

SUMMARY OF ANTISEMITISM

Antisemitism is the term used for hatred of Jews as a group or Jews as a concept. It is an archaic term conceived in the latter part of the nineteenth century when the social sciences were trying to develop “scientific” terms to match those of the pure sciences. In practice, however, the hatred of Jews has deep roots in history. As far back as ancient times, Jews were often seen as outsiders and a stubborn people who were unwilling to assimilate, primarily because of their religious beliefs.

With the beginning of Christianity, there was an inherent clash between Judaism and Christianity. Christianity grew out of Judaism, but at the same time was competing with it. Early Church fathers believed that the Jews had failed in their role in the world and that Christians had inherited it. In addition, although the Romans crucified Jesus, the blame was put on all Jews everywhere and forever (a false blame that was condemned by the Catholic Church in the 1960s). Jews were also said to be in league with the devil, which both dehumanized and demonized them. For these reasons, not only were Jews seen as outsiders, but they were also regarded as a people who should be eternally punished.

By the Middle Ages, Jews were living in Europe not as an integrated part of society, but as outsiders and on the sufferance of local rulers. Popular antisemitism prevailed partly to win favor with the ruling Romans. Jews could live only where the rulers allowed them and practice only certain trades and professions that generally were shunned by the rest of the population. As a result, Jews often engaged in trade and banking, which led to negative stereotypes that Jews care only for money and engage in shady business practices. When crisis struck, primarily the massive death caused by the “Black Death” in the 1300s, Jews were falsely accused of having caused the sickness by poisoning the wells—they were made the scapegoats for the tragedy. Other accusations included the patently false blood libel—the belief that Jews use the blood of Christians for ritual purposes. As a result of these many layers of anti-Jewish stereotypes, Jews were frequently massacred, expelled, or forcibly converted to Christianity.

By the nineteenth century, a constellation of antisemitic stereotypes was deeply rooted in the Western World. Nevertheless, under the influence of the Enlightenment and modern thought, the process of giving Jews equal rights unfolded in much of Europe. As Jews integrated more, there were some in the general society who applauded these changes and hoped that by assimilating, the allegedly bad characteristics of Jews would disappear. There was a paradox that even among the greatest champions of Jewish rights, there were those who still had many antisemitic beliefs, and Jews frequently faced social discrimination even where they had been granted legal equality.

Especially as the modern nations of Europe took shape, there was heated discussion about whether or not Jews, who were often viewed as a separate group or nation, could really be a part of the broader nation. In light of all the antisemitic stereotypes attributed to them, many people believed Jews were simply not capable of being part of “the nation.”

New stereotypes also arose at this time. It was said that Jewish elders plotted to take over the world. A fabricated record of the supposed Jewish conspiracy was published as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which nevertheless a great many people believed was true and many still believe is accurate today. Jews were also accused of being unpatriotic, despite much evidence to the contrary.

Most significantly during the last third of the nineteenth century, racism as a pseudoscience first surfaced. Racism grew out of the emerging sciences of biology, genetics, and anthropology, and it held that human civilization could be best understood through biology. Moreover, it held that different national and ethnic groups were defined by their biological characteristics, and some groups were superior to others. With the long history of antisemitism as the background, Jews were seen by many racial thinkers as the worst race—strong, yet very dangerous. In other words, all the negative stereotypes Jews supposedly had were now explained as being the result of Jewish biology, or in language of the time, “Jewish blood.” With earlier forms of antisemitism Jews could escape hatred, at least in theory, by converting to Christianity or shedding their alleged bad characteristics by assimilating. As soon as anti-Jewish prejudice was linked to racism, Jews could do nothing to change themselves or the hatred directed toward them.

Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party did not invent antisemitism, but it was central to their ideology. They embraced a racial ideology that stated the Germans were the master race in the world. Their goal was to make Germany a superpower by conquering lands of supposedly lesser people and restructuring society according to racial principles. For the Nazis, the Jews were the racial archenemy. They saw them as a demonic force that aspired to dominate the world, and they believed that the Jews’ victory would spell the end of the world. The Nazis believed that Jews were behind Bolshevism (Communism), exploitative capitalism, and democracy, all of which supposedly threatened mankind. Nazi ideology also argued that Christianity had been weakened by Jewish ideas, such as that all human beings are created in the image of God. In short they blamed Jews for all of humanity’s shortfalls and troubles. Not only did they believe that Jews had no place in a racially restructured Europe, they felt that they must put an end to the “Jewish menace” lest the Jews destroy them.

One would think after the Holocaust antisemitism would have disappeared. Unfortunately it has continued to exist. Today a constellation of antisemitic stereotypes and motifs still may be found, some elements with older ideas and some with newer variations, chief among them hatred of Jews linked to a demonic image of Israel and Zionism.

The Protocols of the Elders of Zion

In 1903, a newspaper in Czarist Russia published a false document that allegedly described a secret action plan by which “the Jews” were plotting to take over the world. Although the Russian secret police quickly proved the document to be a forgery, *The Protocols* was distributed across Europe. The first version in German came out in 1911, in Berlin. In 1937, a court in Switzerland declared this myth of global Jewish conspiracy to be groundless. This finding, however, did not stop the dissemination of *The Protocols* worldwide, including throughout the United States, or its translation into dozens of languages. For instance, in the 1920s, the famous American car manufacturer Henry Ford financed the translation of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* into English. No other antisemitic text has been—and continues to be—so widely distributed.

