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**ANTISEMITIZMI NË GJERMANI PËR LUFTËS SË DYTË
BOTËRORE**

**АНТИСЕМИТИЗМОТ ВО ГЕРМАНИЈА ПРЕД ВТОРАТА
СВЕТСКА ВОЈНА**

ANTISEMITISM IN GERMANY BEFORE THE WORLD WAR TWO

Abstract

This paper explores the development and intensification of antisemitism in Germany before the outbreak of World War II, with a particular focus on the years of Nazi rule from 1933 to 1939. While antisemitism had deep roots in European history, the rise of the Nazi Party under Adolf Hitler transformed these prejudices into a state ideology grounded in racial pseudoscience and nationalist fervour. Jews were no longer viewed merely as a religious group but were redefined as a racial threat to the German *Volks-gemeinschaft* (people's community), accused of undermining the nation through both capitalism and communism.

Through an analysis of Nazi ideology, legislation, and propaganda, this study illustrates how antisemitism became institutionalized in German society. Laws such as the Nuremberg Laws and the Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring stripped Jews of citizenship, outlawed intermarriage, and justified the sterilization of those deemed "genetically unfit." These legal frameworks laid the groundwork for broader exclusion and persecution.

The paper also examines the role of propaganda in reshaping public opinion, highlighting how newspapers, films, and public messaging portrayed Jews as dangerous and alien. This atmosphere of normalized hatred

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culminated in the *Kristallnacht* pogrom of 1938, marking a violent turning point in Nazi antisemitic policy.

By investigating the mechanisms and motivations behind antisemitism in pre-war Nazi Germany, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of how systemic hatred can evolve into widespread social and political exclusion, even before the onset of mass violence and genocide.

Keywords: *Antisemitism, Jews, Holocaust, Nazism, Germany*

1. Introduction

Antisemitism represents one of the darkest and most troubling phenomena in European history, with 1930s Germany serving as one of the most dramatic stages for its manifestation. During the period leading to the World War II, antisemitism escalated to unprecedented levels, becoming institutionalized and permeating every aspect of public and private life. This paper aims to examine the roots and development of antisemitism in Germany by analysing the historical, political, economic, and ideological factors that contributed to this phenomenon. Between the two World Wars, antisemitism appeared in various forms, with tragic consequences for European Jews. During this period, Germany experienced a rise in antisemitic organizations and movements that spread conspiracy theories about the “Jewish threat” to society and the economy. By 1933, after Hitler came to power, antisemitism was embedded into state policy, culminating in the enactment of the Nuremberg Laws in 1935, which excluded Jews from citizenship and public life. This historical account will help understand how racist and discriminatory ideologies laid the groundwork for the Holocaust.

When analysing the historical, ideological, and social factors that contributed to the spread of antisemitism in Germany before the World War II, the paper will first look into the historical context of antisemitism in Europe and Germany over the past centuries, in order to understand the foundations of this phenomenon. Then, it will analyse the impact of social and economic changes during the period of industrialization and urbanization in Germany, emphasizing how these transformations created a favourable environment for nurturing antisemitic narratives. Next, the paper will focus on the role of nationalist and racist ideologies that dominated the political and cultural discourse of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In this context, special attention will be given to the impact of political antisemitism in the years of the Weimar Republic and the preparation of the ground for the rise of Nazi ideology.

The structure of the paper is divided into several main sections. After this introductory section, the next one will provide a brief overview of the

historical background on the rise of antisemitism in Europe, focusing on the period following the Industrial Revolution. Then, it will shift focus to 19th and early 20th-century Germany, analysing the economic and political factors driving hatred against Jews. The core section will examine nationalist and racist ideologies, including theories of social Darwinism and antisemitism as an integral part of Nazi ideology. Finally, the paper will conclude with reflections on how these ideologies shaped German society and contributed to the Holocaust.

