

Jacob Burckhardt on the Likely Consequences of Antisemitic Agitation (January 2, 1880)

Abstract

Jacob Burckhardt (1818–1897), a Swiss historian of art and culture, held a professorship in Basel, Switzerland, from 1858 until his retirement in 1893. The following letter was addressed to his friend, Friedrich von Preen (1823–1894), a civil servant whom Burckhardt had met on one of his walks in the neighborhood of Lörrach in the Black Forest in 1864. Unlike so many other reactions to Treitschke's 1879 polemic against the Jews, this letter was not published until 1922 and thus did not contribute to the "Berlin Antisemitism Conflict" [*Berliner Antisemitismusstreit*]. Although Burckhardt knows that Conservatives and Catholics would exploit the current wave of antisemitism to attack the liberals, and although he describes such agitation as contagious, he counsels Jews and liberals to demonstrate more moderation. He also appears to welcome state initiatives to diminish the role of Jews in the press and other areas of German public life.

Source

Jacob Burckhardt to Friedrich von Preen

Basel, January 2, 1880

[...]

At present, I would recommend great wisdom and moderation to the Semites; and even then, I do not believe that the current agitation will wane again. Liberalism has defended the Semites thus far, but soon it will no longer be able to resist the temptation to shake off such odium. Liberals will not be able to continue looking on as Conservatives and Catholics harbor the most popular trump card there is and use it against them. Moreover, legislation will also be changed again, and I would not guarantee the careers of Semitic gentlemen in the legal profession, in particular, for much longer. A change will take place as soon as it becomes safer for the state to intervene than to continue looking on. — The Semites will have to pay particularly for their entirely unjustified interference into all sorts of things, and newspapers will have to dispose of Semitic editors and correspondents if they intend to survive. Something like this may occur all at once and become contagious from one day to the next. [...]

Source: Jacob Burckhardt to Friedrich von Preen, January 2, 1880, in Jacob Burckhardt, *Briefe an seinen Freund Friedrich v. Preen 1864–1893*. Stuttgart and Berlin, 1922; original German text reprinted in 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. 251.

Translation: Erwin Fink

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