**What is anti-Semitism?**

**Answer:** hostility toward or discrimination against Jews as a religious or racial group.

**Introduction**

The term *anti-Semitism* was coined in 1879 by the German agitator Wilhelm Marr to designate the anti-Jewish campaigns underway in central Europe at that time. Although this term now has wide currency, it is a misnomer, since it implies a discrimination against all Semites. Arabs and other peoples are also Semites, and yet they are not the targets of anti-Semitism as it is usually understood. The term is especially inappropriate as a label for the anti-Jewish prejudices, statements, or actions of Arabs or other Semites. Nazi anti-Semitism, which culminated in the [Holocaust](http://www.history.com/topics/the-holocaust), had a racist dimension in that it targeted Jews because of their supposed biological characteristics—even those who had themselves converted to other religions or whose parents were converts. This variety of anti-Jewish racism dates only to the emergence of so-called “scientific racism” in the 19th century and is different in nature from earlier anti-Jewish prejudices.

**The origins of Christian anti-Semitism**

Anti-Semitism has existed to some degree wherever Jews have settled outside of Palestine. In the ancient Greco-Roman world, religious differences were the primary basis for anti-Semitism. In the Hellenistic Age, for instance, Jews' social segregation and their refusal to acknowledge the gods worshiped by other peoples aroused resentment among some pagans, particularly in the 1st century BCE–1st century CE. Unlike polytheistic religions, which acknowledge multiple gods, Judaism is monotheistic—it recognizes only one god. However, pagans saw Jews' principled refusal to worship emperors as gods as a sign of disloyalty.

Although Jesus of Nazareth and his disciples were practicing Jews and Christianity is rooted in the Jewish teaching of monotheism, Judaism and Christianity became rivals soon after Jesus was crucified by Pontius Pilate, who executed him according to contemporary Roman practice. Religious rivalry was theological. It soon also became political.

Historians agree that the break between Judaism and Christianity followed the Roman destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem in the year 70 CE. In the aftermath of this devastating defeat, which was interpreted by Jew and Christian alike as a sign of divine punishment, the Gospels diminished Roman responsibility and expressed Jewish culpability in the death of Jesus both explicitly (Matthew 27:25) and implicitly. Jews were depicted as killers of the Son of God.

Christianity was intent on replacing Judaism by making its own particular message universal. The New Testament was seen as fulfilling the “Old” Testament (the Hebrew Bible); Christians were the new Israel, both in flesh and in spirit. The God of justice had been replaced by the God of love. Thus some early Church Fathers taught that God had finished with the Jews, whose only purpose in history was to prepare for the arrival of his Son. According to this view, the Jews should have left the scene. Their continued survival seemed to be an act of stubborn defiance. Exile was taken as a sign of divine disfavour incurred by the Jews' denial that Jesus was the Messiah and by their role in his crucifixion.

As Christianity spread in the first centuries CE, most Jews continued to reject that religion. As a consequence, by the 4th century, Christians tended to regard Jews as an alien people who, because of their repudiation of Christ and his church, were condemned to perpetual migration (a belief best illustrated in the legend of the Wandering Jew). When the Christian church became dominant in the Roman Empire, its leaders inspired many laws by Roman emperors designed to segregate Jews and curtail their freedoms when they appeared to threaten Christian religious domination. As a consequence, Jews were increasingly forced to the margins of European society.

Enmity toward the Jews was expressed most acutely in the church's teaching of contempt. From St. Augustine in the 4th century to [Martin Luther](http://www.history.com/topics/martin-luther-and-the-95-theses) in the 16th, some of the most eloquent and persuasive Christian theologians excoriated the Jews as rebels against God and murderers of the Lord. They were described as companions of the Devil and a race of vipers. Church liturgy, particularly the scriptural readings for the Good Friday commemoration of the Crucifixion, contributed to this enmity.

Such views were finally renounced by the Roman Catholic Church decades after the Holocaust, with the Vatican II declaration of *Nostra aetate* (Latin: “In Our Era”) in 1965, which revamped Roman Catholic teaching regarding Jews and Judaism. The Vatican accepted the legitimacy of Judaism as a continuing religion and exonerated Jews for the murder of Jesus by universalizing responsibility for his Crucifixion. As a result, the Good Friday liturgy was changed to make it less inflammatory with regard to Jews. In 2007, however, Pope Benedict XVI approved wider use of the old Latin mass, which included the Good Friday liturgy and a prayer that most Jews found offensive. Although the prayer was revised in 2008 to address Jewish concerns, some argued that it was still prejudicial.

