogel, p. 6) Houston Stewart Chamberlain, an Englishman who emigrated to Germany around the turn of the twentieth century, overwhelmingly supported the ideals of racial biology, believing that Germans "were the true creators of culture while the Jews were simply parasites who destroyed culture" (Spielvogel, p. 6). But historian Rita Botwinick explains that Jews were given an unfair shake through claims of "deficiencies that [had] little or no relationship to reality" (Botwinick, p. 3). It took the Christian Middle Ages to discover the "truth" that the Jews were responsible for the misery that the Black Plague brought (Ibid., p. 12) just as it would take a downhill turn in the economy in Germany from 1870 – 1890 caused by new "economic and social problems" of urbanization and the Industrial Revolution to make people believe that Jews were responsible for the new hardships, too (Spielvogel, p. 7).

In the 1890s, conservative voices in the government sounded very similar to those of radical right-wing nationalist and anti-socialist groups due to frustrations caused by the poor economy. These groups also shared the fear that the poor economy could trigger the onset of socialism, which would take power and money away from the anti-liberals that controlled the government. Unfortunately, the agreements in opinion that conservatives began to share with the radicals had the effect of turning the radicals into credible players in the political spectrum (Ibid.). Nationalistic pressure groups, while not having a direct affect on German politics, also played an important role at this crucial time in the young nation's history. The Pan-German League, one of the many nationalistic pressure groups, tried to keep Germans united behind conservative leadership by diverting the public's

attention towards an old enemy, the Jews. The Pan-German League preached that Jews were the “destroyers of national community” (Ibid.). This anti-Semitic rhetoric, which by the 1890s had a well-established foundation, saved the country from revolution and also reinforced the German acceptance of *völkisch* ideals that the Jews were responsible for all problems that Germans faced.

By the time World War I ended on Armistice Day in November 1918, German leaders were not as lucky as they had been in the 1890s when they avoided a change in government. Germany stood as a defeated nation at the hands of American militaristic forces. Germany stood humiliated, as their quest for territorial expansion had come to a halt. On top of German pride that was dealt a blow, economic liabilities and militaristic sanctions imposed by the Treaty of Versailles, which ended the Great War, caused economic hardships for the majority of German citizens (Spielvogel, p. 10). These blows to the ego of Germans, the *volk*, gave the Nazis, an emerging middle-class radical group after World War I the propulsion they needed to gain support, especially from the working class, which was affected the most by the vengeful stipulations of the peace treaty (Ibid., p. 7).

The Nazis with goals of expansionism stayed true to *völkisch* ideals of playing to German patriotism and once again blamed the Jews for the decreased standard of living that Germans were experiencing. By 1933, the Nazis and their leader, Adolph Hitler, had gained a large enough following that they were able to grab power. In an effort to control the masses, the Nazis spread a massive amount of propaganda. Paul Brohmer, a Nazi author who helped to spread their propaganda, wrote in 1933 that for the *volk* to have a great existence, “German man must not think only of himself, but should be cognizant of

his duty to place himself in the service of the people” (Brohmer, p. 206). The Nazis hoped that propaganda such as this would decrease opposition to their rule, and to a large extent, it did. The “people” that Brohmer speaks of was referring to Hitler and his government, which was telling Germans that it was their patriotic duty to take out their frustrations on the people who caused them to face hardships.

To convince the public that Jews were responsible for the miserable fate of Germans citizens, Hitler manipulated historically documented facts, events, and so-called conclusions, such as the Jews had caused the Black Plague, and he mixed them with new interpretations of the words of nineteenth century German intellectuals whose main goal in their time was to make Germans realize that they shared a common heritage. These historical writings were used to support Hitler’s claim that Jews were evil. The Fuhrer dramatically explained that Jews possessed a certain trait that was poisonous to Germany. The evidence that Hitler presented to the masses was convincing enough that people actually started to believe that Jews must be extinguished (Botwinick, p. 23). Hitler was able to manipulate the time-tested prejudice towards Jews into his own self-righteous campaign that made the decimation of “an estimated two-thirds of the Jews living in Europe” into the patriotic and socially acceptable thing to do (Ibid., p. 3) But perhaps the most valuable lesson that can be derived from the tragedy of the Holocaust has been hit on by historian Rita Botwinick. She expresses the importance of understanding the “connection between the men who committed acts of unspeakable brutality during the Holocaust and their claim that they were only carrying out orders” (Ibid., p. 3).