2. Historical background on the rise of antisemitism in Europe and Germany

Historically, antisemitism was recognizable as something targeting Jewish people and/or the Jewish religion. Though the term antisemitism is used to apply to Jewish people, it is technically a misnomer, because Semite is not synonymous with Jew, but it refers to anyone who speaks a Semitic language, including Arabic, Hebrew, Aramaic, and other languages from the Middle East and Northern Africa.² Though it is nowadays applied to acts that occurred over centuries, the actual term antisemitism first emerged in late-19th-century Germany. The term antisemitismus in its original German was used and popularized by a German nationalist, racist, atheist, and violently anti-Jewish journalist by the name of Wilhelm Marr around 1879. He was looking for a pseudo-scientific term (with an “ism”) to replace “Jew-hatred” (*Judenhass* in German), and similar terminology in different European languages.³ Today, according to the official definition adopted in 2016, by the 31 member states of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), “antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward or about Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.”⁴

The rise of antisemitism in Europe is closely linked with the period following the Industrial Revolution due to significant social and economic transformations that fuelled longstanding prejudices against Jewish communities. During the 19th century, the rapid industrialization and modernization of Europe created new social dynamics and tensions, which, combined with pre-existing religious and cultural biases, led to a surge in antisemitism across the continent. The Industrial Revolution brought about profound economic

² Mark Weitzman, Robert J. Williams, and James Wald eds., “The Routledge history of antisemitism,” Routledge, New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2024, p. xiii.

³ Ibid.

⁴ The same definition is also referenced by the U.S. State Department and the United Nations; see Center for Interreligious Understanding, “Anti-Semitism – What, Where *and* Why?,” Tanenbaum: Combating Religious Prejudice, New York, 2021, p. 1.

changes, including urbanization and the rise of capitalist economies, which intensified competition and social inequalities. Jewish communities, often visible as successful traders, bankers, and professionals, became targets of envy and resentment.⁵ Antisemitic stereotypes that portrayed Jews as greedy, manipulative, or economically exploitative gained traction, especially during periods of economic crisis, such as the depressions of the late 19th century. Simultaneously, the spread of nationalist ideologies emphasized ethnic homogeneity and cultural purity, often portraying Jews as “outsiders” who could not assimilate into the national identity. All these elements laid the groundwork for more systemic and institutionalized forms of antisemitism, across the Europe.⁶

In Russia, although most Jews themselves were extremely poor, they were blamed for all the problems of the Russian peasantry. Pogroms were instigated by the czarist secret police in part to deflect the anger of the citizens from the regime. For instance, in 1903 in Russia, czarist secret police published a forged collection of documents that became known as “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion”. These documents described a secret plot by rabbis to take over the world. On the other hand, after Russia’s loss in the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, the government blamed Jews for the defeat and incited a bloody pogrom in Kishinev. Moreover, after the October Revolution, between 1917 and 1921, more than 500 Jewish communities in the Ukraine were wiped out in pogroms resulting in about 60,000 Jewish men, women and children being murdered.⁷ Similarly, in Poland the leader of the so-called “National Democratic” movement Roman Dmowski was the founding father of modern-day Polish antisemitism and a lifelong vocal opponent of minority rights in Polish society. He emphasized Roman Catholicism as a central element of Polish national identity, thus excluding Jews from the Polish nation.⁸ Perhaps the most drastic case of antisemitism was “The Dreyfus Affair” - a political and criminal justice scandal in France that went from 1894 to 1906. In 1894, the French artillery officer Alfred Dreyfus, of Jewish descent, was convicted of selling military secrets to the Germans and was sentenced to life in prison. New evidence arose in 1896 according to which a French Army major named Ferdinand Walsin Esterhazy was the one responsible for Dreyfus’ alleged crimes. Nevertheless, the second trial was granted to Dreyfus only in 1899, and divided French society between pro-Republican and anticlerical supporters of Dreyfus, and a pro-Army, mostly Catholic group

⁵ For more details about the impact of industrialization on antisemitic sentiments see Bernard Lazare, *Antisemitism, Its History and Causes*, New York: The International Library Publishing Co., 1903, p. 208.

⁶ William I. Brustein and Ryan D. King. “Anti-Semitism in Europe Before the Holocaust,” *International Political Science Review* (2004), Vol 25, No. 1, p. 38.

⁷ Anti-Defamation League, “A Brief History of Antisemitism,” *Grosfeld Family National Youth Leadership Mission Guide*, New York, 2018, pp. 3-4.

