

Unit Two: Assignment 5: Antisemitism's Return

Introduction: History Rhymes

Antisemitism—hatred and discrimination against Jewish people—is not new. It has existed for centuries, but reached its most horrific peak during the Holocaust when Nazi Germany systematically murdered six million Jewish people. Most people assumed that after the world witnessed these unimaginable horrors, antisemitism would disappear forever.

During the Crusades (1095-1291 AD), Jewish communities faced devastating attacks as crusading armies traveled through

Unfortunately, that didn't happen. In the 21st century, antisemitic incidents are rising again around the world, including in Canada and the United States. By studying both the historical roots of antisemitism and its modern forms, we can better understand why this hatred persists and how to combat it.

Background: Antisemitism before Hitler

Antisemitism didn't start with the Nazis. For centuries, Jewish people faced discrimination, violence, and expulsion from various countries in Europe. They were often blamed for economic problems, natural disasters and plagues, or social unrest—even when they had nothing to do with any of these.

During the Crusades (1095-1291 AD), Jewish communities faced devastating attacks as crusading armies traveled through Europe toward the Holy Land. The **First Crusade** was particularly brutal—entire Jewish communities in the Rhineland cities of Speyer, Worms, and Mainz were massacred in 1096. Crusaders justified these murders by claiming Jews were "enemies of Christ" who should be forced to convert or killed. Many Jewish families chose suicide over forced conversion or death at the hands of the crusaders.

During the **Black Death** (1347-1353 AD), Jews were blamed for the plague that killed roughly one-third of Europe's population. Despite suffering and dying from the plague themselves, Jews were accused of poisoning wells and spreading the disease. Some Christians justified murdering Jews by saying that God punished Christians with plague for tolerating Jews. This led to systematic massacres across Europe—entire Jewish communities were burned alive, particularly in German-speaking regions. In Strasbourg alone, about 2,000 Jews were burned to death in 1349. Many communities were completely destroyed, and survivors fled eastward to Poland and Lithuania.

In the centuries following the Black Death, European Jews faced recurring cycles of persecution including blood libel accusations (false claims they murdered Christian children for ritual purposes), forced conversions, and mass expulsions. Spain expelled all Jews in 1492, England had expelled them in 1290, and France did so multiple times. These expulsions often involved confiscation of property and forced conversion or exile. Throughout these periods, Jews were frequently confined to ghettos, subjected to special taxes, banned from most professions, and

made to wear identifying badges or clothing - creating a pattern of systematic marginalization that persisted for centuries.

Martin Luther & National Socialism

Martin Luther's antisemitic writings, particularly his 1543 essay "On the Jews and Their Lies," provided a disturbing blueprint that Nazi ideologists would later exploit in the 1930s. This represents one of the most troubling aspects of Luther's legacy.

Luther's antisemitism evolved over time. Early in his career, he hoped Jews would convert to his reformed version of Christianity, but when this didn't happen, his writings and speeches became increasingly vicious. In his later writings, he called for synagogues to be burned, Jewish homes destroyed, rabbinical writings confiscated, and Jews to be expelled from Christian lands. He described Jews using dehumanizing language and promoted conspiracy theories about them.

The Nazis directly borrowed from Luther's writings and recommendations. **Julius Streicher**, publisher of the antisemitic Nazi newspaper *Der Stürmer*, cited Luther during his Nuremberg trial. On *Kristallnacht* in 1938, Nazi propaganda explicitly referenced Luther, with one Nazi newspaper declaring that Luther's recommendations were finally being implemented. **Heinrich Himmler**, head of the SS and the death and forced labour camps during World War Two, praised Luther as a "great German patriot and Jew-baiter."

Luther's writings provided a veneer of religious and intellectual legitimacy for Nazi antisemitism. The Nazis could point to this revered Protestant reformer to argue that hatred of Jews had deep German roots and religious justification. This connection demonstrates how dangerous rhetoric can echo across centuries, and how even influential religious figures can contribute to patterns of persecution. Many Lutheran churches today have formally repudiated Luther's antisemitic writings and acknowledged their role in enabling later violence against Jewish communities.

Propaganda: The Protocols of the Elders of Zion

One of the most harmful antisemitic documents in history was created around 1903 by the Tsarist Russian secret police (the Okhrana). Called *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, this fake document claimed to reveal a secret Jewish conspiracy to control the world through banks, media, and governments. *Russians* created this document, not Jews; and there was, and there is, no Jewish conspiracy to take over the world. The document was created by Russian authorities to distract their people from the problems of drought, high bread prices, unemployment and social unrest, etc. that eventually lead to the Communist Revolution in 1917 under Lenin. Even though the *Protocols* were proven fake by historians in 1920s, they continue to spread.

