

Session 5: A Hundred Years of Preparation: Creating the Climate and Soil for the Holocaust (1830 – 1930)

Steven Hess

It might at times appear that the perpetrators and murderers of the 12-year nightmare we know as The Third Reich, The Nazi Period and -- in its most horrific phase -- The Holocaust, were like demonic chessmen that suddenly sprung up on the game board of the western world to redefine and re-invent the possibilities and toll of human evil.

That assumption would be wrong.

These men (and here and there women) were not so much products of those times, but were in fact formed by the influences and currents of the late 19th century. And those influences and currents were in turn derived from the European turmoil of the post-Napoleonic era and ultimately from the 2000-year-road that has drawn our interest and attention.

The end of the long period we call the *Age of Enlightenment* coincided roughly with the beginning of the Napoleonic wars in the early years of the 19th century. It had brought with it fundamental changes in the perception of and attitudes towards Jews. It significantly changed the treatment of Jews for the better. In most of Western Europe Jews had gained at least limited citizenship, greater protection under the law and expanded, if not equal, social and economic opportunity.

By the early 1800's, classical, religious, mystical anti-Semitism had had its underpinnings weakened by a profound shift in Western civilization; a shift from God and the supernatural to an emphasis on humanity. The focus on the divine had been redirected to secular hopes and aspirations. The mystery of religion was being pushed into the shadows of the illuminating emerging sciences. In particular, it can be said that wherever the French ruled at the time the condition of the Jews improved. It all promised to be decidedly 'Good for the Jews'.

However, while in broader and farther reaching terms one can observe that the period since the French Revolution saw the most successful integration of Jews into non-Jewish Society; it has ultimately also seen the greatest slaughter of Jews in recorded history!

The early 19th century emancipation of the Jews, rather than eliminating European anti-Semitism, exacerbated the problem. One of the most advanced countries in respect to Jewish emancipation and assimilation was Germany, birthplace of the Haskalah (enlightenment)--a Jewish movement towards a more open approach to Western ideals and integration into gentile society.

Emancipated Jews, proud of their achievements, often found themselves the objects of intense hate; usually because of commercial and social competition. One early 19th century response, mostly in Germany, was the "Hep Hep" riots against Jews, reminiscent in spirit if not the lethality of the rampages of 11th and 12th century Crusaders. In response, and for the claimed purpose of "keeping the peace," the governments of several German states rescinded many of the privileges granted to Jews. This was even more so following the defeat of Napoleon and the Congress of Vienna in 1815 that saw a general backlash against the liberal ideologies and excesses of the French Revolution. Much of the supposed progress towards Jewish equality was undone.

Thus, in spite of the improvements of Jewish life in Western Europe it was for the most part, two steps forward, one step backward. In addition, the nature of Jewish emancipation did not extend to their acceptance. While Jews may have entered Western society they were nevertheless perceived as separate. There was also the hope and expectation of the Christian world that if Jews were given opportunity Judaism and its (scorned) practices would disappear and that "former

The Two-Thousand Year Road to the Holocaust

Session 5: A Hundred Years of Preparation

Jews” would conform to the Christian culture. On that the Jews did not deliver even though conversion was commonplace; seen as a “passport” to acceptance and opportunity.

The Revolutions of 1848

In the mid-1840's a wave of revolution spread throughout much of Western Europe, propelled by popular discontent, severe crop failures and its resultant economic distress. In 1848, powerful liberal and nationalist movements led to widespread uprisings in Germany, with the intent of overthrowing the ruling classes, end political oppression, and obtain greater freedoms. To some extent, these revolutions helped Jews win back some rights in France, Austria, Hungary and in Germany as well.