⁸ Weitzman, Williams Wald, 2024, p. 190.

who maintained he was guilty. Finally, in 1906 Dreyfus was declared innocent and was reinstated to the French army. Still, his case remained a notable example of antisemitism in the criminal justice system, showing how the press and public opinion can potentially manipulate a criminal case.⁹

Similarly to other parts of Europe, Industrial Revolution also greatly contributed to the rise of antisemitism in Germany. One of the most significant consequences of industrialization was the rise of capitalist enterprise and financial institutions, where Jews were often disproportionately represented due to historical restrictions on land ownership and craft guilds.¹⁰ Many Jewish families turned to trade, finance, and commerce, leading to the perception that they controlled economic power. In an era of growing economic inequality, struggling workers, small business owners, and members of the aristocracy alike increasingly blamed Jews for their misfortunes, perpetuating the myth of Jewish financial dominance.¹¹ On the other hand, the rise of the press and printed antisemitic propaganda further fuelled these beliefs, as newspapers and pamphlets spread the idea that Jewish financiers were behind economic crises and social instability.¹² Undoubtedly, rapid urbanization further exacerbated these tensions. Mass migration to cities disrupted traditional rural communities and led to a sense of alienation among many Germans. As cities expanded, they became centres of economic opportunity but also of stark class divisions and labour unrest. Jews, often seen as successful urban dwellers, became easy targets for resentment, particularly among those who viewed industrialization as a force eroding traditional values and social hierarchies.¹³ The influx of rural migrants into urban areas also created competition for jobs and housing, leading to frustration that was frequently directed at Jewish populations who were perceived as economic competitors.¹⁴

On the other hand, the unification of Germany in 1871 also played an important role by fostering a strong sense of ethnic nationalism. Political movements, such as those led by figures like Adolf Stoecker and Wilhelm Marr, propagated modern antisemitic ideologies, which combined traditional Christian anti-Judaism with new racial theories.¹⁵ The development of

⁹ Library of Congress, "Dreyfus Affair: Topics in Chronicling America," Research Guides, Newspapers & Current Periodicals, 2025; <https://guides.loc.gov/chronicling-america-dreyfus-affair>.

¹⁰ George L. Mosse. *Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism*. University of Wisconsin Press, 2020, p. 64.

¹¹ Pulzer, 1979, p. 78.

¹² Shulamit Volkov. *Germans, Jews, and Antisemites: Trials of Emancipation*. Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 2.

¹³ Pulzer, 1979, p. 20.

¹⁴ Volkov, 2006, p. 29.

¹⁵ For more details see John D. Klier, "German Antisemitism and Russian Judeophobia in the 1880's: Brothers and Strangers," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, Neue Folge, Bd. 37, H. 4, 1989, pp. 524-540.

pseudoscientific theories, including Social Darwinism, further exacerbated antisemitism by providing a supposedly scientific basis for racial hierarchies. Jews were depicted as biologically inferior and as a threat to the “purity” of the dominant races.¹⁶ These ideas laid the groundwork for more systemic and institutionalized forms of antisemitism, culminating in discriminatory legislation and policies, such as those seen later in Nazi Germany. This historical context shows how a combination of economic anxieties, nationalist fervour, and pseudoscientific racism transformed antisemitism from a primarily religious prejudice into a broader social and political phenomenon, setting the stage for the extreme persecution and atrocities of the 20th century.

3. Nationalist and racist ideologies in Germany

As already mentioned, during the 19th and early 20th centuries, the period of industrialization and urbanization in Germany profoundly influenced social and economic structures, creating conditions that fostered antisemitic narratives. The rapid transformation of society due to technological advancements, economic upheavals, and shifting demographics intensified anxieties among segments of the population, particularly those who perceived themselves as being left behind. These changes contributed to the growth of antisemitism by reinforcing stereotypes and scapegoating Jewish communities as symbols of unwanted modernization and capitalist exploitation.¹⁷ Consequently, it was in the 19th and early 20th centuries that nationalism and racism became two of the main pillars of antisemitism in Germany. These ideologies intertwined and were institutionalized to create an environment where Jews were targeted as internal enemies and blamed for the social, political, and economic problems of the time. It is worth noting that German nationalism in the 19th century emerged in a context where nation-states were consolidating, and national unity was closely tied to ethnic and cultural belonging. The concept of “Volksgemeinschaft” (people’s community) emphasized a shared national identity that excluded those considered outsiders, such as Jews.¹⁸ By the early 20th century, German nationalism had become increasingly racialized, influenced by pseudo-scientific racial theories that classified Jews as an alien and inferior race. Thinkers such as Houston Stewart Chamberlain and the völkisch movement propagated the idea that Germany’s future depended on racial purity, and Jews were framed as a biological threat to the nation.¹⁹

