Etymology of antisemitism

‘Antisemitism’ is a key concept in understanding why the Jews were targeted. As Yehuda Bauer explains, “after all, the Germans and their allies all over Europe did not murder the Jews because they loved them, or even because they were indifferent to them, or because of a generalised ‘racism’. They did not kill all the green-eyed men and the red-haired women, but Jews” (in Foster et al. 2016: ix). Antisemitism refers to ‘the belief that Jews have common repellent and/or ruinous qualities that set them apart from non-Jews’ (Hayes, 2017: 3). The term first appeared in 1879 and was intended to describe something different from previous forms of anti-Jewish sentiment. As Hayes (2017) explains, antisemites claimed to be against a phenomenon they themselves invented, ‘Semitism’. They claimed to combat Semites (speakers of the Semitic family of languages) but in fact not all Semites were targeted – speakers of Arabic and Aramaic were not included though they both speak Semitic languages. Indeed, the target of the new term was Jews and ‘by focusing on their ancestral language and using an abstract, pseudoscientific euphemism to group them, the antisemites purported to (a) differentiate Jews authoritatively from everyone else, (b) root their difference in their very nature and thought processes, and thus (c) assert that opposition to Jews was not a mere prejudice, but a response to a demonstrable reality that had to be dealt with politically’ (Hayes, 2017: 4-5; emphasis added). Those who espoused antisemitic ideas claimed that Jews had been shaped over time by their language and their original desert environment to be a fundamentally and unchangeable different species than Europeans; a species that had to be contained and expelled (ibid). Nazis combined such antisemitic ideas with racial doctrines about superior and inferior races, as well as ideas about ‘racial hygiene’ and along with nationalism created the special fusion that was their ideology.

References Foster, S. et al. (2016). What do students know and understand about the Holocaust? Evidence from English secondary schools. London: UCL Centre for Holocaust Education. Hayes, P. (2017) Why? Explaining the Holocaust. New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company

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Throughout all of the Centre’s materials, including the textbook, we refer to ‘antisemitism’ without a hyphen and in lower case. Including a hyphen in ‘anti-Semitism’ suggests opposition to ‘Semitism’, it assumes that there is such a thing as a Semitic people when there is not. When the word first appeared in English in 1893 it was given a hyphen. The word antisemitism means hatred of the Jews, it does not mean hatred towards ‘Semitism’ which is non-existent. As antisemitism is illogical it does not deserve capitalisation. “Something this absurd does not deserve a capital letter.” Lipstadt, 2019.

Lipstadt, D. (2019) Antisemitism Here and Now. London: Scribe.