

Antisemitism

A Multi-disciplinary Perspective on a Demonology with Variations

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The aim of this article is to synthesize existing knowledge in a novel way by looking through a social psychological lens at historical manifestations of antisemitism and its most recent variant, presented as a case study which tracks its development and compares it with the core demonology of antisemitism. By reviewing literature representing many different disciplines, focusing particularly on history, theology and social psychology, the article aims to bridge disciplinary gaps, making social psychological insights on inter-group relations and social identities accessible to scholars in other fields and thus foster a cross-disciplinary dialogue on antisemitism. Linguistic “innovation” has been needed whenever an existing variety becomes politically incorrect, which, on the individual level, may give rise to a denial that the new variety is antisemitism. It is concluded that compared to other racisms applied research is still needed to fill the existing lacuna to find remedies for antisemitism.

Introduction

Antisemitism is a deeply rooted prejudice. Its manifestations have changed over thousands of years; they include medieval accusations such as the blood libel, which falsely claimed that Jews used Christian blood in religious rituals (e.g. Teter 2023) and modern conspiracies alleging Jewish control over global affairs (e.g. Czimbalmos 2025), often linked to the State of Israel

(e.g. Herf 2024). Antisemitic tropes rely on conspiratorial thinking, a feature which differentiates antisemitism from racism (e.g. Stögner 2025). Contemporary variants of antisemitism can be classified into three main forms: Rightist, Leftist and Islamist (Herf 2024). The common factor is that Jews are portrayed as a threat that fuels cognitive, emotional and behavioural responses that constitute antisemitism.

The aim of this article is to synthesize existing knowledge in a novel way. By revisiting some definitions and historical manifestations of antisemitism through a social psychological lens, the article aims to bridge disciplinary gaps. Integrating a social-psychological perspective on inter-group relations with broader multi-disciplinary work, focusing on how Jews and Judaism have been imagined in inter-group prejudice as opposed to how Jews have defined their own identity, this article also aims to make social psychological insights accessible to scholars in other fields, thus fostering cross-disciplinary dialogue and understanding of antisemitism.

Some basic concepts and tenets of the social psychology of inter-group relations and social identity need to be addressed

in the introduction. Next, the basics of the social psychology of inter-group relations and social identities, i.e. the “lens” through which this literature review is perceived, is briefly described. This is followed by a section discussing how to define and identify antisemitism, while the next section addresses the historical roots, transformations and core demonology of antisemitism as well as the role of academia in decisive junctions of those transformations. The largest section is a case study of the development of the latest variety of antisemitism and its connection to the core demonology of antisemitism. Before the conclusion drawn from all previous sections, a separate section discusses the consequences of the failed identity negotiations of Jews with other groups and the need for more research on all kinds of contemporary antisemitism and on ways to curb the accelerating increase of this hatred.

On the social psychology of inter-group relations and social identities

Intergroup behaviour occurs when individuals are motivated by a salient social or collective identity, that is, a heightened awareness of characteristics shared with an ingroup, a “we” group. This salient social identity makes us look at ourselves and others, from both “we” and “they” groups, through that group lens and behave towards them accordingly. This is the basic tenet of both Social Categorization Theory (SCT, Turner et al. 1987) and Social Identity Theory (SIT, Tajfel and Turner, 1986). The degree of identification with our ingroup, but even more the subjective content and meaning of the salient social identity (the group lens) influences our intergroup attitudes, i.e. our beliefs about, emotions and behaviour

towards a particular outgroup, in this case, the Jews, however that group is defined or defines itself. Prejudice is a negative attitude characterized by negative emotions which sparks negative behaviour whenever behaviour follows. However, inter-group emotions and behaviour vary, the latter ranging from discrimination, confrontation/attack, avoidance and exclusion to repair of past wrongs or actions of support (Helkama et al. 2017; Mackie et al. 2016).

In interpersonal behaviour, in turn, our personal identity is the most salient one. At the personal extreme of the salience continuum Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* are the iconic example of two individuals who defy the social identity they have as members of two warring families to enable their interaction as individuals only. The social extreme of that continuum can be illustrated by two enemies in combat who are expected to defy their own (and their enemies’) personal identity and thus act solely as soldiers fighting for their country. However, behaviour is seldom this “pure”, but rather the result of a mixture, salience leaning slightly towards one or the other end of the continuum.

What is often ignored, however, is that everyone has more than one social identity, creating intersecting social identities which are not just the sum of their parts. In addition, considering intergroup relations between unequal groups such as minorities and majorities also disadvantage and inequality need to be addressed. Intersectionality Theory started with sociological research on the disadvantaged situation of Black women in the USA, i.e. the intersection of class, race and gender (Crenshaw 1989) and intersectionality research is still mostly sociological,

focusing on social structures. However, the focus in social psychology is on the complexity of multiple, intersecting group memberships which shape each other.

The political scientist and Associate Professor in Law David Schraub (2019) notes that intersectional studies rarely engage with Jewish subjects, despite the framework's potential to illuminate Jewish experiences of marginalization. He attributes this absence to the widespread conflation of Jewishness with Whiteness, which leads scholars to overlook antisemitism as a form of oppression (see also the section on the cultural roots and core demonology of antisemitism). Schraub calls for a more nuanced intersectional approach that recognizes Jewish identity as complex and distinct, rather than subsuming it under Whiteness (Schraub 2019).

The Professor of Sociology Karin Stögner noted that antisemitism “does not position Jews unambiguously on one or the other side of these markers” but is characterized by ambivalence with regard to binary classifications (Stögner 2023, 288), although a common tendency over recent decades in everyday language as well as in academia is to categorize people more or less unambiguously along binary codes (e.g. black–white, hetero–lesbian/gay, oppressor–oppressed).

Two social identities relevant for antisemitism are ethnic identity and cultural identity. The former is in social psychology anchored in the identity process, part of one's total social identity, and defined as identification with a group based on a belief in common ancestry. This belief makes ethnic identity distinct from other social identities (Verkuyten 2018). Cultural identity is defined in different ways within different disciplines, but here it will suffice

to note that it is a learnt relationship to the physical and social environment of one's childhood and the result of a socialization process that anchors an individual to his/her environment. Religion is often considered a part of culture, but in Jewish identity they are often separated. As culture is transmitted from early childhood on within the family it is partly subconscious. In addition, culture changes with time, both historically and within an individual's lifetime. The subjective content and meaning of culture vary between individuals within the same cultural group.