¹⁶ William F. Meinecke Jr. et al., *Nazi ideology and the Holocaust*. Unites States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2007, p. 90.

¹⁷ For a detailed explanation of the impact of industrialization on the rise of antisemitism in Germany see Peter Pulzer. *The Rise of Political Antisemitism in Germany & Austria*. Harvard University Press, 1979.

¹⁸ Meinecke Jr. Et al., 2007, p. 75.

¹⁹ Mosse, 2020, p. 94.

The Weimar Republic's relative openness toward Jewish participation in politics, business, and culture was perceived by nationalists as evidence of Jewish control, further fuelling exclusionary and racist ideologies.²⁰ As a result, despite their efforts to integrate, Jews were often portrayed as foreign elements that did not belong to the German national identity.

The aftermath of World War I created fertile ground for the intensification of antisemitism in Germany. Defeat in the war, economic collapse, and political instability fuelled nationalist and racist ideologies, which increasingly blamed Jews for Germany's misfortunes. German nationalism, infused with racial theories, sought to redefine the nation in exclusionary terms, portraying Jews as outsiders and enemies of the state. One of the most significant factors that further contributed to the rise of postwar antisemitism was the 'stab-in-the-back' myth (*Dolchstoßlegende*), which claimed that Germany had not been militarily defeated on the battlefield but was instead betrayed from within by socialists, communists, and, most notably, Jews. Promoted by military and nationalist elites, this conspiracy theory provided a convenient scapegoat for the war's outcome and undermined the legitimacy of the Weimar Republic, which was often denounced as a 'Jewish democracy'.²¹ Moreover, Jews were also accused as foreign agents who tried to import communism from the Soviet Union into a chaotic and vulnerable postwar Europe.²² The economic devastation that followed World War I, particularly the hyperinflation of 1923 and the Great Depression of 1929, have also intensified antisemitic narratives. Many Germans, desperate to explain their suffering, turned to long-standing antisemitic stereotypes that associated Jews with financial manipulation and economic exploitation. Jewish bankers, business owners, and intellectuals were depicted as profiteers who thrived while ordinary Germans suffered.²³ This resentment was later on exploited by nationalist parties, including the Nazis, who framed the economic crisis as part of a Jewish conspiracy against Germany. Clearly, all factors mentioned above have created a fertile ground for the spread of a number of pseudoscientific theories in Germany that significantly influenced its political, social, and racial ideologies.

These theories, which falsely applied Charles Darwin's concept of natural selection to human societies, played a critical role in shaping nationalist, eugenic, and racial policies that ultimately contributed to the radicalization of antisemitism and the horrors of the Holocaust. Social Darwinism in Germany was based on the belief that human societies evolved through a

²⁰ Volkov, 2006, p. 86.

²¹ Madeline Dixon. "The Weimar Republic and the War of Memory." *SMU Journal of Undergraduate Research*, Vol. 6, Issue 2, 2021, p. 9.

²² Mosse, 2020, p. xviii.

