A Brief Overview of Antisemitism

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The history of **antisemitism** is a long one, but one that changes with time and place. It therefore is difficult to label it as a hate that is identical to others, even though it often shares many features with discrimination and persecution faced by other groups. Antisemitism has sometimes been rooted in religion, sometimes based on politics or nationalism, sometimes the product of racial definitions, and still other times the simple but elusive result of being "different."

Antisemitism contains many contradictory elements. Jews have been viewed as backward, superstitious, physically weak, and culturally inferior even while supposedly being capable of world domination. They have been labeled as subversive, political radicals while also blamed as sinister capitalists and financiers who seek to control media, banking, government.

Discrimination against Jews is particularly difficult to assess and combat because it does not always neatly divide between people who are oppressed and people who oppress. The story of Jews is often one of in-betweenness; they have very often lived at significant disadvantage to those with greater power, but depending upon the place and time, they sometimes occupied a position of relative advantage when compared to people who faced even greater discrimination.

Historians often point to two broad ways in which Jews have faced discrimination, one from the distant past, and one in the modern era. They call the former "**anti-Judaism,**" a persecution based on religious difference, to distinguish it from modern "antisemitism," which usually refers to discrimination connected to political movements and racial classifications.

Ancient and Medieval Antisemitism

Jews trace their ancient origins, as told by the Bible, to a kingdom called Judea on the shores of the eastern Mediterranean sea. They understood themselves as having been chosen by God to bear special customs and commandments that set them apart from other peoples. (In ancient times, many collectives had similar understandings of their distinctive origins).

Although there is evidence of hostility towards Jews even before the birth of Christ, much of the history of anti-Judaism can be rooted in the birth of Christianity out of ancient Judaism around the year 33. Early Christians had two reasons to be hostile to Jews: they blamed Jews for the death of Christ and condemned Jews for not believing in his divinity. (Jews do not believe that Jesus is the incarnation of God as told in the New Testament. Rather, Jews root their beliefs and practices in the Hebrew Bible, what Christians call the Old Testament). This stark difference in beliefs created competition and tensions between Jews and Christians, who each understood their own communities to be the true heirs to the words of the ancient prophets, and the others to be deeply mistaken.

Woodcut of Simon of Trent (1472-1475), an Italian child whose death was blamed on the Jewish community in one of the most infamous blood libels.

In the year 70, not long after the death of Jesus, the center of Jewish life in the city of Jerusalem was destroyed by the Roman Empire. Jews ceased to have a specific political country, and instead fanned out across much of the Middle East and Europe. In the centuries that followed, Christianity gained popularity until it became the official religion of the Roman Empire, and the religion of many of the kingdoms of Europe that followed after the fall of Rome (around the year 476).

This means that for much of the Middle Ages (roughly 500-1500), Jews in Europe lived as a small minority within a larger Christian society. They were perceived as different and wrong in their beliefs and practices, making them visible and often vulnerable to popular hostility and state-sponsored violence. Yet Jews were also tolerated as long as they could accept a status that was inferior to the majority religions. They were often protected by royal rulers and church leaders and subject to distinct laws governing their residency, commerce and other privileges.

Jews were often suspected of plotting to harm Christians. In episodes known as blood libels, that usually occurred close to the Jewish holiday of Passover and the Christian celebration of Easter, Jews were charged with using the blood of Christian children to bake matzah. Blood libels occurred in many European cities during the medieval period. Similar sorts of fears about Jews also resulted in accusations that Jews caused the Black Death, a bubonic plague epidemic in the mid-1300s, by poisoning wells.

Depiction of Jews being massacred for allegedly causing the Black Death. Antiquitates Flandriae (Royal Library of Belgium, manuscript, 1376/77).

Between the 12th and 14th centuries, many European communities no longer wanted Jews to live among them at all. Jews faced massive expulsions from England, France, Spain, and parts of Germany. In places where they were permitted to live, they were often forcibly segregated from Christians into walled neighborhoods called ghettos.

Jews also continued to live in the Middle East in lands where Islam was the official religion. Here, too, Jews were protected by rulers and by the official religion, but were also subject to forms of discrimination and dislike on account of their religious and cultural differences.

