Roots of European Antisemitism

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Antisemitism seems to be an unfortunate but integral part of Jewish history. Ever since the Exodus and assimilation into the Promised Land, the struggle against antisemitism, for one reason or another, has been a part of Jewish identity. Jews of Russia and Northeastern Europe have been at the epicenter of it all. Ashkenazic Jewry has seen a lot of turmoil from the Reformation, the surge of extreme nationalism in Russia, and the Shoah during WWII. In 1514 CE, Martin Luther wrote a letter to George Spalatin outlining his philosophy when it came to Jews in Europe. Tsar Nicholas II, in 1905 CE, secretly published a farce, Jewish authored pamphlet that wreaked havoc on Jews in Russia. Lastly, Adolf Hitler wrote a series of letters in the early 20th century in which his underlining contempt for the Jews simmered, and his words may have alluded to the horror of the Shoah to come. These published materials have impregnated the world with seeds of antisemitism, taking root when eyes are turned away.

Martin Luther was the leader of the Protestant Reformation. He was appalled by the absolute control of the Roman Catholic Church and preached that individuals had the capacity to study the Bible and understand the words of Christ without the aid of the clergy. This was a spiritually liberating movement as well as a nationally liberating one. Some of the principalities of Europe were eager to rid themselves of the burden and political interjection of the Catholic Church, and Luther was just the man to do it. Leo Trepp, author of *A History of the Jewish Experience*, explains that, in his early years, Luther had a favorable disposition towards the Jews thinking they would all see that Christianity was cleaned of the stench of the Catholic Church and therefore convert (147). However, Trepp continues, “When the Jews turned him down and some, according to his imagination, even tried to convert him to Judaism, he turned against them
with unmitigated venom” (147). Luther’s writings clearly verify such venom, especially in his opinion of the Reuchlin case.

Johannes Reuchlin (1455-1522) was a humanist who defended Hebrew literature when a Johannes Pfefferkorn was campaigning to have the Talmud burned because he felt it was blasphemous and anti-Christian (Trepp 146). Oddly enough, Reuchlin was arguing that the preservation of Hebrew literature was indispensable to Christianity, and despite his pro-Christian reasons, he won favor from the Jews because he ultimately saved the Talmud from cremation. The Catholic Church brought a case against Reuchlin and accused him of heresy for supporting the Jews. Martin Luther wrote a letter to Reverend George Spalatin when another Brother asked him to share his opinions on the case. Luther found the Reuchlin was innocent of heresy because of his Christian motives, but because this case was so interconnected with Judaism, Luther felt he was at liberty to speak uninhibitedly about his philosophy of Jewish people.

After commending Johannes Reuchlin in his letter, Martin Luther wasted no time pointing out who the “true” blasphemers were. Luther begins, “A hundred times worse blasphemes than this exist in the very streets of Jerusalem...[and] we ought to show our excessive zeal in removing these offenses which are our real, intestine enemies.” Later in his letter Luther concludes that the preservation of Jews, which would be in the form of their conversion to Christianity, would “be the work of God alone operating from within” and be of no consequence of man. But why be so vehemently hateful towards Jews? Luther develops his philosophy in his letter that Jews and their supporters are prophesied in the Bible to be blasphemers. Luther states:

Jews will always curse and blaspheme God and his King Christ, as all the prophets have predicted...And so I presume the men of Cologne cannot understand the Scripture,
because it is necessary that such things take place to fulfill prophecy. If they are trying to stop the Jews blaspheming, they are working to prove the Bible and God liars.

To Luther, the prophets did more than just warn the Jewish people of the wrath of God if they did not give up idolatry and sin and return to the covenants of God, but they were, instead, destined to always blaspheme their Elohim. Luther’s antisemitic views rooted themselves in the minds and hearts of his followers and later came to a head when 20th century Germany followed an outline Luther wrote to eradicate the Jews from existence i.e. the Shoah.

Moving forward in time along the root of antisemitism, early nationalistic Russia makes their debut with propaganda of the secret plan of world domination by the Jews. Russia was a country of much turmoil in its beginnings, and Jews always suffered with the crests and troughs of its movements. Between the years 1722-1795 CE, Russia had undergone two major divisions which resulted in Russia, Prussia, and Austria; the former of which ended up having the largest Jewish population of the world, much to its dismay. “‘Holy Mother Russia,’” Leo Tress explains, “had for centuries refused to admit a single Jew...[and] the Tsar’s policy toward the Jews was summed up...: let one-third of the Jews be converted, another third die, the final third emigrate, and the problem is solved” (195). Tsar Nicholas I, Alexander III, and Nicholas II were some of the harshest rulers in regards to persecution of the Jews, and Tsar Nicholas II may have employed the most covert of all schemes to rid Russia of its Jewish population.

