

Overview of Anti-Judaism and Antisemitism¹

Directions: As you are reading, annotate the text by completing the following steps:

1. **Highlight words that are unfamiliar.**
2. **Underline places where you feel confused.**
3. **Stop and answer the questions in the boxes. Underline the place(s) in the text where you found the answer to a question.**

Judaism is the oldest monotheistic religion. Throughout much of the faith's history, Jews lived in territories ruled by other groups. They were often treated as outsiders and blamed for disasters suffered by the societies in which they lived. Continuous rumors, lies, myths, and misinformation about Jews have existed throughout history. Many of them persist in the contemporary world. Often this hatred has led to violence.

In 63 BCE, the Roman army conquered Jerusalem, the center of Jewish life. They incorporated ancient Israel, the land where the Jews lived, into the Roman Empire. Roman leaders often used brutality and demanded that those they ruled worship their numerous gods. Jews worshiped only one god. The Romans responded with persecution and violence. They destroyed the center of Jewish life, the temple in Jerusalem, in 70 CE. In 130 CE, the Roman army attacked Jerusalem again. They displaced much of the Jewish population from the region that Jews considered their homeland.

Why did Roman leaders view Jews as a threat?

During this period of Roman rule, a new faith, Christianity, emerged from Judaism. Jesus and his early followers were Jews. But as Christianity spread after the Roman governor Pontius Pilate had Jesus executed, early Christians distanced themselves from Jews. This was partly to avoid being

¹ The information from this handout is adapted from the following source: Doris L. Bergen, *War and Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 4–6.

persecuted by Roman leaders. Christianity and Judaism eventually became separate and competing religions. By the 300s, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. Jews remained a minority.

Over time, lies and myths developed about Jews. According to historian Doris Bergen, the myth that Jews were traitors and responsible for the death of Christ, which began in the Roman imperial period, had long-lasting impact, “remaining familiar in Europe into the twentieth century.”² Throughout the Middle Ages, state authorities as well as mobs attacked Jewish communities. Jews were also falsely blamed for causing the Black Death. In some places in Europe, they were forced to live in ghettos and wear identifying badges.

In other places, Jews were driven away entirely. This happened in 1492. King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella forced Jews to leave the Iberian Peninsula unless they converted. But in the 1500s, not even conversion was enough to save Jews in Spain, as Jews who converted still faced suspicion and the idea that they were tainted by having “Jewish blood.” This claim stated that conversion to Christianity did not change Jews’ fundamental identity.

For what events did governments blame Jews during the Middle Ages? What were the consequences for many Jewish communities?

Later in the 1500s, Christians known as Protestants broke away from the Church of Rome. Many Protestants thought that Jews would convert to their new Christian faith. When that did not happen, Protestant leader Martin Luther turned on Jews. He called for synagogues and Jewish homes to be set on fire.

The ideas of the Enlightenment had spread across Europe by the 1700s. Among those ideas was that society could be improved through the use of human reason and science and through the ideals of equality. Between the late 1700s and early 1900s, laws and restrictions that discriminated against Jews were lifted in many European societies. In many places, Jews were allowed to participate more fully in the politics, economy, and social life of the places they lived.

² Doris L. Bergen, *War and Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 4–6. Reproduced by permission from Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group.

As restrictions on Jews loosened across Europe in the 1800s, Jews became more integrated into European society. Some Jews became successful and visible leaders in a variety of professions, and a few became high-ranking government officials. This sparked a backlash from those who continued to be prejudiced against Jews or felt threatened by their increasing success (even though most European Jews remained poor). False conspiracy theories spread across Europe that Jews secretly controlled powerful governments. The theories also stated that Jews controlled financial institutions and sought to enrich themselves at the expense of non-Jewish Europeans.

How did the Enlightenment impact the treatment of Jews in Europe?

During the same period, the field of “race science” emerged in Europe and North America. This happened in part to portray slavery and divisions in society as “natural.” Race scientists who divided humans into separate races began to count Jews as a race. In 1878, German Wilhelm Marr popularized the idea that Jews are a distinct and dangerous race. He called them the “Semitic” race. He believed that this race was assaulting Germany and decreasing the fortunes of true “Aryan” Germans. “Aryans” were a mythical, supposedly superior race. Many northern Europeans believed they had descended from the “Aryan” race. Marr coined the term “antisemitism” to describe his belief that Jews were dangerous and should not be allowed to participate in German society.

How did Wilhelm Marr apply ideas of “race” to Jews? How did “race science” support his views?

Antisemitism became common across Europe in the early 1900s. Jews were falsely blamed for the destruction and defeat suffered by Germany and its allies in World War I. They were also blamed for the communist revolution that overthrew the tsar in Russia. Thus, lies about them inspired fear in capitalist societies across Europe. These lies were used to justify increasing discrimination and violence against Jews in the twentieth century.