Preparing for the Holocaust?

Pre-Nazi anti-Semitism in Germany

Judith Rowbotham

Exam links

AQA AS The development of Germany, 1871–1925

AQA AS Anti-Semitism, Hitler and the German people, 1919–45

AQA AS Totalitarian ideology in theory and in practice, c.1848–c.1941

Edexcel AS From Second Reich to Third Reich: Germany, 1918–45

Edexcel A2 From Kaiser to Führer: Germany, 1900–45

OCR (A) AS Democracy and dictatorship in Germany, 1919–63

OCR (A) AS The challenge of German nationalism, 1789–1919

OCR (B) A2 Debates about the Holocaust

Argument

Hostility against Jews

Until the advent of the Nazi party, anti-Semitism was not particularly virulent in Germany, where Jews were well assimilated. It did exist in Germany but, significantly, it was more prevalent in Austria where Adolf Hitler was born.

Judith Rowbotham looks at the growth of anti-Semitism in Germany and the influence on Nazi ideology of US scientific research into race

When studying incidents which, in their horror, are unimaginable by any normal standards, the temptation is to focus on the short-term factors that enabled them to take place, as in the case of the Holocaust. To understand how and why people were able to go along with the Holocaust — whether by turning a blind eye or taking part in its chilling processes — involves studying the longer-term historical evolution of the factors which eventually produced the Nazi policies known as *Judenfrei*, an area free of Jews.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, anti-Semitism in Germany was less significant than elsewhere in Western Europe, including Britain and France. German Jews were well assimilated into society and formed an important element among the bourgeoisie as well as in the intellectual and artistic communities. Many German Jews fought for Germany in the First World War. Nevertheless, anti-Semitism

was deeply ingrained in some Germans, as Heinrich Mann's novel, *Der Untertan* (often translated as *Man of Straw*), reveals. Its ultra-nationalist hero, Diederich Hessling, displays his anti-Semitism as an aspect of his broader hostility to the liberal bourgeoisie, but also in his belief in the fundamental 'foreignness' of Jews.

Pre-twentieth-century hostility

Prejudice against Jews as 'others' has a long history. The factors that produced such prejudice in the West originally focused on religious and cultural issues. Pre-modern justifications lay in a mix of rumour and legends arising from folk myths, sometimes called blood libels. German folk-tale versions included *Der Judenstein* or *The Jews' Stone*, a story based on the alleged murder of a child on a rock.

After the **diaspora**, many Jews maintained their distinctive culture, which made them stand apart from their neighbours in such things as everyday eating habits, and this probably helped sustain the prejudice. It meant that Jews who did not assimilate were seen as different. They became easy targets for blame, for example, for the spread of the Black Death (plague) in medieval Europe.

Jewish moneylenders

Another factor in Christian European history which made Jews stand out was their willingness to lend money as a business proposition at a time when Christians believed that anyone who charged excessive interest on moneylending was committing the sin of usury. These views disappeared with the evolution of the modern banking system, but images of Jewish moneylenders (such as Shylock in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*) helped establish a stereotype of Jews being prone to unfair economic dealings.

Protocols of the Elders of Zion

The moneylending stereotype later contributed to the believability of the anti-Semitic hoax known as the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, which developed in Russia in 1903 before being disseminated internationally after the First World War. The Protocols were said to be 'proof' of a non-existent Jewish plot for world domination, to be achieved through their dominance of the press globally and through gaining control of the world's banking systems.

Defining people by race

One reality in pre-modern Western thought was that you ceased to be Jewish if you converted to Christianity. An example can be found in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, in which Shylock's daughter Jessica elopes with her Christian lover. By becoming Lorenzo's wife, she ceases to be seen as Jewish.

The Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries changed this way of thinking.

Questions

- How important a part did anti-Semitic feeling play in ideas of German nationalism before the First World War?
- To what extent was post-1918 German anti-Semitism pre-determined?
- How far could it be claimed that post-1918 anti-Semitism in Germany was different from anti-Semitism elsewhere in the West?
- To what extent was anti-Semitism an expression of modern racism?

One of the movement's 'scientific' perspectives was to classify the peoples of the world according to their 'types', or races. Out of this came the idea that certain peoples and languages were 'Semitic', a new label. The word originated in the 1770s with two German thinkers, Ludwig Schlözer and Johann Eichhorn. Semitic subsequently became the favoured description for peoples and languages from the Middle East. Consequently (and without biological common sense), the Jews began to be identified as a separate race in scientific terms.

Nineteenth-century developments, including the Darwinian theory of evolution, were crucial in establishing new scientific 'truths' about the 'distinctive' Jewish 'race'. Efforts began to distinguish typical Jewish physical characteristics, such as Semitic noses and ears.

Toleration of German Jews

Acceptance of Jews as forming a distinct race in scientific terms did not initially strengthen existing

The political Zionist thinker Theodor Herzl

diaspora The exile and dispersion of Jews from Judea (the region now known as Palestine and Israel), beginning in the sixth century BC.

Aryan A racist concept describing people of Indo-European descent. The Nazis interpreted Aryan as people of white northern European not Jewish descent.

Austro-Hungarian empire Nineteenth-century Austro-Hungary was composed of a mixture of peoples, many of whom were seeking to assert their own separate national identity.

eugenics A pseudo-science that focused on improving the population by controlling breeding to increase desirable inherited characteristics.

German anti-Semitism, though it was used to 'prove' that Jews were non-**Aryan**. For German Jews in the early twentieth-century there were no internal developments provoking more enhanced levels of prejudice.

Anti-Semitism was stronger in the neighbouring **Austro-Hungarian empire** than in Germany. The German Jewish population was largely long-settled, and there was no significant influx of Jewish refugees to worry national politics.