A centrepiece of the papacy of Pope John Paul II, who witnessed the Holocaust directly as a young man in Poland, was the fight against anti-Semitism and his embrace of Jews. The pope paid a historic visit to a synagogue in Rome in 1986 and officially recognized the State of Israel in 1993 shortly after the conclusion of the Oslo peace agreement between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization. In March 2000 the pontiff visited Israel. At Yad Vashem, Israel's memorial to the Holocaust, he described anti-Semitism as anti-Christian in nature and apologized for instances of anti-Semitism by Christians. At the Western Wall, Judaism's most sacred site, he inserted a note of apology for past Christian misdeeds into the stones—an act of repentance seen throughout the world.

**Anti-Semitism in medieval Europe**

Religious attitudes were reflected in the economic, social, and political life of medieval Europe. In much of Europe during the [Middle Ages](http://www.history.com/topics/middle-ages), Jews were denied citizenship and its rights, barred from holding posts in government and the military, and excluded from membership in guilds and the professions. To be sure, some European rulers and societies, particularly during the early Middle Ages, afforded Jews a degree of tolerance and acceptance, and it would be an error to conceive of Jews facing an unchanging and unceasing manifestation of anti-Jewish oppression throughout this period. In 1096, however, knights of the First Crusade unleashed a wave of anti-Semitic violence in France and the [Holy Roman Empire](http://www.history.com/topics/holy-roman-empire), including massacres in Worms, Trier (both now in Germany), and Metz (now in France). Unfounded accusations of ritual murder, host desecration, and the blood libel—Jews' alleged sacrifice of Christian children at [Passover](http://www.history.com/topics/passover) to obtain blood for unleavened bread—appeared in the 12th century. The most famous example of these accusations, that of William of Norwich, occurred in England, but these accusations were revived sporadically in eastern and central Europe throughout the medieval and modern periods. In the [1930s](http://www.history.com/topics/1930s) the blood libel became part of Nazi propaganda. Another instrument of 12th-century anti-Semitism, the compulsory yellow badge that identified the wearer as a Jew, was also revived by the [Nazis](http://www.history.com/topics/nazi-party). The practice of segregating the Jewish populations of towns and cities into ghettos dates from the Middle Ages and lasted until the 19th and early 20th centuries in much of Europe.

As European commerce grew in the late Middle Ages, some Jews became prominent in trade, banking, and moneylending, and Jews' economic and cultural successes tended to arouse the envy of the populace. This economic resentment, allied with traditional religious prejudice, prompted the forced expulsion of Jews from several countries and regions, including England (1290), France (14th century), Germany (1350s), Portugal (1496), Provence (1512), and the Papal States (1569). Intensifying persecution in Spain culminated in 1492 in the forced expulsion of that country's large and long-established Jewish population. Only Jews who had converted to Christianity were allowed to remain, and those suspected of continuing to practice Judaism faced persecution in the Spanish Inquisition. As a result of these mass expulsions, the centres of Jewish life shifted from western Europe and Germany to Turkey and then to Poland and Russia.

But where they were needed, Jews were tolerated. Living as they did at the margins of society, Jews performed economic functions that were vital to trade and commerce. Because premodern Christianity did not permit moneylending for interest and because Jews generally could not own land, Jews played a vital role as moneylenders and traders. Where they were permitted to participate in the larger society, Jews thrived. During the Middle Ages in Spain, before their expulsion in 1492, Jewish philosophers, physicians, poets, and writers were among the leaders of a rich cultural and intellectual life shared with Muslims and Christians. In collaboration with Arab scholars and thinkers in the tolerant society of Muslim Spain, they were instrumental in transmitting the intellectual heritage of the Classical world to medieval Christendom.

The idea that the Jews were evil persisted in the Protestant Reformation. Luther's reliance on the Bible as the sole source of Christian authority only fed his fury toward Jews for their rejection of Jesus. “We are at fault for not slaying them,” he wrote. “Rather we allow them to live freely in our midst despite their murder, cursing, blaspheming, lying and defaming.” Such views were emphasized by the Nazis. They were renounced by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 1994.