Increasing the complexity of social identities, the content and meaning of any particular social or collective identity can individually be based on different characteristics. National identities can be based on shared culture (language, religion, values, norms), geographical anchoring (where one lives), and/or ethnicity (belief in common ancestry). One specific feature of antisemitism is the variety of rationalities it has applied over time. This is because Jewish identity is manifold at its core, a combination of religion, ethnicity and broader culture—and many other things on whose basis a person may call themselves Jewish (e.g. Dencik 2009). At the beginning of Jewish history, Jewish culture, heritage and religion were very much intertwined. This inherently manifold nature of Jewish identity has, unlike with some other religious groups, made it possible even for atheists to have a strong Jewish identity (Dencik 2009, 321), but has also offered several different grounds for discrimination and persecution of Jews.

An important aspect of the content and meaning of any identity, social or personal, is that people are not free to choose any

identity they want. Social as well as personal identities are presented and negotiated in interaction; self-recognized and alter-ascribed ethnic/cultural/religious or any other social identities may not match (Liebkind 1992; 2006). Our identities are developed, changed, challenged and defended over time, in interaction with our social environment; alter-ascribed identities reflected onto us may confirm or counter our self-recognized ones. As we need positive rather than negative identities, we try to reach an agreement with at least significant others and groups on who and what we are. This poses special challenges for minority groups, whose self-recognized social identities may not be heard, and the alter-ascribed ones be tainted with prejudice (Liebkind 1992; 2006). For example, the self-recognized Jewish identity of Soviet Jewry was countered when in the pre-1967 period they began to develop what would become a Jewish national movement, where Jewish identity included both identification with Israel and the pre-existing conception of all Jews as a people across national borders: According to Gjerde (2018), this “went far beyond the limits of what Soviet authorities considered acceptable Jewish identity” (Gjerde 2018, 280). When not conforming to approved Soviet Jewish identities, therefore, Jews who subscribed to national Jewish identities and supported Zionism were considered part of a vast anti-Soviet conspiracy (Gjerde 2018, 291).

On defining and identifying antisemitism

While the goal of this article is not to define antisemitism, it is necessary to briefly reflect on the debate surrounding its definition. As Czimbalmos and Pataricza (2024)

summarize, like other forms of discrimination, antisemitism includes both easily recognizable and more subtle expressions (Czimbalmos and Pataricza 2024, 15). To cover these, several definitions of antisemitism (e.g. the Jerusalem Declaration, the Nexus Document) have been proposed. Perhaps the most well-known and widely recognized is that of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) from 2016. The IHRA definition serves as a guideline and is recommended by the European Commission in its 2022 conclusions on combating racism and antisemitism, as well as in its 2018 declaration on countering antisemitism. Nevertheless, it is often regarded insufficient for scientific analysis (Czimbalmos and Pataricza 2024, 15–16) and criticized for not providing an unchanging essence for all cases of antisemitism. However, the philosopher Eve Garrard (2020) maintains that this is irrelevant; there are too many other concepts in the same boat for this complaint to count. Another putatively moral objection is the claim that it represents an attack on the freedom of speech of critics of Israel. But this is simply not true, as it is full of conditional verbs: something “may”, “could” or “might” be antisemitic, but need not be. The only view which this definition threatens is that criticism of Israel can never, in any circumstances, be antisemitic. Although this is not even remotely plausible, some critics of the IHRA definition seem to find it attractive (Garrard 2020).

Often used in research is Helen Fein’s definition of antisemitism as:

a persisting latent structure of hostile beliefs towards Jews as a collective manifested in individuals as attitudes,

and in culture as myth, ideology, folklore and imagery, and in actions—social or legal discrimination, political mobilization against the Jews, and collective or state violence—which results in and/or is designed to distance, displace, or destroy Jews as Jews. (Fein 1987, 67)

Fein's definition includes also a cultural level of antisemitism. As culture, often considered to include religion, is transmitted in early childhood, it becomes a part of our personality, and we may be unaware of it. The negative, culturally transmitted alter-ascribed Jewish identity is very different from how Jews have perceived themselves over time. The Professor of Psychology Gordon Allport explained the persistence of most prejudice, relevant also for the stereotypical "imagined Jew": "defeated intellectually, prejudice lingers emotionally" (Allport 1951, 328). Brekke (2021) notes that cultural models or schemas are widely shared but unavailable to the cultural insider because they are taken for granted. Culturally acquired prejudice, like antisemitism, influences individuals' attitudes involuntarily. When normalized, such prejudice becomes structural, i.e. institutionalized (Johnson 2019). Thus, it is at the individual level mostly implicit, i.e. invisible to the prejudiced (Greenwald and Banaji 2017).

This concerns also antisemitism; on the basis of original material of that time, Gjerde (2018) claimed that most of the Soviet elite from 1967 onwards were "true believers" in conspiracy theories concerning Soviet Jews and thus may not have been aware of the antisemitism in their increasing antizionist rhetoric (Gjerde 2018, 291). The British researcher of antisemitism

Dave Rich has described how this unawareness is manifested:

people who fall for antisemitic myths and conspiracies and stereotypes, who follow these built-in ideas about Jews, they are like hikers following a trail across an unfamiliar landscape who just instinctively follow the path trodden into the Earth by countless people before them in times long forgotten [...] because these ideas [...] are deeply embedded in the mainstream of our culture. (Rich 2023)

Regardless of what definition is employed, antisemitism offers Jews a negative alter-ascribed identity contradicting the self-recognized one. It manifests itself, like any prejudice, as negative stereotypes (generalizing beliefs) of Jews, emotions ranging from mild disapproval to passionate hatred triggered by those stereotypes/beliefs and concomitant behavioural tendencies (Helkama et al. 2017).

Although sharing features with racism, antisemitism is also a form of xenophobia and has been perceived as the prototype of conspiracy theories (Volli 2016; Czimbalmos and Pataricza 2024). The difference between the classical concept of racism and antisemitism has been aptly illustrated by the Marxist sociologist Oliver Cromwell Cox:

Antisemitism is an attitude directed at the Jews because they are Jews, while race prejudice is an attitude directed at the Negroes¹ because they want to be

1 I recognize that the term "Negro" as used in historical texts like Cox's is outdated and

something other than Negroes. A Jew, to the intolerant, is an enemy within society; but the Negro, to the race-prejudiced, is a friend in his place. [...] the one condition of peace between Jews and Gentiles is that the Jews cease to be Jews. (Cox [1948]1959, 393, 395)

Rather than perceiving Jews as merely inferior, antisemitism depicts Jews as an all-powerful collective, threatening non-Jews by aiming to harm them (Harrison 2019; Julius 2024). This has also been highlighted by Schraub (2019), as discussed in the section on the social psychology of intergroup relations and social identities.

