Nazi Antisemitism: Where did it come from?

Key Question: Where does antisemitism come from, and how has it changed over time?

Teaching Aims and Learning Objectives

- For students to critically examine the underlying causes of anti-Jewish prejudice
- For students to explore *change* and *continuity* in the development of anti-Jewish prejudice
- For students to be able to explain the development of modern antisemitism and the eliminationist antisemitism of Nazi Germany

Rationale

Research by the Centre for Holocaust Education (2016) revealed that many young people struggled to understand why Jews were targeted during the Holocaust. Many had vague notions about why Jews were persecuted. Of course there was no 'valid' reason – the persecution was based on irrational scapegoating, demonisation and hatred spanning centuries – however students appeared to have no sense of this historic reality. According to the research, only 31.8% of students recognised the term 'antisemitism' at all, whilst explanations for mass persecution and murder tended to be located in the personality of Hitler (and to some extent 'the Nazis') who simply 'hated Jews' and other groups who he

saw as different. Others anchored their understanding of Nazi antisemitism in religious prejudice, or a generic racism, rather than an understanding of the distinctive nature of antisemitism. In trying to explain the targeting of the Jews, some participants reiterated antisemitic tropes, believing '[the Jews] were doctors, lawyers, they owned shops so they were rich' or that Jews 'had the best jobs'. Some 73.9% of participants overestimated the Jewish population of Germany, believing it to be 15-30 times greater than it was. A significant minority (41.6%) believed that Jews could escape Nazi persecution if they converted to Christianity. These misconceptions indicated that many students had a limited understanding of the development of antisemitism.

Such misconceptions are of concern, for without an understanding of the nature and causes of antisemitism any attempt to explain the Holocaust will be seriously flawed. Both the specific antisemitism of Nazi ideology and the long history of European anti-Judaism are foundational if students are to grasp why Jews were easy to target and why Nazi antisemitism had traction across Europe. This lesson has been developed to enhance students' understanding of the origins of Nazi antisemitism and what made it unique.

You can read more about these findings in our research briefing *Victims of the Holocaust.*

Key Information

- The lesson is intended for Year 9 students and above. It is devised for History classes.
- Timings are suggested on the basis of a **one hour lesson** and may need to be modified for different school contexts with different lesson timings or approaches.

  The lesson assumes students have an awareness of medieval history. They should understand the temporal span of the period, as well as key features of medieval society such as guilds or feudalism. The lesson also assumes students are comfortable working with the second-order concepts of change, continuity, significance, cause and consequence.
- It is essential students should have already studied the reality of pre-war Jewish life prior to the lesson, both so that Jews do not simply appear on the historical stage as objects of persecution, and so that students have the knowledge to counter the myths and stereotypes they will be encountering. Lessons exploring the vibrancy and diversity of pre-war Jewish life can be found on our website.
- For this lesson you will require:
    - The accompanying PowerPoint
    - Printed copies of the Card Sort and an A3 copy of the Timeline Graph for each pair in your class
    - *The Roots of Antisemitism* film
    - Coloured pens or highlighters

Lesson Plan

Introduction (6 minutes)

Share the opening slide of the PowerPoint and introduce your students to the objectives of the lesson, explaining that in this lesson we are going to cover a long period of history over a wide area, and that they will be drawing on previous learning about pre-war Jewish life and the medieval historical period. You may wish to refresh or check that previous learning to interleave their understanding with the new material or refresh that learning in homework prior to the lesson. Introduce the objectives on Slide 2.

Prior to showing the images on Slides 4 and 5, emphasise to your students that they will be seeing some hateful antisemitic images and that a feeling of discomfort or even revulsion is a natural and normal reaction. Additionally, emphasise that these are false caricatures – they depict Jews as they were imagined to be by a majority Christian population, not how they truly were. You may wish to remind students of the images they came across in the study of pre-war Jewish life which depicted real Jewish people.

First, show these images taken from *The Poisonous Mushroom* on Slide 4. Ask your students how the 'Jewish' figures are being depicted, and why. What is being claimed about Jewish people in the way these photographs are being depicted? Share the titles of each image – how does this inform students' understanding of these pictures? What sort of myths about Jewish people are being put forward by *The Poisonous Mushroom?* You may wish to discuss the text and its purpose – to convince young children in Nazi Germany to internalise the regime's antisemitism.

