

Who is to Blame for the Inflation?

Germany, 1920s

During the year of hyperinflation, Germans looked for someone to blame for the crisis. There was a widespread feeling that a few people were growing rich while honest workers were starving. Who was responsible? To many people in Germany, the answer was the Jews, even though they suffered from the hyperinflation along with everyone else.

After studying German census data, historian Donald L. Niewyk found that even though a few Jews were highly successful and wealthy in Germany at this time, the vast majority were not. He noted that “by the end of 1923, the Berlin Jewish Community had established nineteen soup kitchens, seven shelters, and an employment information and placement office for the destitute Jews of the city. Other big-city communities did the same.”¹

Niewyk pointed out that the people who suffered most were Jewish refugees from Russia and countries in eastern and central Europe who had come to Germany after the war to escape persecution and upheavals in the countries of their birth. These Jews provided a convenient target for heightened antisemitism, and they were subject to “chronic unemployment, sporadic official harassment, and the resentment of both Jewish and non-Jewish Germans.”²

Excerpted from *Holocaust and Human Behavior*, (Facing History and Ourselves, 2017), 183

¹ Donald L. Niewyk, *The Jews in Weimar Germany* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 18.

² Donald L. Niewyk, *The Jews in Weimar Germany* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 15.

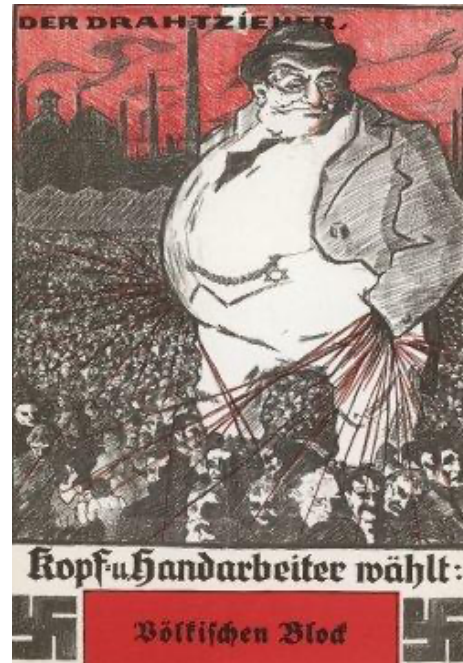
The Myth of a Jewish Conspiracy

Global, 1900 :

Figure 1. This Weimar campaign poster (“The Wire Puller,” 1924) depicts an antisemitic caricature of a Jew with a manipulative personality, urging workers to vote for the Nationalist Party.

In 1919, Erich Ludendorff, one of Germany’s top military leaders, announced that Jews were one of several groups responsible for the nation’s defeat. By 1922, he was focusing almost entirely on Jews as “the enemy.”³

As proof, he cited the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a document supposedly containing the minutes of a secret meeting of Jewish leaders—the so-called “Elders of Zion”—held at the turn of the twentieth century. At that supposed meeting, the “Elders” allegedly plotted to take over the world.



In fact, the *Protocols* is a forgery; Russian secret police wrote it in the early 1900s to incite hatred against Jews. At the time, few people paid much attention to the document, but after World War I, it became a worldwide sensation. Many believed that the *Protocols* explained seemingly “inexplicable” events—the war, the economic crises that followed the war, the revolutions in Russia and central Europe, even epidemics.

In August 1921, the Times of London showed how the authors of the *Protocols* had copied long passages from several fictional works to create the document. As a result of that exposé, the British company that originally published the English version of the *Protocols* refused to print or distribute additional copies, and some newspapers no longer gave the document publicity. But neither action damaged the popularity of the *Protocols*. In recent years, studies have shown that efforts to debunk a lie often leave people more convinced than ever that the lie is true⁴.

In the 1920s, Germany’s 500,000 Jews accounted for less than 1% of the total population of about 61 million. Yet by focusing on Jews as “the enemy,” antisemites made it seem as if Jews were everywhere and were responsible for everything that went wrong in the nation.

Excerpted from *Holocaust and Human Behavior* (Facing History and Ourselves, 2017), 185-186

³ Quoted in Norman Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish World Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (London: Serif Books, 1967), 149.

