



Challenging Anti-Semitism: Debunking the Myths & Responding with Facts

*Students Handouts and
Supporting Materials for Teachers*

Anti-Semitism: Past and Present (Grades 10 - 12)

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Definition of Anti-Semitism

Anti-Semitism is prejudice and/or discrimination against Jews.

Anti-Semitism can be based on hatred against Jews because of their religious beliefs, their group membership (ethnicity) and sometimes on the *erroneous* belief that Jews are a race. Jews are, in fact, of all different races.

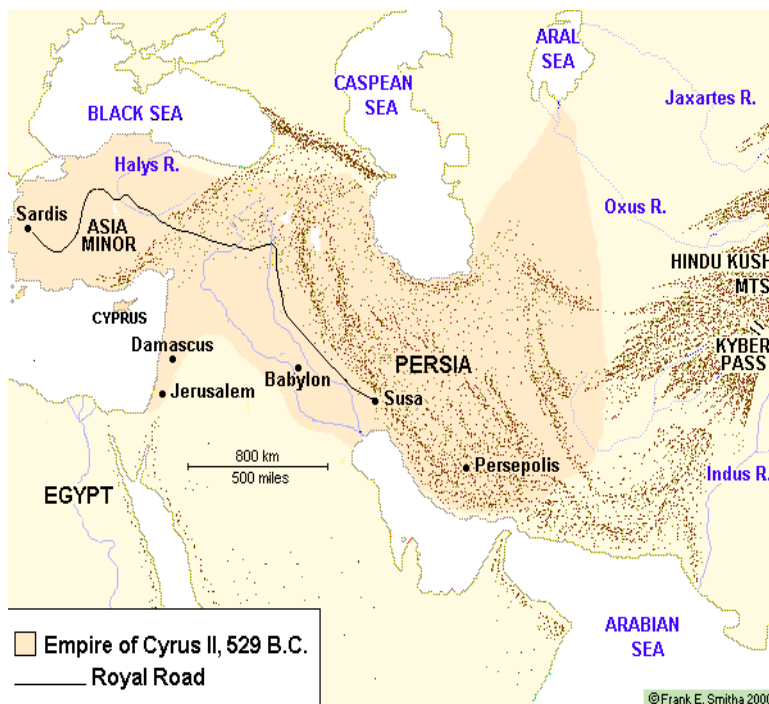
Short History of Anti-Semitism

[Adapted from [“Survival to Service: Resources and Classroom Activities Examining the Life of Abraham H. Foxman, Hidden Child of the Holocaust”](#), Anti-Defamation League, 2003]

Definition

Anti-Semitism is the hatred of the Jewish people and/or Judaism, the Jewish religion. It has been called *anti-Judaism* when it targets Jewish beliefs and practices, and *anti-Semitism* when it targets the Jewish people as a perceived race. Sometimes referred to as "the oldest hatred," it began as a conflict over religious beliefs, but in certain places and times it evolved into political, economic and social isolation of Jewish people, and the attempted annihilation of Jews. It did not begin with the Nazis, nor did it end after the Holocaust.

Biblical Times



Abraham who is believed to be the father of three monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) led his family to Canaan almost 2,000 years before the Common Era (B.C.E.). It was there that a new nation--the people of Israel--came into being. During those centuries before Christianity, the Hebrews (the early Jewish people) experienced persecution because they believed in only one god and refused to worship the many idols of the kingdoms that ruled in the Middle East. This was resented since the usual custom of the times was to adopt the religion of the local ruler or kingdom.

Map 1

Anti-Judaism

After the beginning of Christianity, a new form of anti-Judaism evolved. Initially, Christianity was seen as simply another Jewish sect since Jesus and his Disciples were Jewish and were preaching a form of Judaism. In the year 70 C.E. (Common Era), the Romans destroyed the Jewish State and most Jews were scattered throughout the ancient world.

During the first few hundred years after the crucifixion of Jesus by the Romans, followers of both Judaism and Christianity lived together throughout the Mediterranean region sometimes peacefully, sometimes with hostility, as both groups tried to spread their religious beliefs in the same lands.

When the Roman emperors converted to Christianity, it became the sole established religion of the Roman Empire. Since both Judaism and Christianity followed the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament), early Christian church leaders sought to establish their religion as a successor to Judaism and claimed that Jesus was the Messiah, or the son of G-d.

The unwillingness to accept Jesus as the Messiah by Jews who would not convert to Christianity was viewed as a threat to the Christian religion. A destructive claim was now charged against the Jews; Jews were proclaimed by the early Christians to be "Christ Killers."