Despite the complexity of many key terms, definitions are still important as both conceptual under-specification and conceptual expansion are endemic. It is difficult to observe, for example, if antisemitism or ethnic identity is incompatible with observed variability without at least some idea about what antisemitism, ethnicity and identity are all about. Fragmentation and change can be understood only when it is clear what is fragmented and subject to change (Verkuyten 2018).

The cultural roots of much of the world's antisemitism and its core demonology

Owing to its ever-changing nature, antisemitism cannot be understood without tracing its origins in history. In Europe

carries problematic connotations rooted in racial hierarchies and colonial legacies. While engaging with such language critically is important for understanding the context in which it was written, it is equally necessary to acknowledge its offensive nature and avoid its use in contemporary discourse.

and in a large part of the world, a system of antisemitic traditions has since antiquity been used to identify the Jewish “Other”. According to a number of scholars (e.g. Mayerhofer and Lange 2021; Rutgers 2021; Teter 2023), Jew-hatred also significantly served the construction of a Christian identity. Although anti-Judaism was not born with Christianity, Christianity was born as a negation of Judaism, and was, like Islam, formed over several hundred years as emerging groups breaking with their parent religion(s) (Rutgers 2021, 34). Naturally, there are geographic and cultural-historical differences in antisemitism, e.g. in the “Muslim world” and in Christian majority societies, although commonalities also exist (Herf 2024).

From a social-psychological perspective, what all emerging groups have in common is the need to recruit new members. Consequently, they need to stand out in a positive way compared to their parent group(s), that is, they need to acquire so-called positive distinctiveness (e.g. Castelli and Carraro 2010). A strategy often used for that purpose is to engage in active intergroup comparison and depict the new ideology, in this case Christianity or Islam, as superior to the old one(s). Describing the Old Testament Divinity as unforgiving, vengeful and bloodthirsty compared to the Christian one is one example. This alter-ascribed characterization of Judaism emerged in the long, successful process of acquiring a positively distinct Christian identity. Through missionary work Christianity and Islam became majorities, while Judaism remained a minority, also because the new religions, when in power, forbid Jews to proselytize. The conception of the superiority of Christianity culminated in

Christian supersessionism, i.e. the idea that Christianity would finally replace Judaism.

The social psychological notion of the need for early Christianity to acquire positive distinctiveness is entirely theoretical. However, it is independently corroborated by original sources, although not all historians may agree with their interpretation. Professor Leonard Rutgers (2021) noted that:

Early Christian texts dealing with the Jews are often not about the Jews at all but about Christians in search of their own distinct identity [...] Having begun its life as an offspring of Judaism and as a Jewish sect, early Christianity was facing a set of major, almost unsurmountable challenges when it came to delineate its self-identity. [...] Clearly etched boundaries became crucially important. Christian theologians needed to succeed in highlighting the fact that Christianity was something altogether different and new. [...] [As] they tried to sever all ties from the Jewish past that had produced them [...] [they] could do little but engage in a considerable amount of negative identity-formation. Judaism ended up at the receiving end of the hostile rhetoric that this process of dissociation, separation, and identity formation entailed and engendered. (Rutgers 2021, 34)

Another historian, Professor Magda Teter (2023), depicts the content of the Christian “group lens” on Jews by showing how Christian theology of late Antiquity cast Jews as “children born to slavery”, and how their supposed theological inferiority

became inscribed into law, institutionalizing a sense of Christian domination and superiority. Teter (2023) found that, in *Etsi Judeos* of Pope Innocent III (1205), Jews were not allowed to have Christian servants, because they “shall recognize themselves as slaves to those whom Christ’s death set free”. In *Cum Nimis Absurdum* (1555) of Pope Paul IV, Jews were forbidden to live as neighbours to Christians or churches, because “Jews, whose own guilt has consigned them to perpetual servitude” should, “as long as they persist in their errors”, “recognize through experience that they have become slaves while Christians have been made free through Jesus Christ”. Jews were supposed to abandon their religious identity and cease to exist as Jews. Interestingly, Teter shows that the first racist laws which were introduced in Virginia, USA, in “An Act concerning Servants and Slaves” (Section XI) in 1705 largely mirrored the anti-Jewish laws that had existed for centuries.

Although “antisemitism has taken on radically different forms and supposed ‘rationales’ in different cultures at different times” (Johnson 2019, 17), research shows that the core of antisemitism is rooted in Christian theology (Brekke 2021). Many scholars have formulated the essence of antisemitic myths and stereotypes. According to Professor of Law Anthony Julius (2024), for example, all versions of antisemitism libel Jews, as libels “are damaging to the good name of the Jewish people” (Julius 2024, 11). Julius lists five libels as the essence of antisemitism:

- The blood libel supposes that Jews entertain homicidal intentions towards non-Jews (and specifically, non-Jewish children), and commit acts of murder, either in re-enact-

ment of the Crucifixion, or to avenge their continuing, collective punishment for that cosmic crime.

- The economic libel supposes that Jews, who are self-interested, materialist, acquisitive and unproductive by nature, exploit non-Jews when they can, and seek monopoly power, the better to pursue their greater objectives.
- The conspiracy libel supposes that Jews act in concert, in secret pursuit of goals inimical to the interests of non-Jews. That is: Jews conspire with other Jews.
- The silencing libel supposes that Jews cannot tolerate truth-tellers; they fear exposure of their plots. They conspire together to silence their virtuous enemies.
- The mendacity libel supposes that Jews proceed by deception and other forms of deceit. That is: Jews lie to non-Jews. (Julius 2024, 10–1)

The mendacity libel has two variants, *Holocaust denial* and *Weaponization of Antisemitism*; Julius is most concerned about the latter, as it claims that:

the Jews deploy such evidence of anti-semitism as may exist for an ulterior, improper purpose, (a) to deflect attention, or otherwise excuse, Israel's crimes, and/or (b) to intimidate antizionists into silence, or to discredit them. They typically overstate the level or seriousness of antisemitism, and their own concern about it. (Julius 2024, 142)

Julius finds that libel bizarre, as “it would not be difficult to identify the racism, say, in equivalent claims about other minority groups” (Julius 2024, 142). Schraub (2022)

broadens the mendacity libel into general untrustworthiness, calling it epistemic antisemitism, which “injures, wrongs, or marginalizes Jews in their capacities as knowers—testifiers, communicators, exponents or purveyors of knowledge” (Schraub 2022, 153). The long-time socialist, political scientist and journalist Alan Johnson (2019), in turn, compares antisemitism to a piano: its core demonology—the key stereotypes and myths describing the imagined Jew—are the unchanging keys, while the variations across time are the melodies played on those keys, each telling “a different story about the alien, powerful, malevolent and tricky Jew” (Johnson 2019, 17). Although delusional, this core demonology shaped European Christianity in the Middle Ages even without Jews (Julius 2010). The “composers” and “pianists” of the variants—religions, ideologies, movements and their leaders—have adapted it to fit their norms. Older forms exist alongside new ones. Jews have been accused of being god-killers, arch-capitalist exploiters, revolutionary communists, too tribal and too rootless, too poor and too rich, etc. (Johnson 2019), while the core demonology has remained unchanged.

