

ANTI-SEMITISM OVERVIEW

A swastika along side a picture of the mangled bodies of holocaust victims lined up at the feet of German soldiers, surely a page from a history book depicting the horrors of Nazi Germany, right? No, this is the cover of the latest CD by the one of the many domestic White Power bands, Angry Aryans. Their CD is titled "Racially Motivated Violence." Who are consumers and concert goers of these bands? Primarily white teenagers and young adults.

Consider this review of the popular video game, "Ethnic Cleansing": I believe this game is going to be extremely popular-it delivers a very powerful message. Every young elementary school kid who plays this game will have visions of killing Ariel Sharon while sitting in class! When their history teacher asks the class if they've ever heard of Israel or Ariel Sharon, the White kids certainly will have! Hundreds of thousands of copies of the video have been sold and, again the primary target audience is white teens.

Many believe that anti-Semitism a thing of the past. It seemed impossible that, after the Holocaust, it could ever surface in a substantial way again. Unfortunately, anti-Semitism still thrives in many regions of the world. Today's youth are at least one generation removed from the Holocaust (and 25% of them doubt it is even true), and are easily influenced and targeted by this hatred.

What may be even more frightening, though, is the rise of more subtle and socially acceptable forms of anti-Semitism throughout the world, especially as the crisis in the Middle East grows. Even as this discussion is being written French synagogues are being burned, Jewish cemeteries vandalized, and Jews are being beaten. It is critical that anti-Semitism is understood and combatted. Earl Raab, a close student of the Jewish community said, "The large proportion of American Jews who say they worry about anti-Semitism [today]...are really expressing a concern not so much about its currency as about its potential."

Webster's Dictionary defines anti-Semitism as hostility toward or discrimination against Jews as a religious, ethnic, or racial group. Since the times of ancient civilizations, the Jews have usually been a minority group, regardless of the country in which they have lived. The neighboring majority religion usually persecuted Jews for not converting. Jews have also historically served as the scapegoat for tough times in a country or culture.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ANTI-SEMITISM

Throughout history, Jews have been persecuted. European Jews have felt constant oppression since the crusades. There was widespread belief that Jews killed Christian or Muslim children to use their blood in the celebration of their Jewish holidays. This fallacy persists even today. Church leaders forced Jews to live in humiliating circumstances and banned Christians from living in Jewish areas or working for a Jew. The Church also forced Jews to wear special badges as a shameful mark of their identity and prohibited them from appearing in public on Christian holidays. At this time, Christians were also banned by the Roman Catholic Church from lending each other money with interest. This has had a permanent impact on the economic life of Jews, as money lending had become a primary profession of the Jews. Thus the negative stereotype was borne: that all Jews are greedy and obsessed with money and materialism.

European Jews were blamed for the bubonic plague epidemic that killed one third of the population of Europe between 1347 and 1351. Although many Jews also died, many believed that they caused it by poisoning the well water. As a result, many regions of Europe completely destroyed or expelled Jewish communities. A century later, few Jews remained in Western Europe. Many Jews were also forced to pay special taxes and to live in segregated areas called ghettos. They were also denied the right to own land and to go into certain occupations.

Sadly, many Christians read the words of Martin Luther, who condemned intolerance of Jews by Christians in 1523 but by 1543 had come to write "On the Jews and their Lies."

...the Jews are venomous, bitter, vengeful, slimy snakes, assassins and devil's children...A Christian has, next to the devil, no more venomous, bitter enemy than the Jew. (Oberman, H. (1984). *The Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Age of Renaissance and Reformation*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.)

No wonder some feel that Christianity is the root of anti-Semitism.

In 1879, the word anti-Semitism was first used to describe hostility to Jews based on ethnic identity instead of religious practice. It was believed that Jews were a distinct race that had characteristics and attributes distinct from Europeans (the Aryan race). It became a pervasive belief that the "health" of European culture could only be maintained by completely segregating the Jews and refusing them any political power.

Russia, in 1881, first organized massacres of Jews, called pogroms. These killings continued well into the early 1900s. There were also strict quotas on how many Jews could enter schools and certain professions. This dashed all hope of Jews becoming a part of Russian society; these pogroms were also systematically carried out in Poland. Jews today will still refer to some anti-Semitic actions or sentiments, especially if it is viewed as coming from a government, as a pogrom.

In the late 1800s, the Jewish movement called Zionism was birthed in response to intense persecution of the Jews. It was hoped that an independent, free Jewish nation could be formed in Palestine.

In 1933, Adolph Hitler came to power in Germany and enforced anti-Semitism as official government policy. Jews were stripped of their citizenship, their seized of their property, and sent to concentration camps to be exterminated. This mass murder of Jews became known as the Holocaust. Six million Jews were killed, comprising approximately two-thirds of the entire European Jewish population.

As a result of the Holocaust, one of the most unique Jewish sub-cultures was completely destroyed. The Yiddish-speaking culture, highly regarded for its literature, distinguished educational centers and theater, is tragically gone forever.