Antisemitism in the Modern World

The nineteenth century, the dawn of the modern era in Western Europe, ushered in major changes in ideas about individual rights and citizenship along with the creation of nation-states. These changes increasingly made religion a private affair rather than the business of governments to impose and enforce. Across Europe, Jews were gradually granted citizenship and hence, no longer subject to previous restrictions in business, residency, and occupations. Therefore, Jews found new opportunities to participate in the social

and civil life of the majority; many entered the emerging middle class, and a few enjoyed notable success. Liberal politicians, lawyers, and thinkers who proclaimed the importance of individual rights advocated for Jews to have the same opportunities as non-Jews, and were proud when their vision of a new society bore fruit. At the same time, even those who supported Jewish rights conveyed a clear message that Jews needed "improvement" in education and culture to be worthy of their newfound citizenship.

French antisemitic caricature portraying Jews taking over the world. The Rothschild Jewish banking family, often depicted in antisemitic propaganda, is shown having achieved world domination.

Others, however, saw the new opportunities presented to Jews as a symbol of a world changing too quickly. Modern antisemitic movements emerged as a direct response to the greater rights granted to Jews and the more expansive role they began to play in society. In fact, the term "antisemitism" emerged in **Germany** in the 1870s specifically to address the perceived "threat" of a newly emancipated Jewish population. **Antisemites** argued that greater Jewish rights had been a liberal scheme that allowed Jews to acquire power and status, and to displace and erode the foundations of Christian culture.

They focused their disillusionment on Jews specifically because Jews had benefitted visibly in these new systems and according to antisemites, had caused these changes through shadowy, conspiratorial means. Modern antisemitism encompassed a range of ideas, including nationalistic passions that posited that Jews would never be true patriots as well as systematized racial science—really pseudo-science—that identified Jews not only as culturally unassimilable but also as racially "other."

This was an age that gave rise to conspiracy theories that imagined Jews as possessing secret means of controlling governments, even though no such systems existed. Such ideas, however, offered convenient explanations to those who felt left behind in a rapidly changing world. In an age of mass politics and new media (like the rapidly expanding newspaper industry) such theories circulated more widely and rapidly than ever before.

Although the Jews of Western Europe (England, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, Austria, Hungary) increasingly came to have the same rights as their non-Jewish neighbors, farther east, in the Russian Empire, Jews resided in a multiethnic empire where citizenship was not a prospect for any group. Nevertheless, authorities engaged in frequent campaigns attempts to "Russify" Jews sometimes by offering the "carrot" of education and other times through the "stick" of military conscription. In the Russian Empire, Jews (and other groups) faced restrictions about where they could live and what jobs they could hold. In an era of economic decline and demographic growth, many Russian Jews chose to emigrate to the West, seeking opportunities for themselves and their families in the United States. Others joined a range of revolutionary movements in Russia in pursuit of better future. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a series of pogroms—sporadic episodes of anti-Jewish violence—erupted in Russia, often in the wake of revolutionary upheavals, decimating Jewish property and resulting in loss of life. After the revolutions, leaders in the newly-created Soviet Union often formally condemned antisemitism. The Soviet state offered Jews unprecedented rights and opportunities that they eagerly embraced, though it thwarted the development of Jewish culture.

The United States attracted Jewish immigrants in significant numbers beginning in the midnineteenth century, and those numbers swelled to about three million with the arrival of Jews from Eastern Europe. Unlike the countries of Europe, the United States did not possess a medieval past and a long history of Jewish discrimination. While the US Constitution offered Jews expansive rights and freedoms, Jews faced a range of discriminatory policies in individual states. Moreover, U.S. immigration policies gave preference to Western Europeans and purposely restricted those from Southern and Eastern Europe. This meant that the large number of Jews from the Russian Empire—along with Italians, Poles, and Slavs—were deemed undesirable and they were not considered "white." In yet another example of the "inbetweenness" of Jews, they fared better than Asians, Brown and Black people, but remained excluded and unwelcome in other ways.