An important shift occurred when the anti-Judaism became politically incorrect in the nineteenth century and was replaced with the more socially acceptable term antisemitism. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries new ideas emerged, emphasizing equality between citizens (Michman 2023), which clashed with earlier notions of hierarchy between human groups. To deny equality to those deemed inferior, new ingroups and outgroups were needed. Jews were no longer compared with Christians, but, for example, with French or Germans

(Michman 2023). The aim was to show that they did not deserve equality, and if they enjoyed it, it had been “stolen” or was otherwise undeserved (Teter 2023).

A primary example of how academia has rehabilitated Jew-hatred is the concept of the Aryan “race”, which emerged in science in the nineteenth century through misuse of the word Aryan. This word had referred only to Aryan (i.e. Indo-European) languages until Arthur de Gobineau (1853), called the father of racist ideology, started to misuse it to denote race. This allowed Jews to be classified as “Semites”. The term antisemitism improved the reputation of Jew-hatred because the prefix “anti-“ and the word “semitic” made it sound more scientific and the “-ism” transformed it to an acceptable ideology among others (Michman 2023).

Jew-hatred was thus rehabilitated simply by changing the language used to talk about it. However, the many dimensions of Jewish identity still posed a problem; even if Jews were in secular societies given a chance to emancipate without explicitly renouncing their Judaism, this applied only on an individual basis; what they had to abandon was their view of themselves as a people (Lappin 2019), i.e. their ethnic identity. Viewing the Jewish people as an illicit nation is deeply ingrained in both religious and secular European culture. Secular antisemitism in Europe on both the Left and the Right mirrored for centuries before the Second World War the Christian supersessionism in the view that:

Jews are an illicit collectivity lacking any independent legitimacy. Its members need to be repaired and reconfigured. The intended result of each reply

[to the Jewish question] is to find an acceptable way of eliminating this collectivity. In the case of the right, this was to be through expulsion and, ultimately, physical annihilation. For the left, and some liberals, it would be achieved through a forced or a natural process of assimilation. (Lappin 2019, 33)

Currently, “a large part of the contemporary European left has inherited the liberal and revolutionary antipathy towards a Jewish collectivity, with Israel becoming the focus of this attitude” and, as a result, “a Jewish country is treated as an illegitimate entity not worthy of a people whose history should have taught them the folly of nationalism” (Lappin 2003, 23). This was the basis for one decisive event in the constant development of new variants of antisemitism: the 2001 UN “World Conference against Racism”. At Durban, “the 1970s ‘Zionism=Racism’ culture returned” (Hirsh and Miller 2022, abstract) and has grown ever since (see also the section on the cultural roots and core demonology of antisemitism).

Western academia participates again, knowingly or not, in rehabilitating antisemitism by using buzzwords aimed at projecting, without proof of the validity of the claims, all the evil perceived to characterize (the imagined) Judaism and Jews on Zionism and Zionists (see also the sections on the cultural roots and core demonology of antisemitism and the case study). For example, in Whiteness studies: “the color line is introduced into conflicts which have nothing to do neither with the American race relations, nor with a European type of colonialism” (Berkovits 2018, 88). Using

this frame, anti-racist ideology depicts Jews as “super-White”, thereby strengthening age-old antisemitic myths (Schraub 2019):

Whiteness as a lens of analysis is designed to elevate or accentuate certain aspects of experience that might otherwise go unnoticed [...] [T]he prevailing view of Jews—the view that subordinates Jews—is precisely that they are “particularly powerful, or privileged, or influential”. And so, when the Whiteness frame—which by design draws attention to these attributes—is overlaid upon the White Jew (as a body or a concept), it serves not as a counterweight but as an accelerant. The hope in applying the Whiteness frame to a gentile White is to unsettle received understandings of the White experience—to make people see things they had not seen before. By contrast, the effect of applying Whiteness to Jewishness is confirmatory: “I always thought that Jews had all this power and privilege—and see how right I was!” (Schraub 2019, 393)

Research on contemporary antisemitism faces an obstacle not encountered by research on earlier forms: as intergroup attitudes are sensitive to social norms, socially unacceptable ones may become implicit. When the “outgroup lens” on Jews, i.e. the content and meaning of their alter-ascribed identity, becomes politically incorrect, some new content needs to be created. Accordingly, antisemitism mutates to overcome negative connotations of earlier versions. Any new version of antisemitism acquires by definition the status of being politically correct, thereby denying it

is a form of anti-Judaism. The newest variant is discussed below.

The most recent variant of antisemitism— a case study

As Jew-hatred had lost its respectability after the Holocaust, the time was again ripe for its rehabilitation. Izabella Tabarovsky (2022), herself born in the Soviet Union and a researcher specialized in the history of Russia, characterizes the antizionism which was created there after the Second World War as grounded in antisemitic conspiracy theory because it included the core demonology of antisemitism. Although another historian, Åsmund Borgen Gjerde (2018), maintains that the antizionism of the Soviet elite at the time was not a conscious strategy to conceal antisemitism, as conspiracist thinking was common in Soviet politics, he does not deny its antisemitism or consequences:

If an antisemite sincerely believes Jews conspire against everything that is good in the world, this obviously does not make her or him any less antisemitic than if she or he merely fabricates such charges, knowing them to be false [...]. For it remains true that these attacks were directed at any Jew who expressed a commitment to any form of Jewish identity beyond an absolute minimum tolerated by Soviet authorities; and it remains true that these attacks often echoed ideas that had previously been used to justify violence against Jews. (Gjerde 2018, 292)

Lenin himself condemned antisemitism, denouncing it as fascist, but under Stalin a

new linguistic shape, a “permission structure for antisemitism” as the Professor of Literature Dara Horn (2024) has called it, was created. Horn used this term primarily to explain the soaring statistics of antisemitism after Hamas’s brutal attack on Israel on 7 October 2023, but she aptly described how the core demonology of the imagined collective Jew has been maintained through all the variations:

This is the permission structure for antisemitism [...] announce a “universal” ideal that all good people must accept and then redefine Jewish collective identity as lying beyond it. Hating Jews thus becomes a demonstration of righteousness. The key is to define, and redefine, and redefine again, the shiny new moral reasoning for why the Jews have failed the universal test of humanity. (Horn 2024)

The Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm identified the new shapeshift in the Soviet Union when noting that antisemitism was “tolerated and sometimes encouraged [...] albeit now dressed up as anti-Zionism” and that antisemitism manifested itself after the establishment of the Jewish state “under the disguise of antizionism” (Hobsbawm 1980, 502, 504).