CURRENT TRENDS AND RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Anti-Semitism in the Middle East today is pervasive, blatant, and frightening; most of it is based on the same lies and myths that have prevailed for hundreds of years. The government of Syria denies Jews the right to vote, and it restricts emigration by Jews. During the Pope's trip to Syria

last year, President Assad stated, "They (the Jews) tried to kill the principles of all religions with the same mentality in which they betrayed Jesus Christ in the same way they tried to betray and kill the Prophet Muhammad." This echoes the sentiment that led many Christians to despise Jews; that it was the Jews who killed Jesus. In December 2001, the Saudi government-controlled newspaper, Al-Watan, published a report entitled, "The Jewish organizations are implementing their strategic and hellish plan to take over the world." The belief is not new that 'ruling the world' is the Jews ultimate secret goal and aspiration. It was first written in a publication called, "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion," one of the greatest influences in the formation of Hitler's thinking towards the Jews and the policies of Nazi Germany. During a recent Ramadan, there was a 30-part series on Arab Radio and Television depicting "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion." It was hailed by an Egyptian reporter as revealing the truth that "The Jews act by means of the control of the media, politics and the economy in order to weaken the non-Jewish groups and bring about their disintegration." (translation by memri.org)

On March 10, 2002, the Saudi government daily paper published an article, "The Jewish Holiday of Purim." This article stated that the "special ingredient for Jewish holidays is human blood from non-Jewish youth." It offered great detail about how Jews let blood from their victims, how much joy it gives them to do it, and then how they drink it or dry it to bake into their holiday bread. Kuwaiti TV has shown, in political satire, Ariel Sharon drinking the blood of Palestinian children. These allegations are rooted in the stories of medieval times, that Jews drank the blood of Gentile children, and baked Passover bread with it. This was supposedly "proven" in a 1983 document called, "The Matzah of Zion." It is widely believed as fact in the Middle East.

In the Arab and Muslim world, there is widely circulating belief that the Mossad is responsible for the September 11th terrorist attacks in the U.S. Paknews.com, a sophisticated English-language news site based in Pakistan, found that 71 percent of its readers believed the report of a September 11 "Jewish conspiracy."

"Mein Kampf," previously banned by Israel, has been allowed by the Palistinian Authority and was sixth on the Palestinian best-seller list.

Beyond the traditional anti-Semitic stereotypes, there is also a believed effort in the Middle East to try to turn Jewish history into myth. Joseph's tomb was dismantled, and the ancient Jericho synagogue was destroyed. The Mufti of Jerusalem said of the Temple Mount: "There is not the smallest indication of the existence of a Jewish temple on this place in the past." (Boston Globe, April 2001) This comment has been echoed by the PLO's cabinet and much of the official press in the Middle East.

Anti-Semitism is not just confined these days to the Middle East. It is rising throughout Europe, in both obvious and subtle forms. In France for example, where lives one of the largest Jewish communities in the world, three synagogues have recently been burned in the last few months. Vandalizing and beatings are also occurring with disturbing frequency. According to CRIF (an umbrella group of Jewish organizations) between September 2000 and November 2001 there were 330 anti-Semitic incidents in Paris alone.

In December 2001, the largest neo-Nazi march since World War II took place in Berlin. Jews are even being blamed by the President of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, for their current economic

crisis. The government newspaper recently published an article by Mugabe stating how the Jews are to blame for the country's ills and woes.

Finally, during a September 2001 conference against racism in Durban, South Africa, literature with hook-nosed Jewish caricatures were distributed, while thousands of South African Muslims marched outside carrying banners saying that Hitler should have finished the job.

According to U.S. FBI statistics in 2000, in America, 73 percent of all reported hate crimes on the basis of religion were against Jews. American Neo-Nazi groups are finding new allies and audiences in the Middle East. This is concerning, because it allows these organizations to gain more financial support and power. And in America, stereotypes perpetuate about how Jews control money, politics, and Hollywood. Most people do not realize that they have changed false myth into fact. All it may take is for a little anger and discontentment to fuel those wrong beliefs into anger against Jews.

The following sources were utilized for this discussion:

* Dunetz, J. (2002, March 17). Wake Up and Smell the Anti-Semitism. Aish.com.

* Halkin, H. (2002, February). The Return of Anti-Semitism. (Commentary). American Jewish Committee, 113(2), 30.

* Anti-Semitism. Microsoft® Encarta® Online Encyclopedia 2001. <http://encarta.msn.com> © 1997-2000 Microsoft Corporation. All Rights Reserved.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Do you believe anti-Semitism exists today? If so, do you believe it is a serious problem? Can you share a time where you have either experienced it or observed it?

2. How would you define a Jew? (i.e., What about a practicing Christian who has a Jewish mother? Or a non-religious person who has Jewish parents?) How do you think anti-Semites define a Jew?

3. Why do you think anti-Semitism persists today?

4. Do you believe the Holocaust happened? If not, why?

5. Do you have any friends who are Jewish? Have you talked with them about what it is like being Jewish? If so, what have they shared and what did you think?

6. What are the stereotypes and stories you have heard about Jews? Do you believe they are true?

7. Why do you think many Jews in the world believe that to be anti-Israel is to be anti-Semitic?

8. How is anti-Semitism similar to other forms of racism (i.e., towards blacks)? How is it different?

9. What are ways that you possibly have added to the problem of anti-Semitism? What are ways you could contribute to the solution?

IMPLICATIONS

1. The crisis in the Middle East has once again called into question Israel's right to exist. When 40% of the entire Jewish population lives in Israel, in a space approximately the size of the state of New Jersey, and overt anti-Semitism permeates Europe and parts of the U.S., it is vital that young people understand why so many Jews feel that to be against the existence of Israel is to be anti-Semitic. The question must be asked, where would the Jews go?

2. Like other forms of racism, anti-Semitism is often expressed in the desire to simply exclude Jews, but there are two reasons why anti-Semitism will never be able to simply be grouped in with other types of racism. First, no other form of racism has been so pervasive throughout history and culture. Thus, it is hard to identify it in its subtler forms and it must be understood and exposed if it is going to stop. Next, the Holocaust. Anti-Semitism's racial hatred is unique in that it culminated in the heinous and systematic killing of two-thirds of a people group while the majority of nations and people, at least initially, stood by and did nothing. That type of hatred and evil does not die easy and clearly still infects society and culture today. It needs to be proactively addresses if it is to be eliminated.

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