

Racial Antisemitism Prior to 1933

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Racial antisemitism is often viewed as a mostly modern secular movement, coinciding with the growth of social Darwinism and the eugenics movements. While this is not an inaccurate statement, it lacks nuance. The formation of racial antisemitism, as it is known today, is heavily influenced by the 19th century views of race, as well as the eugenics movement. However, these concepts are not solely based on modern secularism as they hold their roots as far back as fifteenth century Spain, which takes inspiration from the 500s.

Early Racial Antisemitism

As a precursor to the blood purity laws of the late fifteenth century, was the beliefs of Izidoro (560-636), the Bishop of Seville. His beliefs reflected those of fifteenth century Spain: the idea that Jews were inherently different beings and could not be saved through baptism.¹ This sharply contrasted the doctrine devised by St. Augustine in the fifth century, which taught that Jews needed to suffer for their responsibility of Christ's death but could not be massacred as God's former chosen people; resulting in Christian condemnation of Jews in hopes that it would induce them to convert.² Instead, Jews were considered a disease, and the root of all sickness that existed within a society.³ As such, they were separated from the rest of society in their own communities and limited to certain lines of work.

This idea of inherent differences between Jews and Christians reared itself in the late fifteenth century with the idea of Old and New Christians. The term New Christian

¹ Novinsky, "Two Thousand Years of Antisemitism." 345-346.

² Hayes, *Why? Explaining the Holocaust*. 19-20.

³ Novinsky. 347.

refers to those who converted from Judaism to Christianity during the fourteenth and fifteenth century.⁴ New Christians were brought about by two major factors: the reconquest of Spain from the Moors in 1492 with the fall of Granada, bringing a large population of Jews and Arabs into Christian society, and the blame on Jews for the plagues of the fourteenth century.⁵ In Spain, like the rest of Europe, Jews were blamed for the plagues, leading to widespread anti-Jewish rioting in 1391, often causing forced conversion of many Jews to save their lives.⁶

A general consensus among historians is that there were around 250,000 New Christians in Spain by 1492 with an equal number of Jews.⁷ This caused great unrest in Spain as many Spaniards were suspicious of New Christians.⁸ They were believed to be crypto-Jews, outwardly appearing Christian while secretly practicing Judaism.⁹ To solve this social unrest, in 1449 a set of laws were passed in Toledo prohibiting any *conversos*, New Christians, from participating in a corporation or being admitted into any government position.¹⁰ This cemented the idea that *conversos* were not equal to Old Christians and never would be, since they carried Jewish blood.¹¹

In 1480, the monarchy created the Spanish Court of Inquisition in Spain, which was later introduced to Portugal in 1536, solely for suspected New Christians of

5. ⁴ Friedman, "Jewish Conversion, the Spanish Pure Blood Laws and Reformation."

⁵ Friedman. 6.

⁶ Friedman. 7.

⁷ Friedman. 8.

⁸ Friedman. 11.

⁹ Wistrich, *A Lethal Obsession: Anti-Semitism from Antiquity to the Global Jihad*. 114.

¹⁰ Gorenstein, "A Brief History of Iberian Antisemitism." 297.

¹¹ Gorenstein. 298

following the Jewish faith.¹² The “purity of blood” laws stated that anyone with at least one Jewish ancestor was still a *converso* and therefore not a real Christian and, in fact, still a crypto-Jew. These laws maintained the idea that Jewish blood would contaminate generations indefinitely and Judaism was not a statement of faith or ethnic practices but a biological consideration.¹³

These statutes lasted for almost three centuries with the Holy Office of Inquisition being abolished in Portugal in 1821.¹⁴ Anti-Jewish politics reached their peak as in March of 1492, Jews were forced to convert to Christianity or leave the kingdom by August.¹⁵

Racial Antisemitism in the Nineteenth Century

Proponents of the biologization of antisemitism drew on ideas of animal husbandry, arguing that nationalities were like animal breeds with their own special qualities passed on through generations and enhanced by selective breeding, including Jews.¹⁶ This played into another common trend of pseudoscience, the idea that external qualities indicated internal ones. This included physiognomy, the idea that shapes of faces denoted superior traits; and phrenology, that the shape of one’s head determined one’s intelligence as it dealt with the configuration of the brain.¹⁷ Given the pseudoscience’s’ European origins, they concluded that traits seen commonly in

¹² Novinsky. 347. And Friedman. 12.

