

# Heinrich von Treitschke Pronounces “The Jews are Our Misfortune” (November 15, 1879)

## Abstract

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Heinrich von Treitschke (1834–1896) was one of the most prominent historians of nineteenth-century Germany and also the most politically engaged. In 1866, he was appointed editor of the *Preußische Jahrbücher* [*Prussian Yearbooks*], which provided monthly reviews of politics. In 1874, he was appointed Professor of History at the University of Berlin. He also served as a Reichstag deputy in the 1870s, representing the National Liberal Party. In his university lectures, journal articles, political essays, and even in his multi-volume *History of Germany*, Treitschke expressed his disdain for the governments of non-Prussian states, women, socialists, Catholics, Poles, and—as we read here—Jews. The ostensible impetus for this essay was Treitschke’s review of the eleventh volume of Heinrich Graetz’s *History of the Jews* [*Geschichte der Juden*]. Only the last third of the article—the part excerpted here—deals directly with the “Jewish Question.” It was published in January 1880, along with two later articles, as a separate pamphlet entitled *Ein Wort über unser Judenthum* [*A Word about Our Jews*]. This pamphlet reached a far wider audience than the initial essay: by the end of 1880, it had been printed in three editions, with a fourth following in 1881. Treitschke’s polemic sparked the “Berlin Antisemitism Conflict” [*Berliner Antisemitismusstreit*], which raged for the next two years and produced violent scenes like the one depicted in another document in this collection. Just as Stoecker’s social and political prominence had allowed him to state his “demands” on the Jews two months earlier, Treitschke’s reputation as a university faculty member lent great weight to his pronouncements, particularly among members of student fraternities [*Burschenschaften*]. Two declarations from this essay were seized upon and repeated *ad nauseum* in the years to come. The first was his statement that “year after year, out of the inexhaustible Polish cradle there streams over our eastern border a host of hustling, pants-peddling youths, whose children and children’s children will someday command Germany’s stock exchanges and newspapers.” The second, more concise phrase had still greater contemporary impact and historical resonance: “The Jews are our misfortune!”

## Source

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Among the symptoms of a deep change of heart going through our nation, none appears so strange as the passionate movement against Jewry. A few months ago the oft-heard cry “Hep-Hep”<sup>[1]</sup> still echoed in Germany. Anyone is permitted to say unabashedly the harshest things about the national shortcomings of the Germans, the French, and all the other peoples, but any who dared to speak about the undeniable weaknesses of the Jewish character, no matter how moderately or justly, was immediately branded by almost the entire press as a barbarian and a religious bigot. Today we have progressed so far that a majority of the voters of Breslau have sworn under no circumstances to elect a Jew to the state parliament<sup>[2]</sup>—and this apparently not in wild agitation but with calm forethought. Antisemitic leagues are banding together. The “Jewish question” is being discussed in excited meetings. A flood of anti-Jewish libels is inundating the book market. There is all too much dirt and crudity in these activities, and it is nauseating to note that many of those inflammatory writings apparently stem from Jewish pens. As is well known, since Eisenmenger and Pfefferkorn<sup>[3]</sup>, born Jews have been ever more strongly represented in the ranks of the fanatic Jew haters.<sup>[4]</sup> But is all that hides behind this noisome activity really just the coarseness of the mob and business envy? Are these outbreaks of deep, long-restrained anger merely an ephemeral excrescence, as hollow and baseless as the Teutonic Jew baiting

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of 1819? No; in fact, the instinct of the masses has correctly identified a serious danger, a critical defect in the new German life. It is no empty formula when we speak today of a German Jewish question.

When, with disdain, the English and French talk of German prejudice against Jews, we must answer: You don't know us. You live in fortunate circumstances that make the emergence of such "prejudices" impossible. The number of Jews in western Europe is so small that it cannot exert a palpable influence upon your national mores. However, year after year, out of the inexhaustible Polish cradle there streams over our eastern border a host of hustling, pants-peddling youths, whose children and children's children will someday command Germany's stock exchanges and newspapers.<sup>[5]</sup> The immigration grows visibly, and the question becomes more and more grave: how can we amalgamate this alien people? The Israelites of the west and south belong mostly to the Spanish branch of Jewry, which looks back on a comparatively proud history and has always adapted rather easily to Western ways. In fact, they have become for the most part good Frenchmen, Englishmen, and Italians. This is true to the extent that we can appropriately expect from a people of such pure blood and such pronounced peculiarity. But we Germans have to deal with that Polish branch of Jewry, which has been deeply scarred by centuries of Christian tyranny. As a result of this experience, it is incomparably more alien to the European and, especially, the German essence.