The Middle Ages: The Early Modern Period

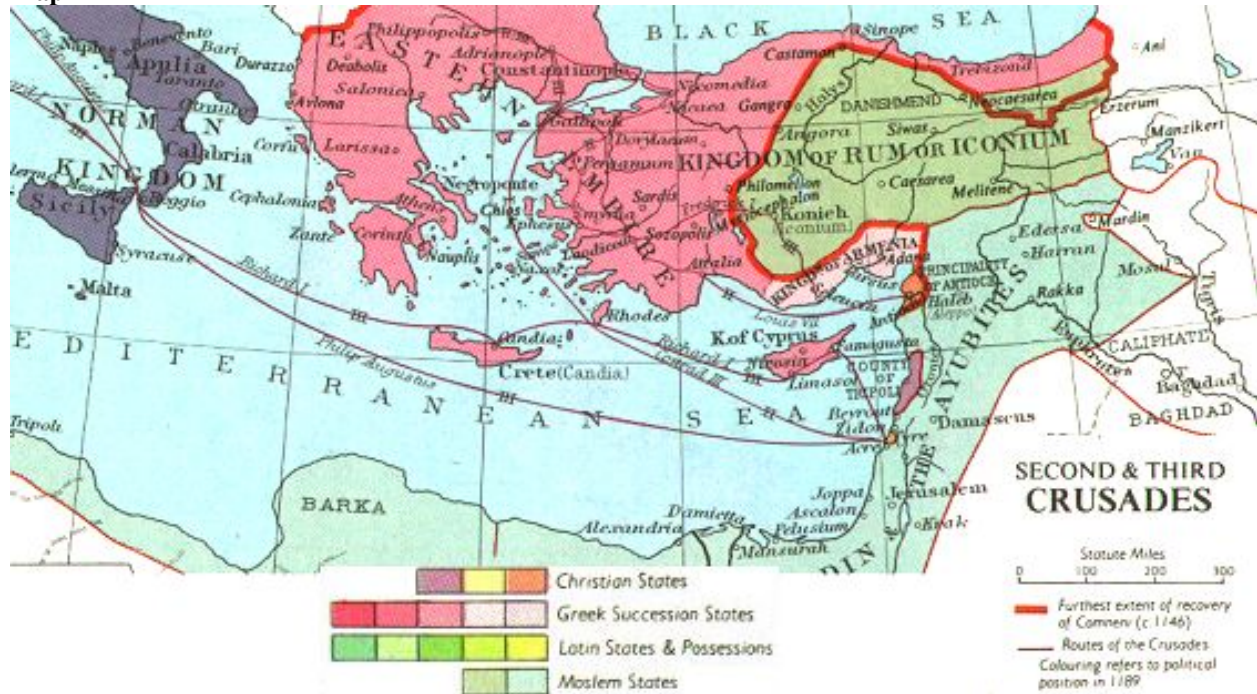
During the next three centuries (300-600 C.E.) new patterns of discrimination against Jews occurred: Jews were forbidden to intermarry with Christians (399 C.E.), prohibited from holding high positions in government (439 C.E.), and prevented from appearing as witnesses against Christians in court (531 C.E.).

As Jews were officially being excluded, certain myths about Jews arose in Europe. Some people came to believe that Jews had horns and tails, and that Jews engaged in ritual murder of Christians. The myth of Jews murdering Christians as ritual is referred to as the "blood libel," which was made up by Thomas of Monmouth, an Englishman, in 1150 to explain the mysterious death of a Christian boy.

Martin Luther, the founder of the 16th century Reformation and Protestantism, wrote a pamphlet in 1545 entitled *The Jews and Their Lies*. Luther claimed that Jews thirsted for Christian blood and urged that the Jews be killed. The Nazis [nearly 400 years later] reprinted this pamphlet in 1935. Some scholars feel that these outrageous attacks mark the transition from anti-Judaism (attacks motivated because of the Jews' refusal to accept Christianity) to anti-Semitism (hatred of Jews as a so-called "race".)

In 1095, Pope Urban II made a general appeal to the Christians of Europe to take up the cross and sword and liberate the Holy Land from the Muslims, beginning what was to be known as the Crusades. The religious fervor that drove men, and later even children, on the Crusades was to have direct consequences for Jews. The Crusader army on the way to attacking Muslims in the Holy Land swept through Jewish communities looting, raping and massacring Jews. This was the beginning of the *pogrom*, or the organized massacre of helpless people who hold unpopular religious beliefs.

Map 2



During the middle of the 14th century, the Bubonic Plague spread throughout Europe, killing an estimated one-third of the population. Though Jews were also dying from the plague, they were accused of poisoning wells and spreading the disease. Fear, superstition and ignorance prompted the need to find someone to blame and the Jews were a convenient scapegoat because of the myths and stereotypes that already existed about them.

