

W.E.B. Du Bois Reflects on his Time in Nazi Germany (1936)

Abstract

Outsiders' observations of Germany's social and political climate in the mid-1930s provide insights into not only the perception of German racial policy, but also the general social attitudes held by everyday Germans. William Edward Burghardt "W.E.B." Du Bois (1868–1963) was an American sociologist and historian at Atlanta University, and a prolific political writer. He was the first African American to earn a doctorate at Harvard University and was a founding member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Du Bois had connections to Germany, having studied German at Fisk and then studying at the university in Berlin from 1892 to 1894. With the support of the Oberlander Trust, Du Bois spent nearly six months in Germany from 1935 to 1936 and wrote about his experiences there upon his return to America. Du Bois' reflections are an example of an intellectual's struggle to understand Germany's particular racial prejudice in the context of racial prejudice elsewhere. Although race prejudice existed in Germany, he insisted that he had not suffered its direct effects himself, and he distinguished between prejudice based on skin color and antisemitism.

In stark contrast to the "white dislike of blacks" in America, Du Bois noted in this first piece a unique distinction in the Germans' attitudes towards and treatment of Jews. German antisemitism, he suggested, seemed to be instinctive rather than based on skin color, stemming instead from economic fears as well as religious and clan solidarity. In the second excerpt, Du Bois recalls his visit to the German Museum of Science and Technology in Munich. While he praised the exhibits for their splendid presentation, he lamented the fact that the entire exhibit centered on the accomplishments of only German scientists and inventors. Du Bois' reflection demonstrates his struggle as a man of science to grapple with the honest celebration of genuine accomplishment with the overtly nationalist agenda being set by the German museum.

Source

I. A Forum of Fact and Opinion

by Dr. W.E.B. Dubois, December 19, 1939

Race Prejudice in Germany

When an American Negro says, "I have met no discrimination in account of race," it is well for those of us who know to apply considerable doses of salt. For our people, in self-defense, have adopted a well-known protective mechanism: under given circumstances, we carefully ascertain where we are wanted or endured, and where we are insulted or debarred. Then we go only where we can, and of course suffer no discrimination. When, therefore, I say I have not suffered from race prejudice in Germany, this calls for explanation.

There is race prejudice in Germany, and a regular, planned propaganda to increase it and make it characteristic of the Third Reich. But it is not instinctive prejudice, except in the case of the Jews, and not altogether there. I mean that German prejudice is not the result of long belief, backed by child teaching, and outward insignia like color or hair. It is a reasoned prejudice, or an economic fear. Consequently, in the case of Negroes, it does not show itself readily. My friend used to say that she liked Paris, because she could start out without wondering where she would get lunch. So in Berlin or elsewhere in Germany: I can go to any hotel which I can afford; I can dine where I please and have the head-waiter bow me

welcome. I can go to any theater and find the strange lady next to me bow pleasantly or pass a conventional word if necessary; I can join a sightseeing tour without comment, etc. In fine, I have complete civic freedom and public courtesy. Of course, if my appearance is pronounced, I shall be an object of curiosity and even excited attention: a black man in a small German city would be a matter of crowds and staring that might be very annoying; but he would not be insulted nor gayed; nor, least of all, would he be refused such accommodation or courtesy as he demanded.

On the other hand, in social lines, there are limits: I have been invited to dinner in German homes, and eaten with German women and men in restaurants. On the other hand, no German woman of good standing would think of marrying a Negro under ordinary circumstances; nor could she do so legally. It is a question if she could legally marry a Japanese. In public dance halls and in the half-world Negroes must be welcomed with care and secretly; police spies would quickly suppress any open commerce.

Anti-Semitism

In the case of Jews, one meets something different, which an American Negro does not readily understand. Prejudice against Jews in Germany comes nearer being instinctive than color prejudice. For many centuries Germans have disliked Jews. But the reasons have varied, and are not at all analogous to white dislike of blacks in America. Economic reasons, built on a foundation of religion and clan solidarity, are the real explanation. In the middle age strangers who did not believe in Christ were largely excluded from land-holding and work as artisans or shop-keepers, and found a way to make a living in the new commerce and money-lending. I have seen the old Juden-gasse in Frankfort, where the Rothschilds [sic], Schiffs and other great capitalists were caged up of [sic] nights in narrow quarters, lest they contaminate the Christians; and where they laid the foundations of wealth and power, despite insult and oppression. As time went on, Jews became free and honored citizens of Germany, contributing to science and art, to finance and banking; still, while intermarrying now and then, excluded from the socially elect – the nobility, the high places in the army, the chief offices of state. But, curiously enough, the chief indictment against the Jews at this time was not what they did, but that they would not intermarry with Germans and lose their identity in the German state. They thus became the objects of envy, fear, and hatred among the workers and less educated folk of the middle class. Waves of anti-semitism, accompanied by malicious slander, arose again and again in the 18th and nineteenth centuries.