**Anti-Semitism in modern Europe**

The end of the Middle Ages brought little change in Jews' position in Europe, and the Catholic Reformation renewed anti-Jewish legislation and reinforced the system of ghetto segregation in Roman Catholic countries. Jews remained subject to occasional massacres, such as those that occurred during wars between Eastern Orthodox Ukrainians and Roman Catholic Poles in the mid-17th century, which rivaled the worst massacres of Jews in the Middle Ages. Periodic persecutions of Jews in western Europe continued until the late 18th century, when the [Enlightenment](http://www.history.com/topics/enlightenment) changed their position, at least in the West. It did not necessarily reduce anti-Semitism. While the major Enlightenment figures championed the light of reason in debunking what they regarded as the superstitions of Christian belief, their thinking did not lead to any greater acceptance of Jews. Instead of holding Jews responsible for the Crucifixion, Enlightenment thinkers blamed them for Christianity and for the injustices and cruelty committed by followers of monotheistic religions. Some of the most prominent, including Denis Diderot and Voltaire, pilloried the Jews as a group alienated from society who practiced a primitive and superstitious religion.

Until the [French Revolution](http://www.history.com/topics/french-revolution) of 1789, the status of Jews in Europe remained tenuous. Treated as outsiders, they had few civil rights. They were taxed as a community, not as individuals. Exclusion from the larger society reinforced their religious identity and strengthened their communal institutions, which served judicial and quasi-governmental functions. In the French Revolution, with its promise of liberty, equality, and fraternity, the rights of citizenship were extended to Jews. Still, respect and rights were conditioned on the willingness of Jews to abandon their age-old customs and their communal identity. This was the meaning of the slogan “To the Jews as individuals everything, to the Jews as a people, nothing.”

France was in the vanguard of the movement that gave civic and legal equality to the Jews. Napoleon's conquest of the German states led to emancipation in some of them, but after his defeat, Jews faced a series of legal setbacks. Full emancipation of Jews throughout Germany came only with the unification of Germany in 1871.

Even in France itself, emancipation did not end anti-Semitism but merely transformed it. With the emergence of nationalism as the defining factor in European society in the 19th century, anti-Semitism acquired a racial rather than a religious character, as ethnically homogeneous peoples decried the existence in their midst of “alien” Jewish elements. Pseudoscientific theories asserting that the Jews were inferior to the so-called Aryan “race” gave anti-Semitism new respectability and popular support, especially in countries where Jews could be made scapegoats for existing social or political grievances. In this new climate, anti-Semitism became a powerful political tool, as politicians were quick to discover. In the 1890s Karl Lueger won the mayoralty of Vienna—a city of diverse culture and many Jews—with his anti-Semitic campaigns. In both Germany and Austria in the late 19th century, anti-Semitism became an organized movement with its own political parties.

The Russian Empire had restricted Jews to western regions known as the Pale of Settlement ever since the partitions of Poland (in the 1790s) had brought large numbers of Jews under Russian rule. The empire's May Laws of 1882, enacted after widespread anti-Jewish riots, or pogroms, had broken out in the Russian Pale the previous year, stripped Jews of their rural landholdings and restricted them to the towns and cities within the Pale. These measures, which crippled many Jews' activities as rural traders and artisans, spurred the emigration of more than a million Jews to the [United States](http://www.history.com/topics/states) over the next four decades. Another result was a somewhat smaller emigration of Jews to the countries of western Europe, where anti-Semitic agitators exploited xenophobic sentiments against them.

In France the Dreyfus Affair became a focal point for anti-Semitism. In 1894 Alfred Dreyfus, a highly placed Jewish army officer, was falsely accused of treason. His final vindication (in 1906) was hampered by the French military and the bitterly anti-Semitic French press, and the wrenching controversy that ensued left lasting scars on French political life.

During the first decade of the 20th century, there was a period of moderate decline in anti-Semitic tensions—except in Russia, where serious pogroms occurred in Kishinyov (now Chisinau, Moldova) in 1903 and 1905 and where the Russian secret police published a forgery entitled *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* , which, as the supposed blueprint for a Jewish plot to achieve world domination, furnished propaganda for subsequent generations of anti-Semitic agitators.

The widespread economic and political dislocations caused by [World War I](http://www.history.com/topics/world-war-i) notably intensified anti-Semitism in Europe after the war. In addition, the many Jewish Bolshevik leaders in the [Russian Revolution](http://www.history.com/topics/russian-revolution) of November 1917 gave anti-Semites a new focus for their prejudices in the threat of “Jewish Bolshevism.” In postwar Germany, anti-Semites joined forces with revanchist nationalists in attempting to blame the Jews for that country's defeat. In eastern Europe, anti-Semitism became widespread in Poland, Hungary, and Romania in the interwar period.