The Nazis used the *Protocols* as "evidence" to justify their hatred, poor treatment, and eventual systematic murder of Jewish people. The document convinced ordinary Germans that Jewish people were their enemies, making it easier for the Nazis to implement discriminatory laws and, eventually, genocide. These same fake conspiracy theories appear on social media platforms today:

- Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, and YouTube videos are currently spreading updated versions of the *Protocols* (using the algorithms on these platforms to target primarily young men)

- Instead of "Jewish conspiracy" these updated videos say "globalist conspiracy"
- Instead of blaming the wealthy Rothschild family they blame wealthy Jewish individuals like George Soros
- These posts are seen by millions of people and their messages find followers (especially during times of economic uncertainty or political tension like we're seeing in the West today)

Both Luther's essays and the Russian *Protocols* show how dangerous disinformation survives by adapting to new technologies while spreading the exact same hate-filled message. The historical lesson is that antisemitic ideas don't emerge out of nowhere, but they build on centuries of accumulated prejudice and hatred. Arguably, antisemitism is baked right into the Western intellectual tradition where people just sort of adopt attitudes and ideas without really thinking about them.

The Nazi Rise to Power

When Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party gained control of Germany in 1933, they made antisemitism an official government policy. The Nazis promoted the lie that Jewish people were responsible for Germany's problems after World War I, including economic hardship and military defeat. For this reason the Nazis passed a series of laws called the **Nuremberg Laws** with the intent of removing Jewish people from the cultural and economic life of Germany. For example, Jews were forbidden from teaching at universities or secondary/primary schools; their property and businesses were confiscated; citizenship revoked; and they were fired from their jobs. The persecution got so bad during an event that came to be called *Kristallnacht* ("Night of the Broken Glass") many Jews were compelled to leave the country, e.g. Albert Einstein left for the United States in 1933; the Frank family resettled in the Netherlands (also in 1933); and hundreds of Jewish refugees aboard the *MS St. Louis* attempted to move to Canada in 1939 but were refused entry. Frederick Blair, a powerful government official at the time, was an antisemite (as was Canada's then Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King). The *MS St. Louis* returned to Europe and within three years 254 of the 900 Jewish passengers were killed by Hitler's death camp system.

The Final Solution

By 1941, the Nazi government abandoned the plan of compelling Jews to migrate to other countries and adopted the "**Final Solution**"—a horrifying plan of genocide. Hitler ordered all Jewish people and other "undesirables" to be shipped to concentration camps, such as Bergen-Belsen and Buchenwald in Germany, and Auschwitz and Treblinka in Poland. Upon arrival, guards stripped them of their clothes and valuables, shaved their heads, and separated families. The weak, the old, and the young were immediately killed in gas chambers. Healthy people worked as slave labourers. When overwork, starvation, and disease weakened them, they too were murdered. By 1945, the Germans had killed more than six million Jewish people and an additional five million Roma, Poles, Russians, special needs people, gay people, and so on and so forth. Though the Allies had known about German concentration camps, they did not realize the full extent of the horrors of the Holocaust until they pressed closer to Germany and saw the Nazi atrocities first-hand.

In 1945, the Allies established an International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg, Germany, to prosecute prominent Nazi leaders for atrocities committed during the war. During the **Nuremberg Trials**, twelve Nazi defendants were sentenced to death while many others were imprisoned. This was the first time in history that leaders of a country were charged for "**crimes against humanity**" during wartime.

Modern Antisemitism in the 21st Century

Background: History Doesn't Repeat but It Rhymes

Many people believed that after the Holocaust, antisemitism would become a thing of the past. However, antisemitic incidents have been rising dramatically in recent years:

In 2022 approximately 2,769 "hate crimes" directed towards Jewish Canadians were recorded. In 2023 this number jumped to 5,791 and in 2024 increased to a further 6,219 incidents. Specific examples of these incidents include a firebombing of a Jewish community center in Montreal (2023) and gunshots were fired at two Jewish elementary schools. Three additional gunfire incidents took place in May and October of 2024 in Toronto.

In 2024 Jewish students were physically assaulted in both British Columbia and New Brunswick. In Calgary of the same year, a man threw eggs at a Holocaust Memorial Monument and Jewish Community Center while shouting anti-Semitic profanities. Also in 2024, a father and son planned to commit a mass murder of Jews in Toronto but were arrested by the RCMP before they could do it; and in 2025, university students at the University of Toronto protesting Israel's war against Palestine were seen giving Nazi salutes to Jewish students as they walked by. These and other similar incidents, including murder, are taking place in *every* country in the Western world.

Social Media Spreads Misinformation and Disinformation

Much of today's antisemitism has moved online, where social media platforms allow antisemitic conspiracy theories to spread rapidly to millions of people. Jewish individuals regularly face harassment and threats through social media, email, and messaging platforms. Holocaust denial and distortion—false claims that the Holocaust didn't happen or was exaggerated—spread easily through internet forums and websites, reaching young people who may not have learned about this history in school.

