

First Expression of Antisemitism: Hitler's Letter to Adolf Gemlich (September 16, 1919)

Abstract

Historians have debated when and where Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) first developed his antisemitic beliefs. This 1919 letter, written in response to Adolf Gemlich's solicitation of Hitler's opinions on the "Jewish Question" in Germany, is frequently cited as an early example of Hitler's emerging antisemitism. Hitler advocates for the emergence of a "rational" antisemitism, one that would allow the state to find a systematic way to remove Jews from society. He attempts to separate Jews from those whom he considered "German," arguing that a shared language did not make Jews German. Instead, Jewishness was a racial quality. His argument that Jews cared mostly about increasing their personal wealth was typical of the prejudice leveled at wealthy Jewish Germans who worked in banking or owned retail stores. The attacks on Jews in this letter, and in Germany more widely, were always implicitly and explicitly connected to the perceived ills of modernity. Hitler sees Jews as racial outsiders, as proponents of unsettling economic change, and as supporters of the political shift in favor of Social Democracy. These are the "facts" [*Tatsachen*] that, according to Hitler, get lost in emotional attacks on Jews.

Source

Dear Herr Gemlich,

The danger posed by Jewry for our people today finds expression in the undeniable aversion of wide sections of our people. The cause of this aversion is not to be found in a clear recognition of the consciously or unconsciously systematic and pernicious effect of the Jews as a totality upon our nation. Rather, it arises mostly from personal contact and from the personal impression that the individual Jew leaves behind, which is almost always an unfavorable one. For this reason, antisemitism is too easily characterized as a mere emotional phenomenon. And yet this is incorrect. Antisemitism as a political movement may not and cannot be defined by emotional impulses, but by recognition of the facts. The facts are these:

First, Jewry is absolutely a race and not a religious association. Even the Jews never designate themselves as Jewish Germans, Jewish Poles, or Jewish Americans but always as German, Polish, or American Jews. Jews have never yet adopted much more than the language of the foreign nations among whom they live. A German who is forced to make use of the French language in France, Italian in Italy, Chinese in China does not thereby become a Frenchman, Italian, or Chinaman. It's the same with the Jew who lives among us and is forced to make use of the German language. He does not thereby become a German. Neither does the Mosaic faith, so important for the survival of this race, settle the question of whether someone is a Jew or non-Jew. There is scarcely a race whose members belong exclusively to just one definite religion.

Through thousands of years of the closest kind of inbreeding, Jews in general have maintained their race and their peculiarities far more distinctly than many of the peoples among whom they have lived. And thus comes the fact that there lives amongst us a non-German, alien race which neither wishes nor is able to sacrifice its racial character or to deny its feeling, thinking, and striving. Nevertheless, it possesses all the political rights we do. If the ethos of the Jews is revealed in the purely material realm, it is even clearer in their thinking and striving. Their dance around the golden calf is becoming a merciless struggle for all those possessions we prize most highly on earth.

The value of the individual is no longer decided by his character or by the significance of his achievements for the totality but exclusively by the size of his fortune, by his money.

The loftiness of a nation is no longer to be measured by the sum of its moral and spiritual powers, but rather by the wealth of its material possessions.

This thinking and striving after money and power, and the feelings that go along with it, serve the purposes of the Jew who is unscrupulous in the choice of methods and pitiless in their employment. In autocratically ruled states he whines for the favor of “His Majesty” and misuses it like a leech fastened upon the nations.

In democracies he vies for the favor of the masses, cringes before the “majesty of the people,” and recognizes only the majesty of money.

He destroys the character of princes with byzantine flattery, national pride (the strength of a people), with ridicule and shameless breeding to depravity. His method of battle is that public opinion which is never expressed in the press, but which is nonetheless managed and falsified by it. His power is the power of money, which multiplies in his hands effortlessly and endlessly through interest, and which forces peoples under the most dangerous of yokes. Its golden glitter, so attractive in the beginning, conceals the ultimately tragic consequences. Everything men strive after as a higher goal, be it religion, socialism, democracy, is to the Jew only means to an end, the way to satisfy his lust for gold and domination.

In his effects and consequences, he is like a racial tuberculosis of the nations.

The deduction from all this is the following: an antisemitism based on purely emotional grounds will find its ultimate expression in the form of the pogrom. An antisemitism based on reason, however, must lead to systematic legal combating and elimination of the privileges of the Jews, that which distinguishes the Jews from the other aliens who live among us (an Aliens Law). The ultimate objective [of such legislation] must, however, be the irrevocable removal of the Jews in general.

For both these ends a government of national strength, not of national weakness, is necessary.

The Republic in Germany owes its birth not to the uniform national will of our people but the sly exploitation of a series of circumstances which found general expression in a deep, universal dissatisfaction. These circumstances, however, were independent of the form of the state and are still operative today. Indeed, more so now than before. Thus, a great portion of our people recognizes that a changed state form cannot in itself change our situation. For that it will take a rebirth of the moral and spiritual powers of the nation.

And this rebirth cannot be initiated by a state leadership of irresponsible majorities, influenced by certain party dogmas, an irresponsible press, or internationalist phrases and slogans. [It requires] instead the ruthless installation of nationally minded leadership personalities with an inner sense of responsibility.

But these facts rob the Republic of the essential inner support of the nation’s spiritual forces. And thus today’s state leaders are compelled to seek support among those who draw the exclusive benefits of the new formation of German conditions, and who for this reason were the driving force behind the revolution of the Jews. Even though (as various statements of the leading personalities reveal) today’s leaders fully realized the danger of Jewry, they (seeking their own advantage) accepted the readily proffered support of the Jews and also returned the favor. And this payoff consisted not only in every possible favoring of Jewry, but above all in the hindrance of the struggle of the betrayed people against its defrauders, that is in the repression of the antisemitic movement.

Respectfully,
Adolf Hitler

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