Next, share the medieval image on Slide 5. Ask your students to describe what they can see in the image, and how the 'Jewish' figures are being depicted. What is the same or different in how Jews are depicted in these two images 700 years apart? Students are likely to pick up on similarities in visual language. A notable difference is the inclusion of demonic figures taken from Christian cosmology, showing the fundamentally religious character of medieval anti-Judaism.
Unlike the propaganda of *The Poisonous Mushroom,* this image is a doodle and arguably had no real intended purpose or audience at all. What does this tell your students about the nature of medieval anti-Judaism?

These images depict the very long history and continuities in anti-Jewish prejudice in Europe. The 'oldest hatred', antisemitism, is what your students will be learning about this lesson.

Roots of Antisemitism (20 minutes)

Introduce the student to the *Roots of Antisemitism* film. Explain that they need not take notes on the film – they just need to take it in during watching. The film contains a great deal of information over a large chronological sweep of history. This will support the student's work in subsequent tasks. You should not expect students to remember and internalise the whole film – students are intended to understand the broad patterns in each historical period. You may wish to 'chunk' the film to support children's working memory, by playing the medieval segment of the film (up to 5:06), discussing it, and then moving on to the early modern and modern section (5:06 – 12:01). At the end of the film, or after each chunk, you will wish to question students on their understanding of what they have seen: what do they think is the most significant knowledge to take from the film and why.

Timeline Task: Chronology and Causation (30 minutes)

Having discussed the film and given your students an understanding of the broad sweep of antisemitism, we are now going to develop their understanding making use of the Antisemitism Timeline Graph and the Timeline cards. If 'chunking' the lesson, you may wish to complete each chronological section of the timeline separately. The Timeline is meant to function as a visualisation of the long history of anti-Jewish prejudice, and as a working document which pupils can add to throughout the lesson. They may make notes on your discussions on their Timelines graphs. On Slide 6 and Slide 7 there are completed and interactive versions of the Timeline graph which you can use to model the task with your students.

Group your young people into pairs and have them arrange the cards chronologically on their timeline together. On the X axis of your timeline graph pupils can rate the severity of the anti-Jewish prejudice in that period. This should make clear to pupils that whilst anti-Jewish prejudice is common throughout the period covered by this lesson, there are numerous 'flashpoints' where moments of crisis lead to increased violence and discrimination towards Jews. The 'severity' of anti-Jewish prejudice should not be confused with the degree of 'suffering' – we are inviting students to compare the extent and scale or persecution, not the suffering of individuals.

Once students have completed the first task, they should have a timeline of anti-Jewish and antisemitism across the period and may start to analyse it.

Your students are now going to reflect on the causes of anti-Jewish prejudice in different historical periods. It may be useful to remind students that in history events are multi-causal, and that we are not looking for simple explanations. Ask your student-pairs to draw lines between cards on their timeline linking events to their causes. Then ask your students to discuss in their pairs what the key causes are in each historical period. Choose some pupils to explain their reasoning to the class. To build on this, question the pupils about which themes are most significant in each period: *Religion, Economics, Blame, False Beliefs, Conspiracy Theories.* Invite students to feed back where they feel the themes are most prominent in each period so that you can check their understanding. Students should then be able to see that the causes shift away from religious beliefs after the Medieval and Early Modern period towards a focus on Conspiracy Theories and False Beliefs (such as the 'race science' of Wilhelm Marr). Economics and Blame, however, are consistent themes throughout the timeline.

Building on this, students can then highlight *turning point* events which represent a significant change in the treatment of Jewish people, and also the causes of that change.

Students should start to see that there are long periods of continuity in the Medieval and Early Modern periods, and large changes to the nature of antisemitism during the nineteenth century. This can open up a conversation between the religious anti-Judaism of the Medieval and Early Modern eras and the pseudo-scientific 'race science' of the later nineteenth century. Students can begin to describe these differences. The distinction between Jews being considered a 'race' as opposed to belonging to a 'religion' may be difficult for some students to grasp. You may wish to spend time ensuring they understand this change during the nineteenth century, and its ramifications: whilst medieval Jews could convert to Christianity and to some degree avoid prejudice, Jews in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries could not change their 'race'.