Tsar Nicholas II (1894-1918) created an antisemitic association that he employed to instigate antisemitism throughout Russia. One particular move he made was providing the antisemitic association with funds to create a fabricated pamphlet authored by the Jews known as the Protocols of the Wise Men of Zion (Tress 198). This was done in order to take attention away
from a defeat Russia suffered by Japan and reinstate the Tsar’s power and people’s favor by encouraging the Russian Orthodox Church to support him. In 1905 CE, the pamphlet was published and distributed with devastating affects to the Russian Jewry.

The *Protocols of the Wise Men of Zion* fabricated a list of steps the Jews were going to implement in order to enslave or get rid of gentiles. Reading an excerpt from the protocols, an individual can see that the antisemitic association went to great lengths and developed a solid economic plan that would ruin gentiles and place all the financial power into the hands of the Jews. One of the protocols listed attacks the aristocracy of Russia in order to render them handicapped against the Jewish movement. “It is essential, therefore,” the paragraph begins:

> For us at whatever cost to deprive [the aristocracy] of their land. This object will be best attained by increasing the burdens upon landed property—in loading lands with debts. These measures will check land-holding and keep it in a state of humble and unconditional submission. The aristocrats of the [gentiles]...will rapidly burn up and fizzle out (“Protocols”).

Using language like “at what ever cost” is clearly fear mongering. Other items of the protocols use the same language device to further enhance the fear among the Russians: “We shall enslave gentiles” and “To complete the ruin of industry of the [gentiles]...” (“Protocols”).

These protocols did more than simply instill fear in the non-Jewish, Russian population; it also instigated them to action. Gangs backed by the Russian Army spread the protocols and other fabricated works around Russia and mass murders ensued. Russian Jewry had a full-fledged attack laid on them and bloodshed was unavoidable. One thing lead to another and soon the blood libel was revived and, with the advent of WWI, Jews were being blamed and executed
for being German spies. Presently, the Protocols of the Wise Men of Zion are still an influential element in antisemitism. A facet of the global economic situation is similar to one of the protocols listed. One paragraph ends with a unique situation of raising wages of the working as a response to a false decline of the economy to entice the educated to anarchy and drunkenness and “therewith taking all measure to extirpate from the face of the earth all the educated forces of the [gentiles]” (“Protocols”). There is a real potential for devastation among the world Jewry because of this similarity, especially when taking into consideration how easy it would be for this to take root in the heart and mind of an uninformed, powerful, antisemitic group.

In recent history, the Protocols of the Wise Men of Zion did indeed fall into the hands of a powerful anti-Semite who was more than apt for creating a super power against the Jews. Even so, this individual also used the antisemitic writings of the aforementioned Martin Luther as a blueprint to exercise his hatred of the Jews and attempt to exterminate them; this individual is Adolf Hitler. Prior to coming to power, and before he brought the world to war in WWII, Adolf Hitler developed his antisemitism and idea of a German race through letters to some of his acquaintances. One particular letter to Herr Gemlich, in 1919 CE, underlines Hitler’s idea that Jews were a race and not a religion. His main reason is the way Jews assimilate, or do not assimilate, when they are citizens of a country. Hitler states, “Even the Jews never designate themselves as Jewish Germans, Jewish Poles, or Jewish Americans but always as German, Polish, or American Jews [, and] Jews have never yet adopted much more than the language of the foreign nations among whom they live.”

Hitler makes reference to the pogrom and the Protocols of the Wise Men of Zion when discussing his belief for the reason why he feels Jews are as disdainful as they appear to be when
they encounter non-Jews. He explains Jews are simply a money driven people whose goal it is to dominate the world. In one paragraph of his letter to Gemlich he states:

His [the Jew’s] power is the power of money, which multiplies in his hands effortlessly and endlessly through interest, and which forces peoples under the most dangerous of yokes...Everything men strive after as a higher goal...is to the Jew only means to an end, the way to satisfy his lust for gold and domination.

Hitler states that an emotional based conclusion of antisemitism would be using the pogrom as a grounds on which to make such a conclusion. However, Hitler contradicts himself verily by using the exact propaganda used to incite the pogrom as his argument’s “rational” basis. Regardless of any errors in his argument’s development, he nevertheless launched a successful attempt to eradicate the Jews, following Martin Luther’s plan verbatim (Tress 148), and establish his own perfect German race.

Three major movements under three major leaders have established the roots of antisemitism throughout the world, the effects of which can still be felt. Martin Luther, Tsar Nicholas II, and Adolf Hitler have produced literary pieces that have worked to their advantage in encouraging antisemitism to the masses, all with devastating consequences. Luther argued that Jews are the blasphemers against Christ; Nicholas II persuaded the world into thinking Jews were power hungry, financial master minds out to rule the world; and Hitler secured the idea that Jews were a race, and all of these deadly stereotypes are still used in order to label Jews as “others” and justify contempt towards them. Any academic investigation into Judaism will reveal that Jews are none of the above. The history of antisemitism and its persistence world round teaches people a lesson they seem to always forget: hate does nothing but destroy.
Works Cited

Hitler, Adolf. “Adolf Hitler’s First Antisemitic Writing: September 16, 1919.”