But it was a mixed bag because in Germany there was a call for German unification and a national parliament. Ultimately these revolutions failed and the establishment regained power, but the seeds of nationalism and the hope for a united Germany had been firmly planted. These nationalist movements in particular tended to exclude those seen as “outsiders,” especially and pointedly, the Jews. In addition there was a greater backlash to Jewish progress. Leading German thinkers and scholars, men of substantial standing, were anti-Semitic as a matter of course. The consequence of this was that Germany became the center of European anti-Semitism and anti-Jewish expression.

Jews and Money

Jewish progress and the inevitable backlash also had strong economic components. It was the time of the Industrial Revolution that ushered in very real material and social advances. The traditional financial skills and experience that some Jews had developed from the restrictions of the Middle Ages became more valuable and many Jews entered the new worlds of finance and business with considerable success, in some cases spectacularly so. As banking families, such as the Rothschilds, spread their operations throughout Europe, the later charge that they were the leaders and financiers of a worldwide Jewish conspiracy was practically inevitable. The influence Jews had over the money trade was overestimated, and purposely so by anti-Semites. Socialists such as Karl Marx (a baptized Jew) accused Jews as responsible for corrupt capitalism.

Without doubt, even as some Jews prospered and as Jews entered government, industry and the professions; equality remained out of reach. To the contrary, Jewish progress re-ignited old resentments and hatreds. The only thing that changed was that Jews were now hated simply because they were Jews with hatreds expressed in “racial” terms, rather than in traditional religious ones. A substantial number of German Jews became Christians, but as they found out that did not alter their “racial” identification. The Jew was defined by what we might now call their DNA

The Emergence of Racial Anti-Semitism

Leading German philosophers, such as Johann Fichte (1762-1814) and Georg Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) as far back as the late 18th century espoused German superiority and German nationalism and by extension set the tone and direction of Germany's later anti-Semitism, up through and including the Third Reich. At the same time there arose a German romantic movement exalting folkways, German purity, knights in shining armor, golden-haired maidens and national traditions. The Jews did not fit the mold!

The Two-Thousand Year Road to the Holocaust

Session 5: A Hundred Years of Preparation

Putting all the pieces together-- and a master stroke of timing and good fortune for anti-Semites for the next hundred years going forward-- was the mid-19th century work of Herbert Spencer and Charles Darwin. Spencer propounded the theory of constant struggle between humans in which the strongest would win. Darwin proposed that various types of life had developed and survived by adapting to changing conditions and environment. The concept of survival of the strongest, a somewhat distorted notion of Darwin's work, came to be known as *Social Darwinism* which encompassed the idea that protection of the weak and poor by society was against natural law. The strongest was deemed the fittest, both among mankind and among Nations and consequently had the right to rule. You can see where this is going. By the way, Darwin and Spencer were not anti-Semites. Their work was simply appropriated and distorted to fit the anti-Semitic agenda of others.

Since, as we have discussed, religious anti-Semitism no longer had as much traction in the 19th century, the new thinking that Jews were inferior by their very genes dovetailed perfectly, if not accurately, with the work of Spencer, Darwin and others. Biological racism, more than anything else, clearly produced the soil in which Nazi ideology was nourished. With the religious basis for anti-Semitism weakened because of the weakened influence of the church and the rising influence on scientific discourse, redefining ancient hatreds in new, contemporary terms was both timely and inspired. It would ultimately prove deadly beyond all imagination.

Enter the "Aryan"

Racial theorists in the 19th century were the first to confuse the term "Aryan" (a linguistic term) with race. The term "Semitic" also had a linguistic origin. Of particular interest among the early racial theorists was Arthur de Gobineau (1816-1882), who used anthropology, linguistics and history to formulate a theory in which race explained virtually everything in the human experience.

In his *"Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races,"* Gobineau argued that he and his fellow French aristocrats were superior to the French masses by virtue of their pure Aryan stock. He held that the decisive events of history are determined by the iron law of race. Human destiny, he wrote, is decreed by nature and expressed in race. "History shows that all civilization flows from the white race," and the jewel of this race is the Aryan, which survived as a superior race. In light of this, he warned that cross-breeding and race-mixing were threatening its very survival.