**Nazi anti-Semitism and the Holocaust**

The storm of anti-Semitic violence loosed by Nazi Germany under the leadership of [Adolf Hitler](http://www.history.com/topics/adolf-hitler) from 1933 to 1945 not only reached a terrifying degree in Germany itself but also inspired anti-Jewish movements elsewhere. Anti-Semitism was promulgated in France by the Cagoulards (French: “Hooded Men”), in Hungary by the Arrow Cross, in England by the British Union of Fascists, and in the United States by the German-American Bund and the Silver Shirts.

In [Nazi Germany](http://www.history.com/topics/nazi-party), anti-Semitism reached a dimension never before experienced. Christianity had sought the conversion of the Jews, and political leaders from Spain to England had sought their expulsion, but the Nazis sought the “final solution to the Jewish question,” the murder of all Jews— men, women, and children—and their eradication from the human race. **In Nazi ideology the elimination of the Jews was essential to the purification and even the salvation of the German people.**

The novelty of the Nazi brand of anti-Semitism was that it crossed class barriers. The idea of Aryan racial superiority appealed both to the masses and to economic elites. In Germany anti-Semitism became official government policy—taught in the schools, elaborated in “scientific” journals and research institutes, and promoted by a huge, highly effective organization for international propaganda. In 1941 the liquidation of European Jewry became official party policy. An estimated 5.7 million Jews were exterminated in such death camps as [Auschwitz](http://www.history.com/topics/auschwitz), Chelmno, Belzec, Majdanek, and Treblinka during [World War II](http://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii).

**Anti-Semitism since the Holocaust and outside Europe**

For a period of time after the Nazi defeat in 1945, anti-Semitism lost favour in western Europe and the United States. Yet anti-Semitism persisted in many countries. In the [Soviet Union](http://www.history.com/topics/soviet-union), opposition to the State of Israel and to the attempts of Soviet Jews to emigrate was linked to historic Russian anti-Semitism. In postcommunist Russia, political opposition to the regime or to the disproportionate representation of Jews among the powerful oligarchy has often had anti-Semitic overtones. In Poland in 1968, there were anti-Semitic purges, involving firings, denunciations, and expulsions of Jews, that prompted a mass emigration of Jews. More recently, international controversy over the legacies of Nazism in Austria and Switzerland has triggered increased anti-Semitism in those countries. Foreign concern over Kurt Waldheim's Nazi past provoked angry anti-Semitic reactions among some of his supporters during his successful 1986 campaign for the Austrian presidency. During the late 1990s, when it was revealed that Swiss banks had laundered Nazi gold (much of it likely confiscated from Jews) during World War II and had failed to return money to Jewish depositors after the war, international criticism and demands for restitution provoked increased anti-Semitism in Switzerland. In several European countries, xenophobic and nativistic parties opposed to immigration and the European Union engaged in anti-Semitic statements or actions. Even countries with few Jewish residents can manifest anti-Semitism. The discredited and anti-Semitic *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* enjoyed significant popularity in [Japan](http://www.history.com/topics/japan) during the [1980s](http://www.history.com/topics/1980s) and '90s.

For many centuries, Islamic societies had tolerated Jews but had made them pay special taxes, wear identifying clothing, and live in specified areas. Jews were thus treated much as other nonbelievers were in Muslim societies. But the emigration of large numbers of Jews to Palestine in the 20th century and the creation of the State of Israel (1948) in a formerly Arab region aroused new currents of hostility within the Arab world. Because the Arabs are Semites, their hostility to the State of Israel has been primarily political (or anti-Zionist) and religious rather than racial. Whatever the motivation, however, the result was the adoption of many anti-Jewish measures throughout the Muslim countries of the Middle East. In response, most of the Jewish residents of those countries emigrated to Israel in the decades after its founding.

American Jews became an integrated part of culture and society in the postwar United States. Barriers to complete Jewish participation in business and politics fell, and Jews found few obstacles in their way as they sought to participate in American life. Anti-Semitism became a fringe phenomenon with occasional lethal manifestations in hate crimes. Fewer in number, less widespread, and less tolerated by American society, virulent anti-Semitic acts still occasionally occur.

Michael Berenbaum

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