Bringing it together (4 minutes)

In order to bring together the learning about the history of anti-Jewish prejudice in this lesson, ask the students to summarise the most important aspects of Medieval, Modern and Nazi antisemitism – what are the most significant differences between them? Students should understand that Medieval antisemitism was primarily religious in nature based on exclusions of Jews accompanied by occasional outbursts of violence. 'Modern' antisemitism has been primarily pseudoscientific, relying on conspiracy theories and the idea of 'racial struggle' which blamed Jews for the misfortunes of others. Nazi antisemitism was similar to modern antisemitism, but was distinctly **eliminationist** – seeking to murder Jewish people on an unimaginable scale.

Engaging all learners

The film *Roots of Antisemitism* contains a large amount of information, covering some 2,000 years densely packed into just 12 minutes. As previously discussed, you may wish to 'chunk' this film and revisit it as students work through discrete parts of the lesson. This will diminish the cognitive load placed on students by the amount of information in the film.

To support students with the complex vocabulary of this period a glossary has been provided with the lesson materials. You may also wish to support students by pre-teaching vocabulary such as *pogrom* or *ghetto* at the opening of the lesson so that students are comfortable using those terms in their verbal and written answers. There is also a worked example of the Timeline Graph which you can share with students to help them with their own.

There is a risk when discussing aspects of anti-Jewish prejudice historically that students may develop a misconception that certain false beliefs about Jews and Judaism are true. You may wish to spend some time discussing with pupils at the opening of the lesson the fact that they will be encountering a lot of false beliefs about a minority group in the lesson and that they should be prepared to separate fact from fiction. You will note the film does this very carefully, addressing and deconstructing each feature of anti-Judaism and antisemitism and offering a correction in each case. Additionally, the cards for the Timeline reinforce that many of these beliefs are false.

It is not expected that students will internalise and remember every example of anti-Jewish prejudice discussed in the lesson – it is most important that they develop an understanding of the typical features of anti-Jewish prejudice in each period and their differences and similarities.

Additional Information

Pedagogical guidance

Challenging subject matter

Because of the nature of the material encountered by students in this lesson, a reflexive approach is imperative. Some students may, for example, require time and space to process some of the information relayed to them by the film; others could understandably find aspects of this history upsetting or offensive.

A deeply uncomfortable truth for some students will be the long history of Christian anti-Judaism. It may be salient for teachers to give time and space for reflection and discussion of these issues. Here it is important to note that Christianity is not inherently anti-Jewish (indeed, the religion began as a Jewish movement, with Jewish leaders and followers); in many places and at many times Christians and Jews have lived peaceably side by side. Since the Holocaust much has been done to improve understanding and relations between these religions. You may also wish to discuss that the Timeline – as this lesson focuses specifically on anti-Jewish prejudice it omits periods of sustained good relationships between the Jewish and Christian communities in Europe, such as in the Iberian Peninsula for long periods, or in tenth-century Poland. It may also be worth reaching out to teachers of Religious Education, Citizenship/PSHE or pastoral leads within your school to support you in discussing this essential history without causing damage to students' personal faith and identity.

Language

In the development of these lesson materials, there is some use of language which we have adopted for a specific pedagogical purpose. For example, we spell 'antisemitism' without capital letters or a hyphen. This is because a hyphen implies that there is such a thing as a 'semite', which antisemitism is opposed to, whereas the term in fact describes the hatred of Jews. Additionally, drawing on Jean-Paul Sartre and Anthony Julius's work on antisemitism, we choose not to capitalise 'antisemitism' as a proper noun, to avoid giving the impression that antisemitism is a serious ideology which should be engaged with.

Throughout the lesson a distinction has been made between anti-Judaism (a religious prejudice against the Jewish religion) and antisemitism (a primarily secular prejudice against Jews as a race) to reenforce the difference between the two.