Soviet antizionist propaganda had right-wing antisemitic roots and was produced, translated to many languages and disseminated to many countries from roughly 1967 to 1988 (Tabarovsky, 2022). This propaganda proclaimed, without evidence, that Zionism is Nazism, racism, apartheid, colonialism and genocide. So-called “Zionologists” were employed at the Soviet Academy of Sciences for the

purpose of producing that propaganda. The renowned Professor of History Robert Wistrich (2012) noted the crucial role of Soviet academics:

a wide variety of classic anti-Jewish motifs became virtually obligatory in so-called academic Soviet publications. Ostensibly concerned with Zionism, these writings insistently slandered Judaism as a creed that calls for genocide and the enslavement of non-Jews [...] Ultimately, this ideology [Zionism] was founded to justify the “extermination” of Palestinian Arabs. (Wistrich 2012, 435)

Wistrich saw the development of antisemitic antizionism in the Soviet Union as an effort to explain away the defeat of the Arab allies 1967:

Already in the summer of 1967 the Soviet media began to denounce Israel’s so called genocide against the Palestinian people. Within days of the Israeli victory, the Soviet press would brand Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Dayan as a “pupil of Hitler” and execrate world Zionism as a racist, criminal conspiracy [...] The tone had been set for what would become a veritable tsunami of articles, lectures, broadcasts and films vilifying Judaism, Zionism and Israel in the Soviet mass media. The only comparable analogy would be the monstrous specter of *Das Weltjudentum* in Nazi propaganda of the 1930s and 1940’s—this time with the roles reversed. In place of the relentless Nazi myth about “Jewish Bolshevism”, the Soviet

Communists began to fabricate the equally mendacious “Jewish Nazism”. (Wistrich 2012, 433)

Tabarovsky (2022) notes that Zionism and Zionists were demonized with the same core demonology with which Judaism and Jews had been depicted by the forged Protocols of the Elders of Zion and by the Nazis, creating an imagined Zionism which to a large extent was based on old antisemitic myths. One pertinent example is from an antisemitism trial in Paris in 1973, where the defence quoted a right-wing author, who had:

borrowed entire passages—typos included—from a 1906 pamphlet called *The Jewish Question [...] or the Impossibility of Granting Full Rights to Jews*, authored by S. Rossov, a member of the ultra-nationalist, antisemitic Black Hundreds movement which incited pogroms in pre-revolutionary Russia. The only difference [...] was that whenever the former [Rossov] used the word “Jew”, the [1972 publication] used the word “Zionist”. (Tabarovsky 2022, 4)

Discussing the link between antisemitic antizionism and the legacy of classical right-wing antisemitism in Russia, Wistrich (2012, 434) noted that in Soviet propaganda the virulent antisemitism of the Russian masses in older times was depicted as an understandable reaction to the economic exploitation by Jews. Even “the monarchist pogromchiks who had mobilized the ultra-reactionary Black Hundreds around 1905 in defense of Tsarism, were now being rehabilitated as precursors of a

new and better socialist world” (Wistrich 2012, 434). Soviet mass media “openly embraced the language of the Protocols and did not shrink from Sturmer-like caricatures which had acquired free reign since 1967” (Wistrich, 2012, 438). Wistrich (2012) noted also the journal published by the Russian Embassy in Paris 1972 which:

contained extracts from a pamphlet originally published seventy years earlier by the antisemitic “Alliance of the Russian People”. The only significant divergence in the modernized Soviet version of Black Hundred antisemitism was the substitution of the code-word “Zionist” for “Jew”. The article consisted of largely fabricated quotations from Jewish religious writings. (Wistrich 2012, 434–35)

This pamphlet was what the defence had used in the Paris trial in 1973 when the French Communist publisher of the Embassy was found guilty of discrimination, hatred and racial violence (Wistrich 2012, 435).

The transfer of the core demonology of antisemitism to antizionism can be exemplified by a typical Nazi imagery of the Jew, an enormous spider with a star of David on his military hat, threatening innocent Soviet children beneath it (cf. Fig. 1). Even as it was endlessly repeated that this was not antisemitism, Soviet Jews were mercilessly persecuted (Tabarovsky 2022). Regrettably, however, also “contemporary left-wing antizionist discourse reproduces with stunning fidelity some of the central tropes of Soviet antizionist propaganda, which demonized Israel and Zionism” (Tabarovsky 2022, abstract).



Figure 1. The text on the spider's web reads "Zionism is a weapon for imperialism". The image was taken at the parade on 1 May 1972 in Moscow by Vladimir Sichov. Image source: Huttunen 2019. Image: Courtesy Vladimir Sichov, all rights reserved.

This antizionist narrative exemplifies what Deborah Lipstadt (1994) named a “soft” form of Holocaust denial, also called Holocaust inversion (Klaff 2014). Despite Jews clearly qualifying globally as a vulnerable minority, constituting 0.2 per cent of the world’s population, compared, for example, to Muslims at close to 30 per cent (Illouz 2025), Holocaust inversion implies a victim–perpetrator reversal, where Israel is perceived as just as bad as the Nazis and denied any victimhood while the Palestinians are the epitomized victims. As the senior researcher at the Norwegian Centre for Holocaust and Minority Studies Vibeke Moe (2025, 10) has noted, most Jews in Europe and scholars of antisemitism perceive similar analogies in connection with descriptions of Israel as expressions of Holocaust distortion and antisemitism.

The Professor of Social Psychology Michael Billig (1987) studied the discourse of the British far left in the late 1970s and early 1980s from a social psychological perspective. He noted that this narrative was “typical of the way the revolutionary left in general” wrote about Zionism:

Thus, comments about “genocidal suppression of Palestinians” and of the “Hitlerite policies of the Israeli Zionists” exemplify a more general trend in which the language used to describe Nazi crimes against Jews is now appropriated to describe Zionism. This is part of a general ideological process that is equating Zionism with Nazism. (Billig 1987, 125)

Billig found in these left-wing publications “themes that suggest that Jews are forever

complaining about non-existent persecutions” and “as with right-wing antisemitism, these themes are formulated against a background that assumes that the world would be a better place if the Jew were made impossible” (Billig 1987, 129). The historian Henrik Bachner (1999) found similar material in Sweden, noting that “the motif of ‘the Jew’ as Nazist and racist was linked to and co-existed with more traditional perceptions of Jewish vengefulness, ‘Old Testament’ cruelty and the ‘chosen people’s’ evil, murderousness, and dreams of domination and supremacy” (Bachner 1999, 473).