Gobineau's essay was later translated into German and had a powerful influence on Germans such as composer Richard Wagner and his son-in-law, Houston Stewart Chamberlain, who, in turn, influenced Nazi racial doctrine.

Although Gobineau writings were not particularly anti-Semitic, with a bit of editing and change of emphasis, his words later became part and parcel of the Nazi lexicon.

Unification and the Further Growth of Nationalism

Following the German victory in the Franco-Prussian War (1870), Germany was finally unified under Otto von Bismarck's "blood and iron" policy. German nationalism was now not only firmly entrenched but was able to move farther away from liberal, democratic ideas that tended to be beneficial to the German Jews. The new German Reich of 1871 was dominated by Prussia, by Junker aristocracy, and by militaristic interests. In 1878, the Social Democratic Party was outlawed. Democratic efforts were stifled. In the 1890s, political democracy was blocked by the rising power of German industrialists and over shadowed by imperialist expansion. This period coincided with a new cycle of anti-Semitism. Jews were blamed for the severe economic depression of 1873. But the story is never simple or straightforward. Jews did advance to claim their place in the Bismarck government as well as in industry and finance. But that produced, as it always did, a backlash against Jewish progress.

The Two-Thousand Year Road to the Holocaust
Session 5: A Hundred Years of Preparation

That was also the year that Wilhelm Marr, a journalist who coined the term "anti-Semitism," wrote a pamphlet, "*The Victory of Jewry over Germandom*." It was widely read and issued in twelve editions in six years. Using ideas of race and "Volkisch" nationalism, Marr argued that Jews had become the "first major power in the West" in the 19th century. He accused the Jews of being liberals, a people without roots who had Judaized Germans "beyond salvation." In 1879 he founded the League for Anti-Semitism.

In the late nineteenth century, political parties in Europe and especially in Germany used anti-Semitism in various degrees in their party platforms. Typical was the Christian Socialist Workers Party, founded in 1878 by Adolf Stricker, a chaplain of the imperial court. Stricker blamed Jews for business failures, domination of liberal political movements, and for being "a foreign drop of blood in the German body, one with destructive power!" His message had great appeal to Germans in the lower economic and social classes the same groups to whom Hitler appealed who yearned for status and a strong state. In 1879, Stricker joined Marr in founding the League for Anti-Semitism.

Also in that year the respected historian Heinrich Treitschke wrote "*the Jews are our misfortune*:" a phrase that later became the masthead slogan for the Jew-hate-dripping Nazi weekly, "Der Stuermer," published by Julius Streicher throughout the Nazi period. Treitschke proclaimed that a chasm existed between the German and Jewish spirit. Philosopher Eugen Karl Dühring wrote *The Jewish Question as a Racial, Moral and Cultural Question*, in which he argued that Jews were causing Germany's decline, and that they constituted a "counter-race" which neither conversation nor assimilation could change. His influence among university students was considerable.

In 1893, 250,000 voters sent 16 deputies (out of 397) pledged to anti-Semitic measures to the Reichstag, the German legislature. In 1900, H. S. Chamberlain, an Englishman who settled in Germany, wrote *The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century*, in which he idealized the German "race-soul," which made Germans honest, loyal, and industrious. By contrast, Jews were materialistic, legalistic, and devoid of tolerance and morality. These two peoples were locked in a struggle, in which the Jews must be defeated. This book gave Nazis the text for their racial myth and had enormous sales success in Germany.

It is beyond argument that a deeply ingrained anti-Semitism was part and parcel of 19th century Germany. Moreover a great deal of the anti-Jewish rhetoric came from established and respected circles, Richard Wagner prominent among them.

And this was the Germany and the century into which Hitler and Goebbels and Goering and Streicher and countless of other Nazis and millions of their followers were born to. Anti-Semitism came with German breast milk and when the Nazis came to power it needed only to be called forth.