In these lesson materials, you will find that the term 'race' appears in inverted commas. This is to signify that race is a socially constructed concept with little basis in biological reality. The 'modern' antisemites of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had a limited understanding of heritability, and DNA had yet to be discovered, meaning their understanding of human biodiversity was very poor. In the context of a world dominated by European empires, many turned to pseudo-science to explain European dominance, constructing theories of scientific racism and eugenics to justify imperialism. With your students it is important to be clear that we now understand that 'race' is a socially constructed identity based in culture, and that aspects such as skin colour are an extremely minor part of the human DNA. Race exists because we believe in it, not because it has any significance biologically.

Misconceptions

One essential aspect in teaching about historic antisemitism is to avoid inadvertently reenforcing

antisemitic myths. You will notice that the materials in this lesson have been phrased to foreground where beliefs about Jews were untrue, either in the form of conspiracy theories or antisemitic tropes such as the 'Blood Libel'. When working with your students, you should be careful to emphasise that these canards are harmful and malicious lies. As Anthony Julius writes about the Blood Libel specifically, Jews were 'fantasy perpetrators and real victims'. When checking students' understanding, make sure that students are aware that beliefs about and perceptions of Jews were not based in factual reality.

Supplementary notes on the persecution of Jews

There are several examples you can use to look at other incidents of anti-Judaism. The following are useful examples of anti-Jewish outbursts in very different contexts with different sets of causes. You may wish to draw on these case studies to supplement the lesson's focus on medieval anti-Judaism and Nazi antisemitism.

- 16th March 1190 York: King Richard I had recently been crowned, he made no secret of his intention to go on a Crusade. This inspired anti-Jewish sentiments and there were rumours he had called for all Jews to be killed in his country. Richard de Malbis owed money to Aaron of Lincoln and instigated an attack on Jews in York. The entire Jewish community took sanctuary in the wooden keep of York's royal castle, where they were besieged by the Sheriff's men and a mob of local townspeople crying for their blood. Rather than being forced to convert to Christianity or be killed by the mob, many committed suicide, killing first their wives and children and then themselves. Those that did not kill themselves were murdered by the mob. The entire Jewish community of York – perhaps 150 men, women and children – died that day.
- 6th June 1391 Seville: The Jewish community of Seville was one of the oldest and largest in Spain. By the end of the fourteenth century there was a power vacuum in Seville when the King and Archbishop died in quick succession. King John left his young son to rule under the guidance of a committee of regents. His widow's confessor Archdeacon Ferrand Martinez had been making anti-Jewish rabble-rousing sermons for years; he used the death of the Archbishop to allow him to unleash an attack on the Jewish community. The regents told him to stop but he ignored them. The massacre took the lives of more than 4,000 Jewish people, and thousands more were forced to convert to Christianity.
- June 1768 Massacre at Uman: Uman was a well-fortified city in central Ukraine, then under the control of the Polish kingdom and was garrisoned by Polish troops. There had been numerous rebellions against the Poles (1734, 1750 and 1768). The Jewish community were seen by the Ukrainian rebels as Polish colonisers. When the city was captured by rebellious Cossacks led by Ivan Gonta and Maksym Zalizniak, the Polish commander betrayed the Jews in exchange for clemency towards Polish Catholic settlers there. Some 33,000 Jewish men, women and children from Uman and the surrounding countryside were murdered.
- 25-27 December 1881 Christmas pogrom Warsaw: There was a crush at a Christmas church service in which 29 people died. Jews were accused either of shouting and causing the panic, or for being pick pockets operating during the service. This triggered a three-day pogrom in which two were killed, 24 injured and over 1,000 made homeless. The Russian authorities called in troops to put down the pogrom. There is a historiographical debate about the role of the Russian authorities in initiating the pogrom, however the general consensus is that they were not involved. The growing tension between Polish Jewish and Catholic communities is a better context within which to understand this outbreak of mob violence.

