# **A History of Anti-Semitism**

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Anti-semitism is hostility toward Jews or discrimination against them as a group. The word Semite refers to peoples from southwestern Asia, and includes both Jews and Arabs. Anti-Semitism, however, usually refers only to discrimination against Jews.

Jews had long been discriminated as a religious group. Starting in the 19th century, a new form of anti-Semitism, based on race, emerged. In the 20th century, the Nazis persecuted and killed millions of Jews because of their supposed race, even Jews who had converted to other religions or whose parents converted.

## **Origins of Christian Anti-Semitism**

In the ancient world, anti-Semitism emerged because of religious differences, a situation that worsened as a result of the competition between Judaism and Christianity. Jesus and his followers were practicing Jews, and Christianity is rooted in the Jewish teaching that there is only one God. Nevertheless, Judaism and Christianity became rivals soon after Jesus was crucified.

The competition between Judaism and Christianity was both religious and political. The early Christians blamed Jews for Jesus’ death, and also were intent on replacing Judaism with Christianity. By the fourth century, Christians saw Jews as an alien people who were condemned to roam the earth because they did not accept Jesus Christ as the Messiah.

## **Anti-Semitism during the Middle Ages**

During the Middle Ages (400s through 1400s), Jews were denied citizenship and rights in much of Europe. Jews were not allowed to become government or military officials and were excluded from membership in the trade guilds, which organized craftmen and merchants together to make doing business easier. In some places, Jews were forced to wear distinctive clothing, such as a yellow badge. At times Jews were massacred. The Jewish populations of towns and cities began to be required by law to live in separate districts known as ghettos. This segregation lasted until the 19th and early 20th centuries in large parts of Europe.

In the late Middle Ages, some Jews became prominent in trade, banking, and moneylending. Jews’ success tended to arouse the envy of others. This, along with traditional religious prejudice, prompted several countries and regions to expel, or force out, the Jews. They were forced to leave England in 1290, France in the 14th century, Germany in the 1350s, Spain in 1492 and Portugal in 1496.

But where they were needed, Jews were tolerated. Christianity at the time did not permit money lending for interest, and Jews generally could not own land. For these reasons, Jews played a vital role as moneylenders and traders.

## **Anti-Semitism in Modern Europe**

Even in modern Europe, Jews were occasionally killed and attacked. Jews continued to be regarded as outsiders and anti-Semitism remained strong.

In 1882 Russia took away land owned by Jews and required them to live in the towns and cities in the western part in the country. Over the next four decades, more than a million Jews left the Russian Empire, mainly for the United States. In addition to the anti-Semitic laws, violent mobs attacked Jews—called pogroms—in the Russian Empire in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

In the 19th century the so-called “scientific racism” emerged in Europe, claiming that the Jews were inferior to so-called Aryan (white) “race.”

## **Nazi Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust**

Under the leadership of Adolf Hitler from 1933 to 1945, the Nazis sought to murder all Jews—men, women, and children—and eradicate them from the human race.

In Germany anti-Semitism based on race became official government policy and was taught in the schools. Jews from all over Nazi-occupied Europe were sent to concentration and death camps, where they were either killed or forced into slave labor. Ultimately, an estimated six million Jews and millions of others were killed by Nazi Germany and its collaborators.

## **Anti-Semitism since the Holocaust and Outside Europe**

After the Nazi defeat in World War II in 1945, anti-Semitism was not acceptable in western Europe and the United States. Even people who were anti-Semitic were hesitant to express it. In the years after the war, American Jews became an integrated part of culture and society in the United States. Violent anti-Semitic acts were carried out less often and were less tolerated by Americans, but still occasionally occurred. Recently in Europe, Jewish schools, stores and synagogues have been attacked and many Jews, including children, have been killed.

In the late 20th century, the Roman Catholic Church and other Christian churches changed their teachings about Jews, condemning anti-Semitism. Nevertheless, it has persisted in many parts of the world into the 21st century, including in the Middle East.

For many centuries, Islamic societies treated them much like other non-Muslims. During the Middle Ages in Spain, Jews were philosophers, physicians, poets, and writers and took part in a rich cultural and intellectual life with Muslims and Christians.

## **State of Israel Created in 1948**

In 1948, the State of Israel was created in Palestine as a homeland for the Jews. This created hostility toward Jews within the Arab world. Many Muslims lived in the area where Israel was created. Also, places that are important to Muslims were on the land that is now Israel. Many anti-Jewish measures were adopted throughout the Muslim countries of the Middle East. In response, most of the Jewish residents of those countries immigrated to Israel.

The Muslim world often does not differentiate between Israelis and Jews. Anger at Israel is often expressed as anti-Semitism against Jews as a group. In many Western countries, much of the political left became highly critical of Israel’s policies toward the Palestinians. Experts struggle to distinguish between legitimate criticism of Israel and anti-Semitism.

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