What we have to demand of our Israelite fellow citizens is simple: they should become Germans. They should feel themselves, modestly and properly, Germans—and this without prejudicing their faith and their ancient, holy memories, which we all hold in reverence. For we do not want to see millennia of Germanic morality followed by an era of German-Jewish hybrid culture. It would be sinful to forget that a great many Jews, baptized and unbaptized, were German men in the best sense. Felix Mendelssohn, Veit, Riesser<sup>[6]</sup>, etc.—to say nothing of the living—were men in whom we honor the noble and good traits of the German spirit. But it is equally undeniable that numerous and mighty circles among our Jews simply lack the goodwill to become thoroughly German. It is painful to speak of these things. Even conciliatory words will be easily misunderstood. Nevertheless, I believe that many of my Jewish friends will concede, though with deep regret, that I am right when I assert that in recent times a dangerous spirit of arrogance has arisen in Jewish circles. The influence of Jewry on our national life, which created much good in earlier times, nowadays shows itself in many ways harmful. Just read the *History of the Jews* by Graetz.<sup>[7]</sup> What fanatical rage against the "arch-enemy," Christianity. What lethal hatred against the purest and mightiest representatives of the Germanic essence from Luther right up to Goethe and Fichte! And what empty, insulting self-glorification! [In Graetz] it is demonstrated in constant, spiteful tirades that the nation of Kant was educated to humanity only through the Jews, that the language of Lessing and Goethe has become receptive to beauty, intelligence, and wit through Heine and Börne. What English Jew would dare defame the land that shielded and protected him in such a way? And this benighted contempt against the German goyim is in no way merely the attitude of an isolated fanatic.

There is no German commercial city that does not count many honorable and respectable Jewish firms. But undoubtedly, the Semites bear a heavy share of guilt for the falsehood and deceit, the insolent greed of fraudulent business practices, and that base materialism of our day. [That materialism] regards all labor as pure business and threatens to stifle our people's traditional good-natured joy in labor. In thousands of German villages sits the Jew who sells out his neighbors with usury. Among the leading men in the arts and sciences, the number of Jews is not very great; all the stronger do the Semitic talents constitute the host of the third rate. And how firmly these scribblers stick together. How securely they work on the tested business principle of reciprocity, whereby, as in some insurance company dealing in immortality, every Jewish poetaster receives free and clear one day of fame, paid out by the newspapers, without having to pay the premium.

Most dangerous, however, is the improper preponderance of Jewry in the daily press, a fateful consequence of our narrow-minded old laws forbidding Israelites entry to most of the learned professions. For ten years the public opinion of many German cities was largely "created" by Jewish

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pens. It was a misfortune for the Liberal party, and one of the reasons for its fall, to have afforded too free a scope to Jewry in its press. The present-day weakness of the press is the result of a backlash against this unnatural condition. The little man can no longer be talked out of the fact that the Jews write the newspapers. Therefore, he won't believe them any longer. Our newspaper system owes a great deal to Jewish talents. From the first the trenchancy and acuity of the Jewish spirit found a fruitful field. But here, too, the effect was ambiguous. [Ludwig] Börne was the first to introduce a characteristically shameless tone into our journalism. [He wrote] from abroad with no respect for the Fatherland, as though he was not part of it at all, as though his scorn for Germany did not cut each and every German to the quick. Add to this the unfortunate bustling intrusion into all and sundry, which does not even shy away from magisterially passing judgment on the innermost matters of the Christian churches. The anti-Christian defamations and witticisms of Jewish journalists are simply shocking, and such blasphemies are put up for sale in its own language as the latest achievements of "German" enlightenment! Scarcely had emancipation been achieved before they brazenly insisted on its pretext. They demanded literal parity in everything and did not want to see that we Germans are still a Christian people and that the Jews are only a minority among us. We have experienced their demands that Christian images be set aside and that their sabbath be celebrated in mixed schools.

Overlooking all these circumstances—and how many others could be added!—this noisy agitation of the moment, though brutal and hateful, is nonetheless a natural reaction of Germanic racial feeling against an alien element that has assumed all too large a space in our life. [The agitation] has inadvertently performed a useful service: it has lifted the ban on a quiet untruth. An evil that everyone felt but no one wanted to touch upon is now openly discussed. Let's not deceive ourselves. The movement is very deep and strong. A few jokes by Christian Social politicians will not suffice to stem it. Among the circles of highly educated men who reject any idea of church intolerance or national arrogance there rings with one voice: *the Jews are our misfortune!*

There can be no talk, among those with any understanding, of a revocation or even an abridgment of the completed emancipation. It would be an open injustice, a falling away from the good traditions of our state, and would sharpen rather than ameliorate the national conflict that pains us. The Jews in France and England have become a harmless and in many ways beneficial, element of civil society. That is in the last analysis the result of the energy and national pride of these two ancient culture-bearing peoples. Our culture is a young one. Our being still lacks a national style, an instinctive pride, a thoroughly imprinted character. That is why for so long we stood defenseless against alien essences. Now, however, we are at the point of acquiring those goods. We can only wish that our Jews recognize in time the transformation that is the logical consequence of the rise of the German state. Quietly, here and there, Jewish associations against usury do much good. They are the work of insightful Israelites who understand that their racial brothers must adapt to the morality and ideas of their Christian fellow citizens.

