<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007166>: United States holocaust memorial

ANTISEMITISM IN HISTORY: FROM THE EARLY CHURCH TO 1400

Sometimes called "the longest hatred," antisemitism has persisted in many forms for over two thousand years. The racial antisemitism of the National Socialists (Nazis) took hatred of Jews to a genocidal extreme, yet the [Holocaust](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005143) began with words and ideas: stereotypes, sinister cartoons, and the gradual spread of hate.

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; 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: 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 on a now Christian continent of Europe. In some countries, Jews were welcomed from time to time, but, at a time in which faith was perceived as the principal form of self-identity and intensely influenced both public and private life, Jews found themselves increasingly isolated as outsiders. 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 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 (read 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*](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005183) (riots launched against Jews by local residents, and frequently encouraged by the authorities). Pogroms were often incited by rumors of blood libel. 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.

ANTISEMITISM IN HISTORY: THE EARLY MODERN ERA, 1300–1800

Especially after the Enlightenment of the nineteenth century, antisemitism changed in ways that reflected new cultural, intellectual, and political realities. During the first centuries of the early modern era in Europe, Jews were invited to settle in central and eastern Europe—and to return to western Europe after expulsion from time to time —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.

On the other hand, 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 (Catholicism, Orthodoxy, or, after the Reformation in the sixteenth century, one of the Protestant denominations). 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, hence did not become associated in the popular mind with the most "noble" professions of early modern central and eastern Europe (where the majority of Jews lived): 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.

ANTISEMITISM IN HISTORY: 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](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007430) named two Austrian politicians who most influenced his own approach to politics: Georg von Schönerer (1842–1921), and Karl Lüger (1844–1910). Schönerer brought the racist antisemitic style and content to Austrian politics in the 1880s and 1890s. Lüger 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.

ANTISEMITISM IN HISTORY: WORLD WAR I

Before [World War I](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007427), radical, racist antisemitism was confined to the fringe of right-wing politics throughout most of Europe and in the United States. Nevertheless, enduring stereotypes of Jews and Jewish "behavior" continued to exist among non-Jews.

Three trends that developed during and immediately after the World War I brought antisemitism, including its racist variant, into the mainstream of European politics.

First, for the nations that lost the war, the dreadful carnage on the battlefield—Europe's first experience with mass man-made death—seemed to be a sacrifice made for no gain. It seemed inexplicable except by insidious internal betrayal. A stab-in-the-back legend attributed the German and Austrian defeat in World War I to internal traitors working for foreign interests, primarily Jews and communists. This legend was widely believed and deliberately disseminated by the defeated German military leadership, seeking to avoid personal consequences for their policies.

Like other negative stereotypes about Jews, the stab-in-the-back legend was believed despite the fact that it was entirely untrue: German Jews had served in the German armed forces loyally, bravely, and out of proportion to their numbers in the population.

Second, the Bolshevik Revolution, the establishment of the Soviet Union, and short-lived experiments with communist dictatorship in Bavaria and Hungary frightened the middle classes all over Europe and even across the Atlantic in the United States. The prominence of individual communists of Jewish descent in the revolutionary regimes (Leon Trotsky in the Soviet Union, Béla Kun in Hungary, and [Ernst Toller](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007168) in Bavaria) confirmed to antisemites the "natural" attraction of Jews and international communism.

Third, in Germany, Austria, and Hungary, the stigma, expressed in the provisions of the Versailles Treaty system, of being blamed for starting the war and having to shoulder the burden of paying damages to the victors, created general anger and despair across the political spectrum. The radical right could then politically exploit this anger and despair.

Among the new stereotypes regarding the "behavior" of Jews that appeared in the wake of World War I and that were deliberately propagated alongside older prejudices were the following myths:

1) Jews had started the war to bring Europe financially and politically into ruin and make Europe susceptible to Jewish "control."

2) Jews exploited the misery of the war to enrich themselves and prolonged it to lead the Bolshevik Revolution in furthering the aim of world revolution.

3) With their inherited cowardice and instinctive disloyalty predisposing them against defending the nation, Jews were responsible for the pernicious malaise behind the front and stabbed the fighting troops in the back (causing the military defeat and democratic/socialist revolution).

4) Foreign Jews dominated the peace negotiations and succeeded in dividing Germans and Hungarians by artificial national borders, while their co-conspirators, the domestic Jews, misled the nation into "surrender" and permanent "enslavement."

5) The Jews controlled the complex finances of the reparations system for their own profit.

6) Having established constitutional democracy, Jews used it to weaken the political will of the nation to resist their influence and to destroy the basis of superior Aryan blood by promoting intermarriage, sexual freedom, and miscegenation.