The Marxist Professor of History Moishe Postone (2010) disentangled different historical currents of antizionism, some virulently antisemitic, others not. The latter included Jewish Communists who considered “any expression of Jewish identity as anathema to their own notions of what I would call abstract Enlightenment notions of humanity”. Postone noted that “Trotsky, in an earlier phase, referred to the Bund [the Jewish Socialist Party] as ‘sea-sick Zionists’”, rejecting any form of Jewish communal self-identification. This “critique of Zionism [...] had nothing to do with Palestine or the situation of the Palestinians, since the Bund was focused entirely on autonomy within the Russian empire and rejected Zionism”. Postone added, however, that “frequently, this form of anti-Zionism is inconsistent—it is willing to accord national self-determination to most peoples, but not to Jews” (Postone 2010).

Another version, in turn, aimed “to eradicate actually existing Jewish self-determination. It converges with some forms of Arab nationalism—now coded

as singularly progressive” (Postone 2010). Postone calls it “deeply antisemitic”, noting that it was “introduced by the Soviet Union, particularly in the show trials in Eastern Europe after World War Two”. “Because the Soviet Union could not officially use the language of antisemitism”, he notes, “they began to use the word ‘Zionist’ to mean exactly what anti-Semites mean when they speak of Jews.” Postone was clear about the roots of this antisemitic antizionism: “The idea that every nation other than the Jews should be allowed self-determination does come back to the Soviet Union. One has only to read Stalin on the nationalities question” (Postone 2010).

More recently, the Moroccan-born French, Professor of Sociology Eva Illouz has found that “two key tropes of traditional antisemitism ‘happen’ to be the same as the ones bestowed on Zionists and Zionism: tentacular destructive power and malevolent scheming to evade accountability. These two key antisemitic motifs have been cut from antisemitism and pasted onto Zionism” (Illouz 2025). In addition, she identifies the cultural roots of these tropes:

There is a semantic continuity between the ways in which Jews were vilified in a Christian world which associated them with deicide, the spilling of Gentile blood—especially children, and ritual murder, and the view of Israel as uniquely destructive and criminal. A secular ideology whose aim was to restore dignity and independence to the Jews has been singled out as the bearer of a radical guilt and evil as no other. No sloganeering will manage to hide the obvious: antisem-

itism gives anti-Zionism its fuel and passion, its semantics and archetypes. If 'woke' ideology has marked a moral progress, it is precisely in making us aware that misogyny, homophobia, and racism have deep structures. If it is true for these, it is no less true of antisemitism. (Illouz 2025)

With its roots in the antizionist propaganda of the Soviet Union contemporary antisemitism utilizes antisemitism's culturally transmitted core demonology and is now so normalized throughout the political spectrum that it has become invisible (Herf 2024). The core demonology of antisemitism in all the "melodies" played on the antisemitism "piano" over time can be illustrated by one typical subhuman, i.e. dehumanizing, symbol of the collective Jew, the spider (cf. Figs. 2.1–2.4). Antizionism becomes antisemitic when the Zionism or Zionists it addresses share characteristics with imagined Judaism or Jews and/or when only Jews are denied self-governance in a state of their own.

Research confirms that the antisemitism of contemporary antizionist discourse demonizes all Jews (e.g. Allington et al. 2023). Moe (2025) found that high dislike of Jews among Norwegians increased from 4.2 per cent in 2022 to 8.6 per cent in 2024 (Moe 2025). In addition, she notes that no sudden decrease of knowledge of history can explain the simultaneous significant increase (from 33 per cent in 2022 to 51 per cent in 2024) in support for the statement "Israel treats Palestinians as badly as the Jews were treated during World War II", and that it rather reflects "a widespread Israel-critical opinion and massive media coverage of the war in Gaza and suffering

of its civilian population", indicating "a lack of understanding of and sensitivity to Holocaust distortion, and a public debate in which the threshold for making extremely negative statements about Israel appears to be lower than before" (Moe 2025, 10).

Also ECRI (the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance at the Council of Europe) has observed that an increase of antisemitism in many member states "is also characterized by contemporary forms of antisemitism and by the spread of antisemitic hatred online" and that its "manifestations have also closely followed contemporary world developments" (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance 2021, 3–4).

The Professor of Linguistics Georges-Elia Sarfati (2004) noted that this demonization has been so often repeated that it can be used autonomously, i.e. the content no longer needs to be verified. Thus, one only needs to be, for instance, against Nazism (and who is not?) to be an antizionist. These pseudo-equations and pseudo-equivalences justify every initiative hostile to Zionism, framing it into an act of progressiveness and humanism. Ironically, Europe supplied all that it now reproaches in Zionism: Nazism, totalitarianism, racism and colonialism. Linguistically, this is a "displacement", psychologically, it is "projection". Europe's historical traumas are redirected towards the only Jewish state. Theologically, this recalls the scapegoat mechanism; loaded with everybody's sins the scapegoat was expelled (Sarfati 2004).

Research across history, philosophy, theology, linguistics, semiotics, literature, law, political science, sociology, psychology and social psychology converges. Empirical evidence shows that, individually, traditional



Figure 2.1. Title page from the French version of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, 1921. Image source: Tabarovsky 2019. All rights reserved.

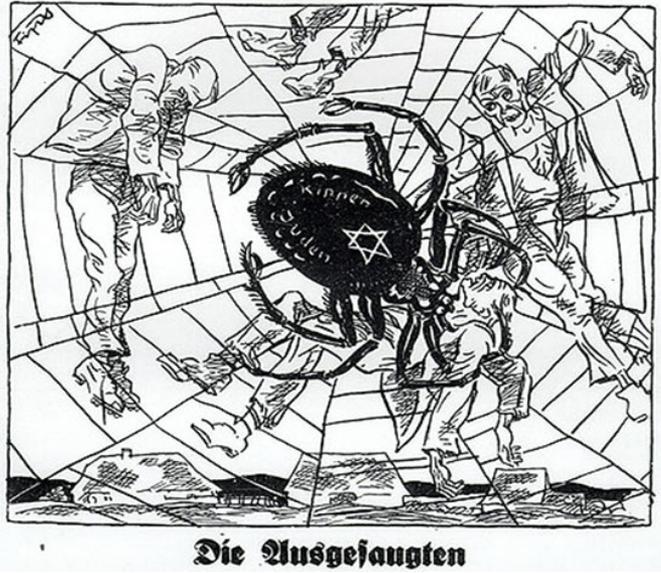


Figure 2.2. German cartoon, *Der Stürmer*, February 1930. Image source: the German Propaganda Archive, published with permission from the page copyright holder Randall Bytwerk. All rights reserved.