This cartoon depicts fears that Jewish immigrants were taking over New York City, turning it into a "New Jerusalem." The Judge, July 22, 1882.
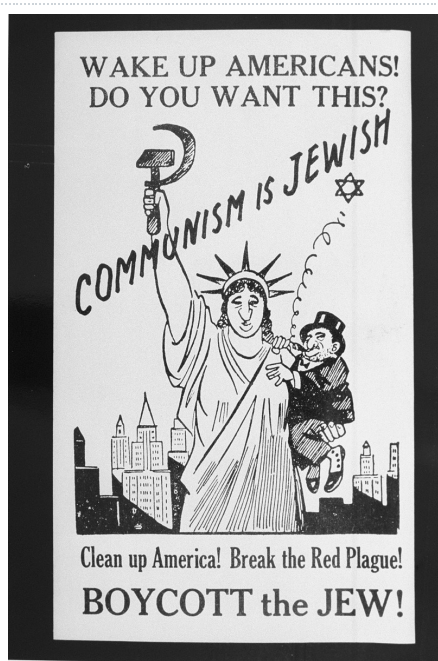
American antisemitic poster equating Jews with communism. The alleged communist conspiracy is depicted as transforming the Statue of Liberty into a Jewish figure. United States, 1939.

Certain attitudes toward Jews prevalent in Europe took on new dimensions on American shores, particularly the notion that Jews were not loyal patriots, that they fostered political and economic corruption, and supposedly threatened to take over certain sectors of the economy. Even after Jews joined other hyphenated Americans—such as Italian-Americans and Polish-Americans—in being regarded as white ethnics, the specter of Jews as particularly dangerous due to their supposed intent to dominate, exploit, and conspire lingered through the Red Scare, the Great Depression, the McCarthy era, and beyond.

The racial pseudo-science of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century affected Jews on both sides of the Atlantic. Racial scientists argued that Jews possessed distinctive racial qualities that made them detrimental and even dangerous to society. Particularly in Europe, political parties made ending Jewish civil and political rights a central platform of their campaigns, and gained increasing support.

This form of "political and racial antisemitism" reached a murderous peak with the rise of the Nazi party in Germany. Germany had been humiliated after the loss of the First World War (1914-1918). Facing severe economic hardship and political dejection, many Germans were receptive to ideas that promised to rejuvenate the German nation, and such programs often placed the blame for their hard times upon a scapegoat: the Jews. Mingling conspiracy theories with pseudo-science and an appeal to German pride, the Nazi party, led by Adolf Hitler, propagated ideas, founded organizations, and instituted policies designed to isolate Jews, with the goal of bringing them to economic ruin and forcing them out of Germany.

These ideas and organizations sufficed to attract sufficient numbers of supporters to lead to Hitler's party winning democratic elections and becoming the dominant political party in Germany in 1933. When Hitler

became Chancellor of Germany, he enacted policies that discriminated against anyone of Jewish "blood," removing them from gainful employment, and revoking their rights. As Germany grew more powerful, Hitler launched a campaign to conquer much of Europe in the name of German dominance and Aryan racial purity, targeting Jews as well as other groups considered racially, mentally or physically inferior. In the Second World War (1939-1945). Hitler's Nazi empire grew to control almost all of Europe, making possible not only the persecution of Jews but also the attempt to remove them first from Aryan society and ultimately from the world entirely. The Nazi party, and allied governments across Europe, implemented a process by which Jews were stripped of all of their possessions by law, removed from their homes, and relocated in crowded ghettos where many perished. As the Nazi campaign escalated, some Jews were shot en masse, and others sent to forced labor camps. Those who could not provide useful labor were designated for death camps. Some six million Jews were murdered during these years, an event now known as the **Holocaust**. By the end of the Holocaust, only one in three Jews remained from their former population.
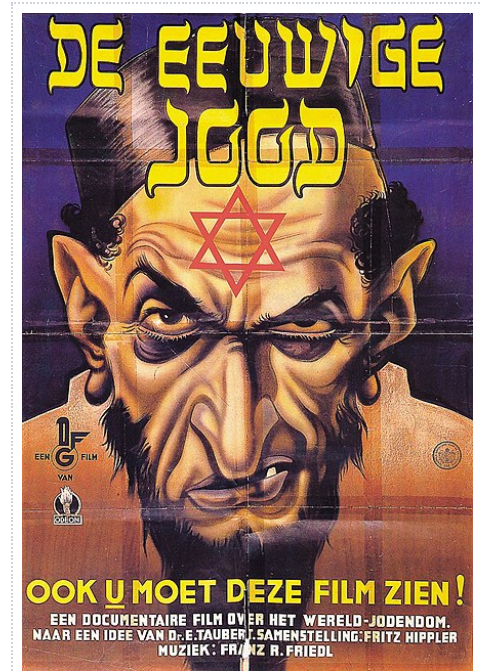
In 1940, the Nazi Ministry of Propaganda sponsored the production of the film Der ewige Jude (The Eternal Jew) that portrayed Jews as alien to German culture, spreading disease and corrupting the nation.