When discussing the nature of medieval anti-Judaism you can bring in the work of Mike Davis, who argued in *Planet of Slums* (2006) that marginal/migrant workers are forced to do jobs which are dangerous, dirty and degrading. He calls these '3D jobs'. This is often the fate of the more vulnerable and powerless in society, who are denied access to high status jobs and better paid work, and who find opportunities mainly in work that others in society do not want. You can highlight this by pointing out that Dante (Italian poet 1265-1321) dooms money lenders to the Seventh Circle of Hell alongside blasphemers and 'sexual deviants'. So the Jews driven to work in the money lending business in medieval Europe were doing work that was seen as morally dirty and degrading as well as physically dangerous. It is also worth dispelling the myth that money lending was the prerogative of the rich – while there were a very small number of very wealthy Jews who made large loans to the nobility, the vast majority of moneylenders were of very modest means, getting by with small loans to people who were often far better off than themselves.

Students often find the idea that the Nazis blamed Jews for both capitalism and communism hard to grasp as they appear to be binary opposites. The Nazis advocated a Romantic ideal of Germany opposed to any manifestation of modernity, (see Ian Kershaw *Hitler 1889-1936 Hubris* pp. 134-139). Their ideal Germany was rural, traditional, communal, hierarchical. Anything that challenged this fantasy – urbanisation, industrialisation, capitalism, democracy, liberalism, individualism, socialism, communism – was seen as 'un-German' and therefore associated, by the Nazis, with the 'alien Jewish race' in their midst. It was also of course a paradox of Nazi ideology that, while holding these Romantic fantasies, they cultivated a self-image of rationality – arguing that emotions such as pity or empathy must be overcome in a world in which struggle was the 'natural order'. In this manner, deep irrational fears about the world were given a false legitimacy by the superficially 'modern' and 'rational' pseudo-science of race hygiene.

There was little that was new or original about Nazi antisemitism. In some aspects it continued a long European tradition, in that it:

- Drew upon a centuries-old phobia of 'the Jew' as a malevolent, even 'demonic', force (which stemmed from traditional Church teaching).

It also drew upon beliefs that emerged from the nineteenth century and which became increasingly popular in a secular world where the Christian churches held less sway:

- The supposedly 'modern' pseudo-scientific belief that human beings had evolved into separate 'races', and that some were superior, others inferior.
- For the 'modern' antisemite, the nature and character of the Jews was unchangeable. Unlike in previous ages, where the Church had sought to convert Jews to Christianity, for the modern antisemite Jews remained an 'alien race' no matter what religion, nationality, or political belief they professed.
- With the Protocols of the Elders of Zion and other conspiratorial fantasies, many modern antisemites came to believe in a worldwide Jewish conspiracy aiming at global domination.

The Nazi vision drew on each of the above, but also embraced more radical elements, which potentially made it more lethal and genocidal:

- The Nazis saw all 'human races' as locked in a battle of survival, a warped 'morality' where war was good, driving the development of the human species as only the strongest prospered.
- Nazi antisemitism went beyond the racist view of 'superior' and 'inferior' groups of human beings – 'the Jews' were perceived as a 'parasitic race' that existed almost outside of other human races and posed an existential threat to the very continuation of German life and culture.

- They rejected the ethics of the Christian Church as being 'weak', stemming as it did from Jewish teaching: this overcame a centuries-old restraint on European Christians against the murder of their Jewish neighbours. Despite anti-Jewish teaching and outbreaks of mob violence, still the Church officially protected the lives of the Jewish communities. In Nazi thinking, this restraint no longer held – there was no desire to 'convert' the Jews, no belief that all people were made in God's image – rather a conviction that race war was natural, inevitable and good, and that 'the Jews' were the single greatest enemy of the German people.

Elements of traditional European anti-Judaism continued alongside modern antisemitism. The growing hostility toward Jews in Poland during the 1930s, for example, drew on religious rather than racial ideas, largely because of the strong and continuing influence of Church teaching in this deeply Catholic society. This serves to underline that while it is essential to have a secure understanding of Nazi antisemitism, this alone cannot account for the way in which the Holocaust unfolded across Europe.

Students need to be aware of different strains of antisemitism, and how these hybrids co-mix with the more long-standing anti-Jewish sentiments. It is essential that teachers (and by extension, students) realise what was distinctive about what we are calling 'Nazi antisemitism', and the broader, longer-term context of European religious and political culture from which this emerged and in which it flourished.