¹³ Friedman. 16.

¹⁴ Gorenstein. 298. And Novinsky. 348.

¹⁵ Gorenstein. 298.

¹⁶ Hayes. 25.

¹⁷ Hayes. 27.

Europeans were seen as superior. Another is Cesare Lombroso's "criminal types" which signify the types of crimes one has committed based on their head form and body shape.¹⁸

This trend led, eventually, to the classification of tongues as inherently hierarchical with Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829), who argued that the grammar of Sanskrit-based languages was superior to that of others, especially the Semitic-based forms, and thus proof of intellectual growth potential of those who spoke it.¹⁹ The basis of modern antisemitism became that Jews were fundamentally different from Europeans and as such had to be contained and expelled as people could only thrive by preserving their racial purity.²⁰

Eventually, this idea was reinforced by limited understandings of a new one, Darwinism.²¹ Social Darwinism, the idea that Darwinism can be applied to social theory, was seen as the epitome of modernity as it consistently appealed to scientific laws and called for secularization.²² This gave it mass appeal as an evolving and novel form of science. Ideas of social Darwinism, while originally used for support of laissez faire markets, fit nicely into ideas of exterminationist racism, the idea that races seen as inferior must be eliminated.²³

¹⁸ Proctor, *Racial Hygiene Medicine Under the Nazis*. 24.

¹⁹ Hayes. 28.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Hayes. 26.

²² Weikart, "Progress through Racial Extermination." 274. And Weikart, "The Origins of Social Darwinism in Germany, 1859-1895." 469.

²³ Weikart, "Progress through Racial Extermination." 275. And Weikart, "The Origins of Social Darwinism in Germany, 1859-1895." 469.

This was due to the fact that Darwin pushed the idea that the population has a tendency to expand faster than the food supply, something that seemed confirmed by the expanding European population; and the idea that within a species individuals have to compete for resources—with human races already considered subspecies at the time.²⁴ It was, therefore, concluded that “inferior” races would eventually be exterminated in this struggle.²⁵

Eugenics and Racial Antisemitism

The idea of social Darwinism began to be enfolded into eugenics, or racial hygiene, the idea to improve the human population through selective breeding.²⁶ Both of these movements (eugenics and racial hygiene) focused on the idea that in order to improve humanity, instead of improving conditions for the disadvantaged, it was best to reduce reproduction of the poor and sick and increase it for the better off.²⁷ Ploetz, the founder of the racial hygiene movement, warned against medical care for “the weak” as it allowed them to survive and reproduce when they would not have survived without doctors, endangering the race.²⁸

While neither of these doctrines were necessarily nor explicitly antisemitic, in fact most arguments of social Darwinism were used to justify imperialism, these arguments quickly applied to Jews once they were considered biologically different

²⁴Weikart, “Progress through Racial Extermination.” 275.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Hayes. 29.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Proctor. 15.

from Europeans.²⁹ The same racist rhetoric used towards non-Europeans, was therefore, applicable to Jews as they were already racialized by the application of animal husbandry. This was especially the case for followers of Schlegel's ideology, with the idea of Semitic tongues being inherently inferior to those of Indo-European descent, meaning they would inevitably die out by natural selection.

Conclusion

Modern racial antisemitism has formed through the "blood purity" laws of fifteenth century Spain, ideas of applying animal husbandry to nationalities in the nineteenth century, and the eugenics movement. This is not to mention the influence of religious anti-Judaism seen throughout history, as well as the specific anti-Judaism of the Enlightenment era which focused on the ethnic practices of Judaism.

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²⁹ Hayes. 29-30. And Weikart, "Progress through Racial Extermination: Social Darwinism, Eugenics, and Pacifism in Germany 1860-1918." 276.

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