There is still a great deal to be done in this direction. To make hard German heads into Jewish ones is surely impossible. Thus, only one possibility remains: Our Jewish fellow citizens must resolve to be German without qualification, as so many of them have already done, to our benefit and their own. The task can never be wholly completed. A cleft has always existed between Occidental and Semitic essences [...] there will always be Jews who are nothing more than German-speaking Orientals. A specific Jewish civilization will also always flourish, as befits a historically cosmopolitan power. But the conflict will lessen when the Jews, who speak so much of tolerance, really become tolerant and show respect for the faith, customs, and feelings of the German people, who have atoned for the old injustice and bestowed upon them the rights of man and citizen. That this respect is wholly missing in a section of our commercial and literary Jewry is the ultimate basis for the passionate embitterment of today.

It is not a pretty picture—this storming and wrangling, this bubbling and boiling of half-baked ideas in the new Germany. But we are now the most passionate of peoples, even though we often berate ourselves as phlegmatic. New ideas have never established themselves among us without convulsive

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twitches. May God grant that we emerge from the rashness and ill humor of these restless years with a stricter conception of the state and its duties, a more powerful national feeling.

## NOTES

[1] Supposedly of medieval origin, the “Hep-Hep” cry was the signal for the pogrom, the anti-Jewish riot. During the “Hep-Hep” riots of 1819, various derivations of the phrase were offered. Nazi storm troopers revived its usage during the 1920s. [Footnote taken from Richard S. Levy, *Antisemitism in the Modern World. An Anthology of Texts*. Lexington, MA, and Toronto: D. C. Heath, 1991, p. 69.] Up to now, the origins and original meaning of the expression are still open to question: the opinion that “Hep” means Hierosolyma est perdita (Jerusalem must be destroyed) is not provable beyond a doubt. According to another interpretation, “HEP” stands for “Hebrew, Noble People [*Edelleute*], and Potentates,” against whom popular anger during the German revolutionary movements of 1819 was originally directed. In any event, since the anti-Jewish riots of that year (the so-called Hep-Hep-riots), this expression was a popular topos for anti-Jewish agitation and persecution. [Note adapted and translated from Karsten Krieger, ed., *Der “Berliner Antisemitismusstreit” 1879–1881. Eine Kontroverse um die Zugehörigkeit der deutschen Juden zur Nation. Kommentierte Quellenedition*, 2 parts. Munich: K. G. Saur, 2003–2004, part 1, p. 10.]

[2] This passage refers to Eduard Lasker’s candidacy for the Prussian Assembly in 1879. [Note adapted from Krieger, p. 10.]

[3] Treitschke’s contention of Jewish authorship for the antisemitic pamphlets of the 1870s is baseless. He is, perhaps, referring specifically to Wilhelm Marr, who was widely thought to have been a renegade Jew; this, too, has no basis in fact. Marr was descended from Lutherans on both sides of his family. [Note from Levy, p. 69.]

[4] Johann Andreas Eisenmenger was not a Jew. [Note adapted from Krieger, p. 11.]

[5] Of the 561,612 Jews living in Germany in 1880, 2.7 percent, or 15,000, of them were foreign born. In 1910 the numbers were 615,021, 12.8 percent, and 78,746. A great many eastern-European Jews made their way across Germany on the way to North and South America, but only a tiny fraction were permitted to settle permanently on German soil. Although statistically groundless, the phantom of a Germany swamped by *Ostjuden* haunted many Germans continuously from the mid-nineteenth century through all the years of the Weimar Republic. [Note from Levy, p. 70.]

[6] The composer Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy (1809–47), grandson of Moses Mendelssohn, was baptized as a child. For some antisemites he was “the exceptional Jew” because of his wholehearted identification with German music; for many more, however, he was the proverbial exception who proved the rule that such assimilation was impossible for Jews and not actually sought after by them; for yet others, like Richard Wagner, his musical talent was typically Jewish—that is shallow, unconnected to the soul of the *Volk*, and aimed at easy popularity. For practicing Jews in the imperial era, Mendelssohn represented the ambivalence of assimilation. They took pride in his musical achievement but fretted over the detachment from Judaism by the grandson of the man who had led the way out of the ghetto and into German life. Was this the price of full participation?

[7] Heinrich Graetz (1817–91) wrote the first general history of the Jews in eleven volumes, the last of which appeared in 1875. Graetz vigorously defended the idea that Judaism was more than a set of enlightened and abstract theological beliefs. It was no mere religious denomination but the organic product of a people with a long history and a politics of its own. Graetz’s sometimes feisty pride in the Jewish past, including the recent past in Germany, annoyed Treitschke and many others, who condemned it as arrogance and evidence that Jews were renegeing on their end of the emancipation contract—the extinguishing of all peculiar national traits. [Note from Levy, pp. 71–72.]

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Source of English translation: Richard S. Levy, *Antisemitism in the Modern World. An Anthology of Texts*. Lexington, MA, and Toronto: D. C. Heath, 1991, pp. 69–73. Republished with kind permission from Richard S. Levy.

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