

SUMMARY OF ANTISEMITISM



Antisemitism is the term used for hatred of Jews as a group or as a concept. It is an inaccurate term first used in the late nineteenth century when social scientists were trying to develop “scientific” terms to apply to their work; 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 fit in, primarily because of their religious beliefs.

When Christianity began, there was a clash between Judaism and Christianity. Christianity grew out of Judaism, but at the same time was competing with it. Early Church leaders believed that the Jews had failed in their role in the world as God’s chosen people 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 living in Europe did not fit in with society. They were seen as outsiders and a burden to local rulers. Antisemitism was popular, in part, to win favor with the ruling Romans. Jews were restricted in where they could live and often only allowed to do jobs others did not want. 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, such as the “Black Death” in the 1300s, Jews were falsely accused of having caused the sickness by poisoning the wells—they were blamed for the tragedy.

Other lies about Jews included the blood libel—the belief that Jews use the blood of Christians for rituals.

As a result of these anti-Jewish stereotypes, Jews

were often killed, driven out, or forced to convert to Christianity.

By the nineteenth century, antisemitic stereotypes were deeply rooted in the Western World. Still, during the Enlightenment, many Jews gained equal rights in Europe. As Jews were brought into broader society, there were some people who praised these changes and hoped that this would erase the allegedly bad characteristics of Jews. Yet, even among the greatest champions of Jewish rights, there were those who still had many antisemitic beliefs. As a result, Jews often faced social bias even where they had been granted legal equality.

As the modern nations of Europe formed, there was heated discussion about whether or not Jews could really be a part of the broader nation. In light of all the antisemitic stereotypes, many people believed Jews were a separate group. It was felt that they were simply not capable of being part of “the nation.”

New stereotypes also formed at this time. One said that Jewish elders plotted to take over the world. A fake record of the supposed Jewish conspiracy was published as the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Sadly, a great many people believed it 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. It held that human civilization could be best understood through biology. It also said 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. They were viewed as strong, yet very dangerous. All the negative stereotypes about Jews 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. They could also remove their 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 beliefs. They believed that 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 variety of antisemitic stereotypes may still be found. Some contain elements of 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 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.