Nazi Propaganda, "Behind the Enemy Powers: The Jew." Nazis often identified Jews as the power behind their enemies, supposedly creating wars and causing conflict for their own gain.

In modern times, Jews have rebuilt and founded new homes and communities in Europe, South America, and especially in the United States. Three years after the end of WWII, the state of Israel was created, fulfilling the hopes of those Jews who embraced the Zionist movement, a political movement whose aim was to establish a national home for Jews. Zionism had gained momentum particularly in European Jewish communities in the decades before the war, and its goals became particularly urgent during and after the war itself, when many Jews were refugees without places to go or return to after the Holocaust.

In the years following the 1948 war, centuries of Jewish life in Arab states throughout the Middle East also came to a painful end. In the 1940s, approximately 900,000 Jews lived in countries like Iraq, Morocco, Syria, Algeria and elsewhere in the region. But the war escalated anti-Jewish tensions and violence in Arab nations, ultimately leading virtually all Jews in the region to leave, many of them relocating to the state of Israel.

For many Jews, the creation of Israel marked a new era of hope, safety and security. But the state also exacerbated tensions in the region and led both to political challenges and to new expressions of antisemitism that did not exist before Israel was founded. Distinguishing antisemitism from anti-Israel or anti-Zionist rhetoric has been a source of protracted debate and consternation. Without question, the very

fact that Jews came to wield the power of statehood has altered the terms that defined Jewish experience in previous centuries, bringing about new historical circumstances and formidable challenges.

Today, Jews reside in fewer places in the world than they did a few centuries ago. In those places, they live in relative comfort and security, generally free from legal forms discrimination and persecution. Yet, the long history of religious discrimination, political inequality, and violence has left Jews collectively with painful memories and deep-rooted fears. Moreover, antisemitic tropes have proven resilient, particularly in times of crisis and discord, and they endure to the present day.

Contemporary Manifestations of Antisemitism

Today, antisemitism is often fueled by conspiratorial thinking—the fear that one's life and fortunes are being controlled or manipulated by a secret and powerful elite.

As discussed above, these fears about Jews have existed since the Middle Ages, when Jews were suspected by Christians of secretly plotting to harm them, and such suspicions frequently led to the persecution and execution of Jews. In the modern age, anti-Jewish conspiracy thinking found its ways into documents like the fabricated "Protocols of the Elders of Zion," first published in Russia in 1903, that claims to reveal a Jewish plot to take over the world. The forgery has been remarkably durable. Automobile magnate Henry Ford circulated it worldwide in his publications in the 1920s and antisemitic radio priest Charles Coughlin excerpted it in his newspaper in the 1930s. The Protocols continues to be circulated to this day. It resurfaced after 9/11 in conjunction with nefarious claims that Jews must have been behind the attacks. This represents just one example of the persistence of the idea that Jews are secretly plotting to weaken, enslave, or destroy non-Jews.

Dearborn Independent, May 22, 1920. Henry Ford used his newspaper to spread antisemitic ideas of Jewish conspiracy in the United States and around the world.
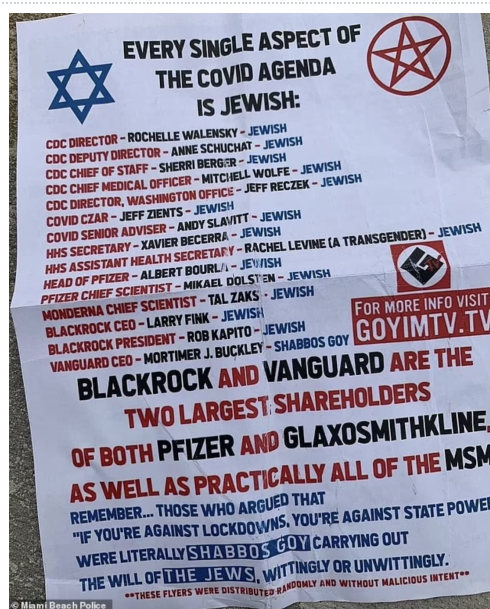
The continued power of such conspiracy thinking also emerged during the COVID pandemic when a significant number of people around the world, Christians, Muslims and others, came to believe that the pandemic was a Jewish or Israeli plot to harm non-Jews. According to one study, at the height of the pandemic, 20% of people in Great Britain believed that COVID was a Jewish conspiracy. As recently as 2022, leaflets were distributed in the Miami area with a Star of David and the slogan, "Every single aspect of the COVID agenda is Jewish." Versions of these flyers also appeared in many other American cities.