Increasingly Jews were subjected to political, economic and social discrimination, resulting in the loss of their legal and civil rights. In some European countries, they were forced to live in certain sections of the towns called *ghettos*. Beginning in the 13th century, in many parts of Europe, Jews were required to wear a distinctive emblem (a badge and/or a pointed hat) so that they could be immediately recognized.

Jews were forbidden to own land, and in agricultural societies there were few other means for Jews to support their families. Since the Church did not allow Christians to loan money for profit, money lending became one of the few ways in which Jews could earn money legally. Once they became associated with the trade of usury (loaning money for interest) a new set of stereotypes evolved in which Jews were accused of being money hungry.

As moneylenders, Jews were frequently useful to European rulers who used the money to build cathedrals and royal armies. As long as Jews were benefiting rulers, they were tolerated. When they were no longer of use to rulers, Jews were expelled--from England in 1290, France in 1394, and Spain in 1492.

The Enlightenment

During the 18th century, Europe was influenced by the increase in knowledge from scientific discoveries. The idea that basic healthy, human conditions needed to be in place for the progress of any human being led to a belief in the equality of treatment of all human beings. Following the spread of these Enlightenment ideas, Jews were granted human rights throughout many countries in Europe.

In Germany, Jews were granted full civil rights in 1871 after the German states unified into a single nation called the Second Reich. With their new status as full citizens, Jews were able to take up many occupations previously denied to them. Many Jews improved their social and economic positions by becoming storekeepers, lawyers, doctors and teachers. However, full professorships in the universities and high military ranks were rarely available to them. Being full citizens of the German state, many Jews believed that their first loyalty was to their nation. They fought as German soldiers in the Franco-Prussian War and in World War I.

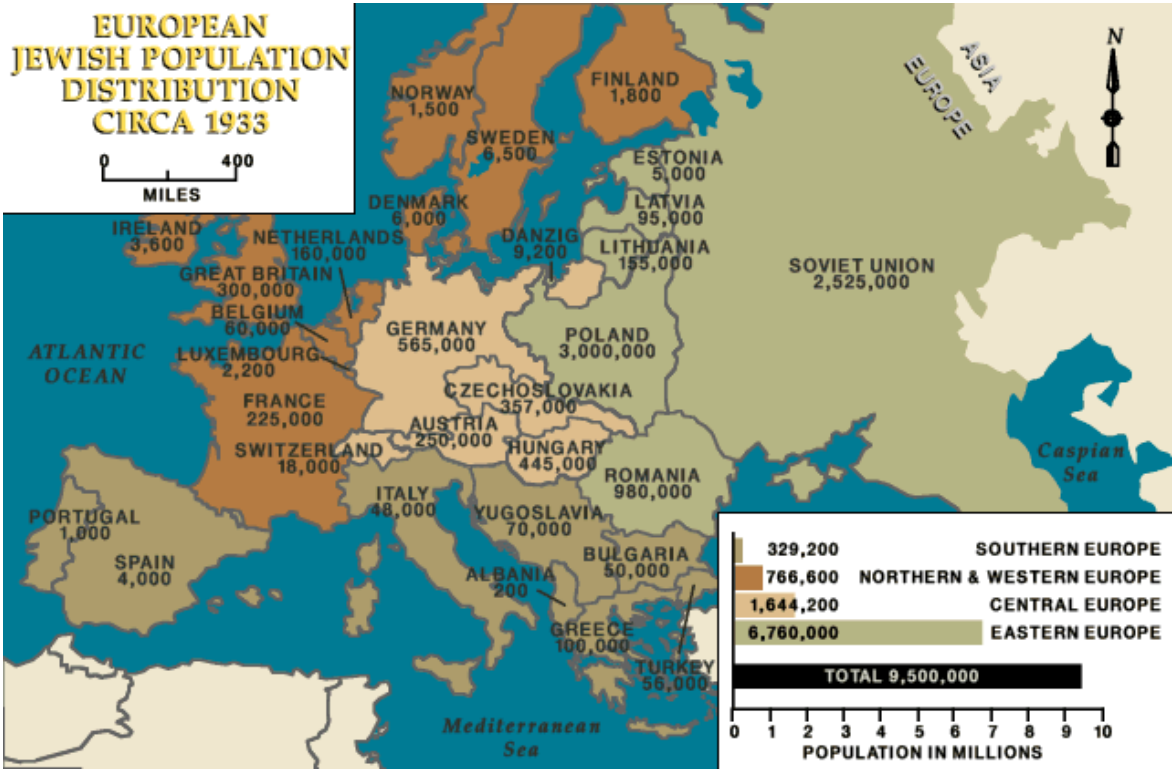
Anti-Semitism

The term anti-Semitism was first used in 1873 by Wilhelm Marr, a German politician. It coincided with the development across Northern Europe and the United States of a new so-called "science" based on false theories of racial superiority and inferiority. These ideas were also used to justify slavery and European colonialism across much of the world.