In 1898, the German Kaiser had even been prepared to meet the political Zionist thinker Theodor Herzl, author of *The Jewish State* (*Der Judenstaat*), which proposed a solution to the Jewish question. How and why did this change?

Science and research in the USA

The pseudo-science of **eugenics** developed out of post-Darwinian science. Eugenics had its roots in the ideas of British Victorian scientist Francis Galton and Austrian scientist Gregor Mendel, who developed genetics. Galton had come to the conclusion that superior abilities and intelligence were hereditary factors in human evolution and, consequently, that humanity could be 'improved' by encouraging the 'best' in society to have more children. Mendel's work, rediscovered after his death, examined the positive impacts of selective breeding of plants.

Selective breeding

Early twentieth-century US scientists, such as Charles Davenport, combined Galton's and Mendel's approaches to propose selective breeding of humans in ways that identified certain 'gene types' as carrying an undesirable 'taint'. This 'taint' was hereditary and therefore could not be eradicated. The initial focus was to get rid of the hereditary 'criminal' or 'feeble-minded' members of the population, an idea that was soon accepted as a matter of popular belief and public policy in the USA.

Forced sterilisation

Research was funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and Carnegie Institute, among others. In 1911, a Carnegie Report speculated on how positive eugenics could go beyond the forced sterilisation of 'undesirable' elements in the US population. Point 8 of the report theorised on the advantages of eugenicide through euthanasia. In 1918, a US textbook, *Applied Eugenics*, by Roswell Johnson and Paul Popenoe, touched on the theoretical future value of publicly operated lethal gas chambers to achieve this.

The US science was not primarily anti-Semitic. Its main policy focused on forced sterilisation of undesirable types, but not genocide.

German anti-Semitism post-1918

German defeat in the First World War fuelled a desire to explain what had gone wrong, and this included attempts to find a scapegoat. In this context a more powerful and active anti-Semitism began to manifest itself in the newly formed Weimar Republic. It looked for propaganda to support this reasoning, including the first German translations of the Protocols of

Berliners selling tin cans for scrap in 1923 during the severe inflation in the Weimar Republic

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the Elders of Zion. Even though the Protocols were swiftly revealed to be false by German as well as British writers, they remained popular because German propaganda post-1918 was often hysterical and irrational.

Jews, along with communists, were blamed by some political groups for undermining the German war effort and causing the **economic hardships of Weimar**. Jewish cultural solidarity was translated into racial solidarity and widely labelled as 'race pride' (*Rassenstoltz*). This picked up on the older Christian prejudice against Jews.

Attempts to justify anti-Semitism

The US pseudo-science of eugenics was increasingly used to justify and boost anti-Semitism. Linguist and zoologist Hans Gunther drew these threads together when developing his ideas of biological nationalism in the 1920s, as part of the new German enthusiasm for the science of race (*Rassenwissenschaft*). It was considered 'balanced' anti-Semitism, based on detailed and extensive quantitative studies.

These studies 'proved' the validity of the less coherent, culturally based prejudices, and so had the power to convince ordinary Germans with culturally derived anti-Semitic feelings that the studies had a scientific and therefore a logical basis. Hitler and his advisers used this academic work when developing their *Judenfrei* strategies. It helped to convince ordinary Germans, who were not necessarily supportive of other Nazi policies, of the need for an escalation of their traditional anti-Semitism into eugenicide.

Weimar anti-Semitic violence

This way of thinking also explains the lack of contemporary outrage at incidents of anti-Semitic violence in the Weimar Republic. One such act was the assassination of the politician **Walter Rathenau** in 1922 by those who claimed that his acceptance of the terms of the Treaty of Versailles was part of a Jewish plot against Germany. Hitler could, and did, capitalise on this new intensity in what was not very new German anti-Semitism.

Posters in Nuremberg advertising the anti-Semitic periodical *Der Sturmer*

Weblinks

The story of the Jewish diaspora can be found at: **www.tinyurl.com/2b3zzdt**

The privations visited upon German Jews before the Holocaust are described at: **www.tinyurl.com/qyotykj**

An interview with Professor Yehuda Bauer for the Shoah Resource Centre that complements this article can be found at: **www.tinyurl.com/o83med4**

Conclusion

It is easy to find German writers and thinkers who were anti-Semitic, including Immanuel Kant and historian Heinrich von Treitschke. However, it tends to be a mistake in history to see inexorable progress from one point to another.

Realistically, it is not sound to argue that the Holocaust was predictable and inevitable because of pre-1914 German anti-Semitism. But it is possible to claim that this widespread pre-existing anti-Semitism ensured that the Jews were a universally recognisable scapegoat when more virulent forms of anti-Semitism emerged in Germany post-1918. It underlines how anti-Semitism has always been situational in terms of its intensity at different times and in different places.

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Further reading

Bookbinder, P. (1996) *Weimar Germany: the Republic of the Reasonable*, Manchester University Press. Chapter 12 is particularly relevant.

For the origins of Hitler's anti-Semitism, see Kershaw, I. (2001) *Hitler 1880–1936: Hubris*, Penguin (paperback edition).

For the pre-Weimar period, see Rash, F. (2012) *German Images of the Self and the Other: Nationalist, Colonialist and Anti-Semitic Discourse 1871–1918*, Palgrave Macmillan.

If you want to look at longer historical echoes, see Voigtländer, N. and Voth, H.-J., 'Persecution Perpetuated: The Medieval Origins of Anti-Semitic Violence in Nazi Germany', *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* (2012) Vol. 127, No. 3, pp. 1339–1392.

economic hardships of Weimar These included payment of reparations, as specified in the Treaty of Versailles, and massive inflation that undermined the value of the German currency.

Walter Rathenau German industrialist who served as foreign minister in the Weimar government.