The connection between conspiracy thinking and antisemitism is part of what distinguishes antisemitism from other forms of racism. Although it often includes caricature of supposed Jewish physical traits, antisemitism is not only based on the perception of physical difference like skin color but focuses more consistently on alleged character traits—cheapness, greediness, lecherousness, vengefulness, and more. One of the most widespread accusations against Jews today is that they are rich, powerful, conspiratorial, manipulative and untrustworthy.

Antisemitic flyer distributed in Miami, Florida, falsely claiming that the response to the COVID pandemic was being orchestrated by Jews. January 2022.

Since the 2010s, antisemitic ideas and tropes have become more visible in American society, and experts have tracked an increase in the number of antisemitic hate crimes. One of the more potent recent antisemitic claims, partially borrowed from Nazi thought, is that Jews are trying to wipe out and dilute the purity of the white race, seeking to replace whites with other races and peoples. Two examples illustrate this point powerfully. In 2017, when a group of white Christian nationalists who were upset about the removal of a statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee descended upon Charlottesville, Virginia, they chanted slogans like "white lives matter," "blood and soil," and "Jews will not replace us." The following year, in 2018, the shooter at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh targeted a Jewish house of worship. But according to his own social media posts, what had set him off was that HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, had held a meeting at that congregation. In his rants on social media, he said, "HIAS likes to bring invaders in that kill our people. I can't sit by and watch my people get slaughtered."

These two incidents testify to the persistence of antisemitic beliefs that Jews are somehow plotting to undermine white dominance. They also demonstrate that while aspects of antisemitic thought are indeed distinctive, antisemitism remains deeply intertwined with hatred directed toward other groups—people of color, immigrants and "others"—who are perceived as unsettling the foundation of white Christian America.

Unite the Right Rally, Charlottesville, Virginia, August 12, 2017.

At the same time, contemporary antisemitism derives from developments that take place far beyond American shores. Since the creation of Israel, events in the Middle East have precipitated fierce debates both within the American Jewish community and between different Jewish constituencies and many other groups. In the 21st century, disagreements over Israel and Palestine have sometimes included antisemitic tropes about Jewish power and conspiracy. One of the most vexing struggles in recent years is how to allow for legitimate debates and critiques of Israel while also keeping antisemitic stereotypes and canards at bay. Sometimes the lines between the two are clear and obvious, and sometimes they can be blurred or defined by individual opinion and outlook. This is one of the most challenging issues of our time.

In recent decades, experts have sought to define antisemitism in a way that distinguishes it from criticism of Israel while also acknowledging how the two can intersect with each other. Such experts agree that it is not antisemitic to criticize Israel in the way one might criticize any state or government for its actions—criticism of the Israeli government is common within Israel itself. However, criticism/protest against Israel verges into antisemitism when it uses the word "**Zionist**" as another word for "Jew," when it denies or

minimizes the Holocaust, when it treats Israel as the ultimate evil, or when it applies antisemitic tropes to Israel (e.g. treating Israel as a puppet master trying to control the world).

People disagree about where to draw the line between protest against Israel and antisemitism, but wherever you fall on that issue, it is important to bear in mind that calling for or legitimizing violence in the name of resistance to Israel has been used to justify attacks against Jews both within and outside of Israel.

Today, efforts to combat antisemitism are especially daunting. We live in an increasingly divisive and fragmented society that makes genuine communication and productive dialogue more difficult than ever. We desperately need better ways to talk to people with whom we disagree without demonizing them and resorting to stereotypes. The fact that information and ideas now circulate so often on social media only escalates the challenges, since the medium so often instills falsehoods in people's thinking that are difficult to counteract and lends itself to impersonal, anonymous expressions of vitriol and hate. That is why we must focus on education, on fostering constructive methods of dialogue, and on the rights and responsibilities of building a civil society that values and protects all its members.

Film: Antisemitism in Our Midst: Past and Present
Retrieved from **https://jewishstudies.berkeley.edu/antisemitism-education/antisemitism-antisemitism-training-film/**
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