In the World War Jews did their legal service, but they were not eager to serve in an army in which they could not act as officers. After the war, bankers, financiers and merchants had many opportunities to profiteer at the expense of the workers and middle class. Jews were prominent in such happenings because they were so largely represented in these callings. Their success in professions and in the competitive civil service brought all the envy and jealousy of the wretched to bear upon them, and Adolf Hitler, born to dislike of Jews, was the appropriate instrument for the undoing of the Jew in Germany.

The Present Plight of the German Jew

There has been no tragedy in modern times equal in its awful effects to the fight on the Jew in Germany. It is an attack on civilization, comparable only to such horrors as the Spanish Inquisition and the African slave trade. It has set civilization back a hundred years, and in particular it has made the settlement and understanding of race problems more difficult and more doubtful. It is widely believed by many that the Jewish problem in Germany was episodic, and is already passing. Visitors to the Olympic Games are apt to have gotten that impression. They saw no Jewish oppression. Just as Northern visitors to Mississippi see no Negro oppression.

This conclusion is largely based on a knowledge of the essential character of the German people. They are a kindly folk, good-hearted, hating oppression, widely sympathetic with suffering, and filled with longing ideals for all mankind. This is true. I know no folk in Europe of whom this characterization is

truer. But one must not forget that the active German folk today is the National Socialist Party, under Adolf Hitler, his coadjutors and backers. And that they set the unquestioned and today unquestionable policy of Germany. An integral part of that policy, just as prominent now as earlier and perhaps growing in prominence is world war on Jews. The proof of this is incontrovertible, and must comfort all those in any part of the world who depend on race hate as the salvation of men.

Adolf Hitler hardly ever makes a speech today – and his speeches reach every corner of Germany, by radio, newspaper placard, movie and public announcement – without belittling, blaming or cursing Jews. From my window as I write I see a great red poster, seven feet high, asking the German people to contribute to winter relief to the poor, so that Germany will not sink to the level of the “Jewish-Bolshevist countries of the rest of the world” At Nuremberg recently he accused the “foreign Jewish element” as causing the rotting of the Aryan world. His propaganda minister was more insulting, and said that the whole oppression of Germany by the world was caused by Jewish emigrants. Every misfortune of the world is in whole or in part blamed on Jews – the Spanish rebellion, the obstruction to world trade, etc. One finds cases in the papers: Jews jailed for sex relations with German women; a marriage disallowed because a Jewish justice of the peace witnessed it; Masons excluded from office in the National Socialistic [sic] Party, because Jews are Masons; advertisements excluding Jews; the total disenfranchisement of all Jews; deprivation of civil rights and inability to remain or become German citizens; limited rights of education, and narrowly limited right to work in trades, professions and the civil service; the threat of boycott, loss of work and even mob violence, for any German who trades with a Jew; and, above all, the continued circulation of Julius Streicher’s *Steuermer* [sic], the most shameless, lying advocate of race hate in the world, not excluding Florida. It could not sell a copy without Hitler’s consent.

Source: W.E.B. Du Bois, “A Forum of Fact and Opinion,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 19, 1936, p.A1.

II. A Forum of Fact and Opinion, October 10, 1936

by Dr. W.E.B. Dubois

Fame

One of the most difficult things in this world is to distribute honestly the reward for thought and action which has benefited mankind. In the German Museum of Science and Technique there is a room which seeks to distribute such honors. In the entrance stands a great monument to Goethe with a portrait of Alexander von Humboldt, and Frederick the Great. And then in another circular room with a beautiful parquet floor are the pictures and statues of men who studied mathematics, germs, electricity and optics; who speculated on the universe and named the stars and dissected light; and flew in the air, and cured men. It is a splendid collection, but, of course, it is predominantly German. A few foreigners have found a place there like Copernicus and Bunsen but for the most part this Hall of Fame tells what Germans have done. It would be a finer and bigger thing if, ignoring nation and language, this hall could have brought together the great contributors of science and technique the world over but perhaps that was too much to expect. But, on the whole, in all the exhibits here, commercialism and nationality have been restricted. The restriction is sometimes poor. For instance, Faraday’s apparatus is exhibited, but a German invention which came years after is given the place of honor. The German inventors of telegraphy are emphasized, while Morse’s telegraph is simply there.

[...]

Source: W.E.B. Dubois, “A Forum of Fact and Opinion,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 10, 1936, p. A1.

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