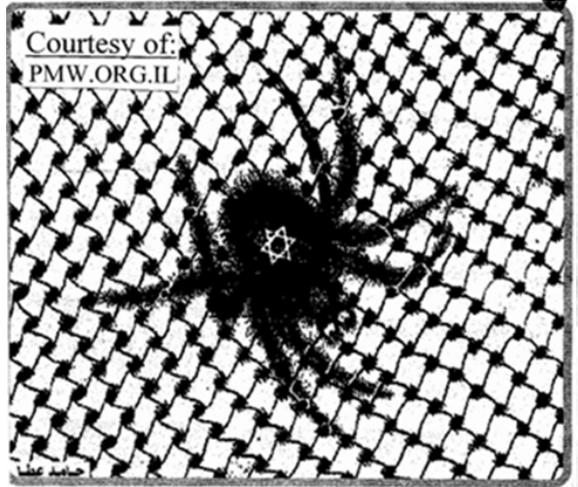


Figure 2.4. Official Palestinian Authority daily *Al-Hayat Al-Jadida*, 21 October 2001 as reprinted in *Kill a Jew—Go to Heaven* by Palestinian Media Watch (PMW), 2005. Reproduced with permission from PMW. All rights reserved.

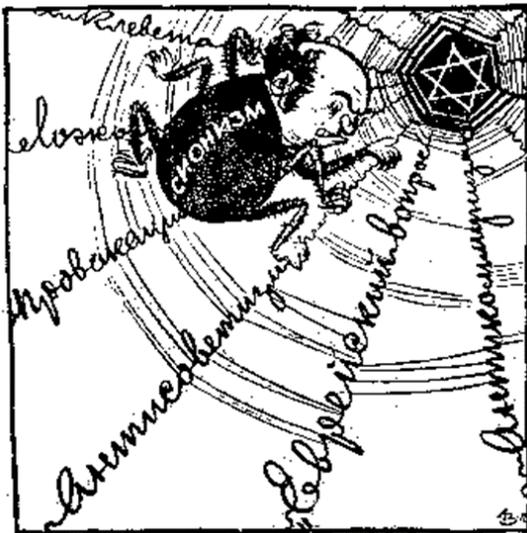


Figure 2.3. "At his favorite work", A. Zenin, *Sovietskaya Moldavia*, 29 August 1971. The cartoon is titled *A Zionist Cobweb Spider*. Image source: *The Israeli-Arab Conflict in Soviet Caricatures, 1967-73* by Yeshayahu Nir, Tcherikover Publishers, 1976. All rights reserved.

Figure 2.1-2.4. The spider as a metaphor of the core demonology of antisemitism.

Jew-hatred strongly correlates in Europe with criticism against Israel (Kaplan and Small 2006). A recent large-scale study finds some differences between individual predictors of “old” and “new” (antizionist) antisemitic attitudes, but both are predicted, at least in the UK, by ethnicity, conspiracist worldviews, a desire to overturn the social order, and a preference for authoritarian government—all of which can be found on the right, the left and elsewhere (Allington et al. 2023).

More research on antisemitism is needed to acknowledge common features of all variants and to curb their increase

As shown above, Jews have repeatedly failed in their identity negotiations with religious and secular outgroups. The Italian Professor of Semiotics Ugo Volli (2016) discussed conspiracist antisemitism in Antiquity and asked: “Why the Jews?”. His reply falls back on social psychology:

Jews are a small group, often dispersed among another people, but able to maintain its different identity, language, religion, habits. So they are perceived as different and secret. But they are also among “us”, indistinguishable from “us”, behaving mostly like “us”, speaking “our” language etc. while keeping different, following a different religion and different habits and laws, eating other foods etc. In the antisemitic discourse they have collective goals that are theirs, not ours, and therefore must (or just could) be evil. They can become a danger [...] This idea of the Jewish conspiracy is very old and widespread. (Volli 2016)

The process of antisemitic othering is conspiracist in nature and creates the imagined Jew. Intergroup beliefs and emotions are socially constructed and embedded in the language of ideologies and worldviews (Billig 2002). Prejudice includes the emotion conveyed by discourse, producing hate speech. Group norms dictate the limits of prejudice expression—whether it is allowed or necessary to despise, discriminate, hate or eliminate “them”. Norms define the politically correct forms of antisemitism; genocide becomes possible only with sufficient ideological importance, emotional investment and legitimizing norms.

Currently, right-wing, left-wing and Islamist antisemitism are interconnected, yet this is rarely addressed (Herf 2024, 237). Herf explains this with the polarization of politics, intellectual life, and scholarship; rightists condemn leftist antisemitism but ignore their own, while leftists condemn rightist antisemitism, yet deny their own and are reluctant to condemn Islamist antisemitism for fear of being labelled “Islamophobes” (Herf 2024, 237). This may be yet another effect of the need for positive distinctiveness discussed in the section on the cultural roots and core demonology of antisemitism: to maintain self-esteem, we compare also our political ingroups with outgroups to acquire positive distinctiveness (Tajfel and Turner 1986; Helkama et al. 2017). Herf (2024) shows his high-level scholarship by analysing all three variants with equal critical rigour.

However, the normalization of the latest variant of antisemitism has led to a striking scarcity of serious research on its contemporary variant. Schraub (2019) has noted that:

there is a consistent worry felt among many Jews—progressive Jews included—that left-wing critics deprioritize the fight against antisemitism, viewing it as a marginal issue, a distraction from more immediate concerns, or a fight that (but for a few stray cranks) has already been won. This fear is exacerbated by noticeable lacuna surrounding antisemitism in progressive scholarship about contemporary issues of discrimination, oppression, and identity-based marginalization. Vigorous theoretical accounts of how antisemitism currently manifests in Western societies lag behind the excellent work focused on other oppressions. [...] Yet the theoretical gap in intersectionality analyses largely overlooking the Jews is not fully accidental. Specifically, the association of Jews with power as an anti-semitic trope functions to classify Jews not just as “White”, but as exemplifying or embodying Whiteness. Insofar as Jewishness is not understood as existing as a materially distinct category from Whiteness, the failure to consider Jews as a case of a marginalized identity is not intuitively felt as an absence. (Schraub 2019, 382, 384)