Tragically, antisemitism has also erupted into deadly physical violence in recent years. The Tree of Life Synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh in 2018 resulted in the murder of 11 Jewish members, making it the deadliest antisemitic attack in U.S. history. The following year, three people were killed in a targeted attack on a kosher market in Jersey City, and another person was killed with three others wounded in a shooting at the Poway Synagogue in California. These attacks demonstrate how online hatred can and do inspire real-world violence.

Modern conspiracy theories often echo the same false ideas from the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, but use updated language to seem more acceptable. Rather than openly blaming "Jewish people," modern antisemites might blame Jewish individuals for controlling banks, media, or governments, or claim that Jewish people are behind global conspiracies to manipulate world events. So, similar to medieval Christians blaming Jews for outbreak of plague in the 13th century, members of Congress (like Republican, Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene), claimed on Facebook that the devastating California fires in 2018 were connected to the Rothschild family (who used "Jewish space-based lasers" to light the fires). A sitting member of Congress literally took her message from the *Protocols*. People like Greene frequently use coded language like "globalists" to refer to Jewish people, making their hatred seem like legitimate political criticism rather than ancient prejudice.

University campuses have become another troubling location for antisemitic incidents. Jewish students face harassment and intimidation, particularly around events related to Israel or Jewish culture. Israel-related events often become targets for antisemitic behavior that goes beyond

legitimate political criticism to include personal attacks on Jewish students. Jewish symbols, buildings, and religious centers on campuses are regularly vandalized with hateful graffiti and symbols.

Why Is This Happening Again?

Many of the factors that allowed antisemitism to flourish in the 1930s are reappearing today in new forms. During times of economic uncertainty, people often look for scapegoats to blame for their problems, just as Germans blamed Jewish people for their country's difficulties after World War I. Social media now plays a similar role to Nazi propaganda, allowing false information and conspiracy theories to spread rapidly to millions of people who might never have encountered these ideas otherwise. Political extremism on both the far-right and far-left sometimes promotes antisemitic ideas, while many young people lack sufficient education about the Holocaust to recognize these dangerous patterns when they see them.

Several new factors have also contributed to the rise of modern antisemitism. Conflicts in the Middle East, particularly involving Israel, have led some people to wrongly blame all Jewish people for the policies of the Israeli government, even though Jewish people around the world have diverse views on these issues and most have no connection to the government of Israel's policy decisions; moreover, the internet has created echo chambers where people can find online communities that reinforce existing prejudices, making extreme views seem normal and acceptable. When celebrities (like Kanye West or Kyrie Irving) or public figures (like Greene) figures make antisemitic comments, it normalizes this hatred and gives it a wider platform than ever before, reaching audiences who might otherwise never encounter and thus *act* on such foolish ideas.

The Big Picture

The Holocaust represents the most extreme example of where antisemitism can lead when it's allowed to grow unchecked. The fact that the same conspiracy theories from the Protocols of the Elders of Zion—created over 120 years ago—still spread on social media today shows how persistent and adaptable hatred can be.

While we haven't seen anything as systematic and deadly as the Nazi genocide, the rise in modern antisemitic incidents should serve as a warning.

As the famous saying goes: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." By studying both the Holocaust and modern antisemitism, we can:

- Recognize the warning signs of growing hatred
- Understand how ordinary people can be convinced to participate in or ignore discrimination
- Learn why it's important to speak up when we see prejudice
- Appreciate why protecting minority rights protects everyone's rights
- Identify when old conspiracy theories are being repackaged for new audiences

The survivors of the Holocaust often say their greatest fear is that the world will forget what happened. Our job is to remember—not just the history, but the lessons that can help us build a more just and tolerant world.

Questions to Think About

For all the following questions, you must use the introduce, illustrate and conclude approach. Each question has a specific word count range. Work within that range if you want to earn full marks for the assignment.

1. The Protocols of the Elders of Zion were created in 1903, used by the Nazis in the 1930s, and still appear on social media today. What does this tell us about how false information spreads and why it's hard to stop? (100-200 words)

2. In your opinion, what can schools, governments, and ordinary people do to prevent antisemitism from growing in the future? (50-200 words)

Final Task

Find and investigate one anti-Semitic incident that took place in either Canada, the United States, France, Germany or Great Britain. For this incident provide:

1. What happened: Describe the incident in detail (when, where, what occurred).
2. Who was targeted: Were they individuals, institutions or groups?
3. Connection to historical patterns: How does this incident relates to the types of antisemitism we studied from the Holocaust era?
4. Response: How did law enforcement, government, or community groups respond?
5. Your analysis: What does this incident tell us about the rise of antisemitism?

Note: focus on incidents that involved actual violence and not just property damage or online harassment.

Your response should follow the introduce, illustrate and conclude format and be in the 200-400 word range. Please include the URL(s) where you got your source(s).