Following World War I (1914-1918), Germany was a deeply troubled country. Having lost the war, German citizens felt humiliated by the defeat, including Jewish German citizens who fought in the war. Germany had to give up much of its territory and pay large sums of money to the countries that had been damaged during the war.

Germany also suffered severe economic problems after the war, including economic inflation and unemployment during the 1920's and 1930's. The government was unable to solve these problems. Increasingly, there were strikes and riots that the government could not control.

In 1933 when the Nazi Party, under the leadership of Adolph Hitler, seized control over Germany, Hitler blamed Jews for Germany's loss of the war and used anti-Semitic myths to evoke fear that Jews would contaminate what Hitler called the superior German "Aryan race." A significant number of the German people were influenced by the extremely effective use of Nazi propaganda and were willing to place blame for Germany's problems on the Jews. Therefore, according to Hitler's doctrine, all Jews had to be eliminated.



Map 3

The Holocaust

The following is a description of the Holocaust issued by the Vatican on March 12, 1998:

This century has witnessed an unspeakable tragedy, which can never be forgotten: the attempt by the Nazi regime to exterminate the Jewish people, with the consequent killing of millions of Jews. Women and men, old and young, children and infants, for the sole reason of their Jewish origin, were persecuted and deported. Some were killed immediately, while others were degraded, ill-treated, tortured and utterly robbed of their human dignity, and then murdered. Very few of those who entered the [Concentration] Camps survived, and those who did remained scarred for life. This was the Shoah.

The Holocaust was the state-sponsored, systematic persecution and murder of European Jews by Nazi Germany between 1933 and 1945. The Holocaust resulted in the death of 6 million Jews, 3 million Soviet prisoners of war, 2 million Poles, 1 million Slavs who were targeted for slave labor, hundreds of thousands of Sinti-Roma, approximately 250,000 people with mental or physical disabilities, and thousands of gay persons, Communists, Socialists, trade unionists, and Jehovah’s Witnesses.

EUROPEAN JEWISH POPULATION DISTRIBUTION CIRCA 1950



Map 4

Contemporary Anti-Semitism

A defining characteristic of anti-Semitism today is the myth of "Jewish power." This is unique as most groups who are the subject of intense hatred are hated for their perceived inferiority, while hatred for Jews seems to arise from the myth that Jews have power and control over others.

The stereotype of Jewish power is derived from *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. This document, supposedly the writings of a secret group of rabbis plotting to take over the world, was later found to be forged by the secret police of Czar Nicholas II in an attempt to blame the Jews for problems Russia was experiencing. The "Protocols" were to serve as one of the bulwarks of Nazi propaganda and were introduced into the curriculum of many of Germany's schools during World War II.

Glossary:

Franco-Prussian War: a war between France and Prussia that ended the Second Empire in France and led to the founding of the German empire in 1870-1871

Pogrom: an organized, often officially encouraged massacre or persecution of a minority group, especially against Jews

Scapegoating: blaming an individual or group for something based on that person or group's

identity when, in reality, the person or group is not responsible. Prejudicial thinking and discriminatory acts can lead to scapegoating

Shoah: Hebrew word for "catastrophe" used for the Holocaust

Stereotype: an oversimplified generalization about a person or group of people without regard for individual differences. Even seemingly positive stereotypes that link a person or group to a specific positive trait can have negative consequences

World War I: a war fought from 1914 to 1918, in which Great Britain, France, Russia, Belgium, Italy, Japan, the United States and other allies defeated Germany, Austria-Hungary, Turkey and Bulgaria

Maps:

Map 1: Jewish Virtual Library, "The Empire of Cyrus II (529 BCE)",
<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/cyrusmap.html>

Map 2: Jewish Virtual Library, "The Second and Third Crusades",
<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/crusade2.html>

Map 3: The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "European Jewish Population (circa 1933)",
<http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/focus/maps/>

Map 4: The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "European Jewish Population (circa 1950)",
<http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/focus/maps/>

Questions about the Short History of Anti-Semitism

A. List two examples of ways in which Jewish people have been stereotyped or discriminated against throughout history that were most surprising to you:

- 1. _____

- 2. _____

B. What do you think is the most dehumanizing and dangerous stereotype about Jewish people, and why?

C. What are some of the connections between acts of historical anti-Semitism and the acts of anti-Semitism perpetrated by Nazis and Nazi sympathizers during the Holocaust?