The philosopher and sociologist Balász Berkovits (2018) considers it detrimental to serious research on antisemitism when Whiteness studies which represent more antizionist activism than academic research is given academic credibility:

there is an extreme variability in the characterization of “Jewish whiteness”, “Jewish hegemony and suprem-

acism”, “Zionist racism and colonialism”, and so on. Most of the time, these interpretations are contradicting one another. Still, there is a unanimous intention of radical criticism, and total political agreement on the evaluation of Zionism, Israel, and Jews in the Middle East. A furtive look into these texts would be sufficient to conclude that whenever it comes to Israel, political criticism fully subordinates any interpretation [...] in these works, the arbitrary usage of the concept of “whiteness” becomes even more conspicuous than in Whiteness Studies proper, as it encompasses an increasingly diverse set of phenomena. However, this fact does not bother totalizing critics emboldened by their academic prestige. (Berkovits 2018, 101)

As in the nineteenth century, academia of today misuses terms to demonize the collective Jew, “genocide” used in Holocaust inversion being only one of them (Klaff 2014). Apart from Schraub (2019), the historian Simon Sebag Montefiore (2023) has also noted misapplication of the antiracist paradigms drawn from accounts of the American Black/White experience to the history and society of modern Israel and of terms like imperialism and colonialism by those forced by that frame to squeeze Israel and Palestine into a wholly inappropriate colonialist mould (Montefiore 2023).

Obviously, Israel can (or should) be criticized like any other country and even accused of genocide, as long as this is done on the basis of impartially established facts and by applying existing definitions of the term, just as they have been applied to

other countries. The Professor of Holocaust Studies Norman J. W. Goda (2025) shows how the term genocide has been applied to Israel since its establishment, noting a double standard, “an effort to redefine genocide itself so that the constitutive elements of the crime itself are lowered” (Goda 2025, 4) and that

the genocide libel also deploys a range of antisemitic tropes. One is the linkage of genocide to violent passages in the Hebrew Bible, a linkage which plays on the theme of Jewish chosenness at the expense of others’ existence and which even claims that God is genocidal. Another is the whitewashing of Hamas’s own genocidal intent in lieu of tropes concerning the out-sized Jewish thirst for vengeance in the form of disproportionate response. A third is the coupling of the genocide charge with the deliberate killing of children, images of whom are ubiquitous on NGO, social media, and other platforms that charge Israel with genocide. A fourth is the attribution of special powers to the Israeli government by which it and its supporters have fooled western governments into believing that Israel’s actions are legitimate and that the history of the Israel-Arab conflict is too complex for snap judgments. A fifth, and this is what makes the genocide libel particularly dangerous, is the association of all Jews with the crime. Jews worldwide are all in on it, either as Zionist enablers, as dishonest back-room lobbyists, or as community leaders who, we are told, “weaponize” the charge of antisemitism to silence the truth-

tellers. Other genocide charges over time have not targeted Hutus living in Belgium or Serbs living in Germany. (Goda 2025, 4–5)

Linguistic “innovation” has always been central in the rehabilitation of Jew-hatred. Illouz calls for overcoming the denial of the antisemitism in its most recent form:

transcendental anti-Zionism is deeply offensive to many or most Jews and does not serve the Palestinian cause. It prevents us from achieving the urgent tasks ahead: stop Israel’s reckless destruction of Gaza, rebuild the Strip, give a humane future to Palestinians and create durable regional peace, and ensure a future Gazan leadership without genocidal aspirations against Israel. As long as our language is contaminated by antisemitism, and as long as anti-Zionism continues to perniciously conflate critique of Israel with its demonization, we can only drift further away from these goals. (Illouz 2025)

Illouz notes aptly that the progressive Left has traditionally relied on members of minority groups to decide whether or not “a word, behaviour, or idea is discriminatory, sexist, racist or Islamophobic” because, “if discrimination or racial hatred profits one group to the detriment of another, we cannot let the profiting group judge how harmful its own behaviour is” (Illouz 2025). This is an accepted principle for all other minorities, but Jews are an exception; their experiences of antisemitism are *a priori* interpreted as false, in accordance with the mendacity libel identified by Julius

(2024) and with epistemic antisemitism as described by Schraub (2022; see also the section on the cultural roots and core demonology of antisemitism).

Where, and as long as a new variety of antisemitism, the contemporary “imagined Jew”, is politically correct in accordance with prevailing norms and values, we are inclined to deny it in ourselves, although recognizing it in others. Research on antisemitism has increased also in progressive scholarship since the noticeable lacuna (Schraub 2019) but still must increase to cover applied studies aimed at finding remedies for it, i.e. research which has long existed for other forms of racism (cf. e.g. Liebkind et al. 2014). There is an obvious need to prevent a contemporary, politically correct version of antisemitism from accomplishing the aim of, to paraphrase Billig (1987) have the (collective) Jew made impossible.

Conclusions

Through examining inter-group relations and social identity dynamics in relation to the historical evolution of antisemitic narratives, key insights emerge that warrant reflection and further scholarly engagement.

First, this work shows that antisemitism is rooted in intergroup and identity processes. Seen through key theories in social psychology, the portrayal of Jews as an outgroup threat based on some dimension of self-recognized Jewish identity has evolved across centuries while maintaining core psychological structures; conspiratorial thinking, threat perception and core demonology remain consistent in driving this prejudice regardless of historical period or political context. Shifting

manifestations of antisemitism, from medieval blood libels to contemporary claims of global Jewish or “Zionist” influence and the double standards applied when criticizing Israel, demonstrate the adaptation of its core demonology to new social and political circumstances.

Second, the multi-dimensional character and linguistic variety of contemporary antisemitism encompassing Rightist, Leftist and Islamist variants indicates the complexity of addressing this prejudice. Recognizing their shared characteristics offers a more coherent analytical framework and enables scholars and practitioners to identify potential intervention points across seemingly disparate contexts.

Lastly, this work highlights a critical gap in contemporary research: while significant scholarship examines how antisemitism manifests and transforms, further research is needed into mitigation strategies and the societal factors that either facilitate or inhibit its spread. Future scholarship should combine analytical clarity with empirical investigation of which interventions can effectively address the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral components of antisemitism, particularly as digital communication platforms facilitate the rapid dissemination and radicalization of antisemitic narratives.

Moving forward, fostering cross-disciplinary dialogue remains essential. Integrating insights from social psychology with historical, political and cultural analysis offers promising avenues for developing more comprehensive understandings of antisemitism and more effective strategies for addressing this persistent form of hatred. ■

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