⁴ Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler, “When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions,” *Political Behavior* 32, no. 2 (June 2010): 303–30.

Anti-Judaism before the Enlightenment

Roman Empire, 66 C.E. - 400 C.E.: The birth of the Deicide Charge

Historians have traced anti-Jewish myths, hatred, and violence back more than 2,000 years to the time of the Roman Empire. Tensions with the Romans led Jews in Palestine to revolt in 66 CE. The Romans responded violently. Historian Doris Bergen explains:

Roman authorities worried that Jewish refusal to worship local and imperial gods would jeopardize the security of the state. At times such unease, coupled with political conflicts, turned into open persecution and attacks. In 70 C.E. the Romans destroyed the Jewish temple in Jerusalem, the focal point of Jewish life up to that time; sixty years later they dispersed the Jews of Palestine, scattering them far from the region that had been their home.

During this same period, a new faith was born out of Judaism and began to spread across the Roman Empire. Bergen continues:

The rise of Christianity added new fuel to anti-Jewish sentiments. Christianity grew out of Judaism—Jesus himself was a Jew, as were the apostles and important figures such as Paul of Tarsus. Nevertheless, early Christians tried to separate themselves from other Jews, both to win followers from the gentile (non-Jewish) world and to gain favor with Roman imperial authorities. Some early Christians also stressed their loyalty to the state by pointing out that the Kingdom of God was not of this earth and therefore did not compete with Rome. Such efforts paid off; in less than four hundred years, Christianity went from being a persecuted branch of Judaism to being the dominant religion of the Roman Empire. It is significant that some early Christian accounts blamed Jews for Jesus' death even though crucifixion was a specifically Roman form of punishment commonly practiced during Jesus' time. The version of events that had Jewish mobs demanding Jesus' death while the Roman governor Pontius Pilate washed his hands allowed later Christians to emphasize their difference from Judaism and downplay the hostility that Roman authorities had shown toward Christianity in its early stages. All of the false accusations against Jews associated with the Roman imperial period—that Jews were traitors and conspirators, that they killed Christ—remained familiar in Europe into the twentieth century.⁵

⁵ Doris L Bergen, *War and Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 4-6

Excerpted from *Holocaust and Human Behavior*, (Facing History and Ourselves, 2017), 91-92

From Religious Prejudice to Antisemitism

Germany, late 1800s

On July 3, 1871, a newly united Germany granted citizenship to all Germans “independent of religious denomination.” It was a moment of triumph for the approximately 500,000 Jews who lived in Germany at the time. But, as had so often been the case in many European societies for hundreds of years, Jews in Germany still did not have the same rights as other citizens. They were excluded from some occupations and denied high-ranking jobs in the army, some universities, and the upper ranks of the civil service.

Despite discriminatory laws and practices, however, many Jews in Germany prospered in the late 1800s... Although they accounted for only 1% of the population and most were not wealthy, more Jews than ever were succeeding in Germany and becoming increasingly visible members of society....

Many Germans were disturbed by the changes in their society, and they felt that their traditional culture, status, and livelihoods were being threatened. Wilhelm Marr, a German journalist, was among those who felt threatened by the progress Jews had made.

To Marr and a growing number of other Europeans, all Jews, regardless of their religious beliefs, belonged to the “Semitic race.” In the late 1800s, many European and American scientists continued to divide humankind into smaller and smaller “races,” one of which was the “Semitic race.” (The word *Semitic* does not actually refer to a group of people but is a linguistic term that refers to a group of languages traditionally spoken in the Middle East and parts of Africa, including Amharic, a language spoken in Ethiopia, as well as Hebrew and Arabic.)

Marr viewed Jews as more than just members of a distinct “race.” In his view, the “Semitic race” was dangerous and alien. He coined the term *antisemitism* to describe his racial opposition to Jews and founded the League of Antisemites in Berlin in 1879 to combat the threat he imagined they posed.

By the end of the century, antisemitism had found a home almost everywhere in Europe. Every country interpreted racist ideas a little differently. Scientists who showed that more differences existed within a so-called race than between one “race” and another were ignored. So the myth that Jews were a race continued to grow throughout Europe.

Excerpted from *Holocaust and Human Behavior*, (Facing History and Ourselves, 2017), 94-95