²³ Gerald D. Feldman. *The Great Disorder: Politics, Economics, and Society in the German Inflation, 1914-1924*. Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 555.

struggle for survival, where the strongest and most 'racially pure' groups would dominate weaker ones. This ideology was championed by thinkers such as Houston Stewart Chamberlain and Alfred Ploetz, who argued that the Aryan race was superior and that racial purity was necessary for the advancement of civilization.²⁴ During the interwar period, these ideas became deeply embedded in German nationalist thought. The Treaty of Versailles (1919), which imposed severe economic and territorial restrictions on Germany, fuelled resentment and reinforced the belief that Germany needed to regain its strength through racial and nationalistic unity. Social Darwinist rhetoric was used to justify expansionist policies and the exclusion of groups deemed 'undesirable,' particularly Jews, Slavs, and the disabled.²⁵

Undoubtedly, such pseudoscientific theories in Germany during the inter-war period have increasingly portrayed Jews as an inferior and dangerous race rather than merely a religious group. This shift from religious antisemitism to racial antisemitism was influenced by thinkers such as Arthur de Gobineau, who argued that Jewish people were biologically predisposed to subversion and corruption. The widespread belief in these racial theories legitimized discriminatory laws and further fuelled public support for anti-Jewish policies.²⁶

The institutionalization and radicalization of antisemitism in Germany reached its peak during the Nazi regime between 1933 and 1945. Rooted in centuries-old prejudices, antisemitism under Adolf Hitler's leadership became a core ideological and policy-driven element of the Third Reich. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler depicted Jews as responsible for Germany's defeat in World War I and as the driving force behind both communism and capitalism - two ideologies he claimed were designed to weaken the German nation.²⁷ The Nazis adopted a racial definition of Jewish identity, moving beyond religious discrimination and framing Jews as an inherently dangerous and inferior race that threatened the purity of the German people's community.²⁸ Consequently, upon seizing power in 1933, the Nazi government swiftly implemented legal measures to entirely exclude Jews from public life. A key element of such institutionalized antisemitism was the enactment of the Nuremberg Laws in 1935. The Nuremberg Laws consisted of two main acts: the "Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honor" and the "Reich Citizenship Law."

²⁴ Meinecke Jr. Et al., 2007, p. 11.

²⁵ Mosse, 2020, p. 15.

²⁶ Pulzer, 1979, p. 18.

²⁷ For a detailed explanation of Hitler's views on Jews and antisemitism see Adolf Hitler. *Mein Kampf* (in English), Hijejglobal, 2017.

²⁸ Saul Friedländer. *Nazi Germany and the Jews, Volume I: The Years of Persecution, 1933-1939*. HarperCollins, 1997, p. 44.

These laws established clear distinctions between Jews and non-Jews, effectively determining who was entitled to the protection of the German state and who was not. According to the Reich Citizenship Law granted citizenship exclusively to individuals of “German or kindred blood,” reducing German Jews to mere subjects of the state. The Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honor on the other hand, went on to legalize the segregation of Jewish and non-Jewish Germans by banning intermarriage and redefining sexual relations between them as “racial defilement,” a crime that could be prosecuted.²⁹ These laws were not only a legal framework for discrimination, but also served to legitimize and normalize antisemitic attitudes within the broader society. The ramifications of these laws were profound, as they facilitated the systematic disfranchisement of Jews and laid the groundwork for more extreme measures that would follow. They reinforced the racial ideology that sought to isolate Jews and paved the way for their systematic removal from German society.³⁰ The Nuremberg Laws were supported by intensive propaganda campaigns aimed at emphasizing the “Jewish threat” to the German people. The Ministry of Propaganda, led by Joseph Goebbels, exploited different forms of media such as posters, films and public speeches to demonize Jews and propagate the myth of an international Jewish conspiracy. Through these means, antisemitism was normalized to the extent that much of the German population either embraced or tolerated it without opposition. Such gradual erosion of rights was accompanied by a campaign of violence, culminating with the infamous Kristallnacht in 1938.

The *Kristallnacht* pogrom known as the “Night of Broken Glass”, happened on November 9 - 10, 1938 when Nazi-led mobs destroyed thousands of Jewish businesses, synagogues, and homes, killing nearly 100 Jews and arresting approximately 30,000.³¹ The attack was framed as a spontaneous public outcry but was, in fact, orchestrated by Nazi officials in response to the assassination of German diplomat Ernst von Rath by a Jewish teenager in Paris.³² After the immense destruction, the 30,000 arrested Jews were taken to the Dachau or Sachsenhausen concentration camps.³³ The Kristallnacht must be seen in the context of the first large wave of arrests of Jews and their transfer to the camps. Most Jews arrested belonged to the wealthier classes, and if they could show emigration papers they were released. While the majority of Jews left the camps this time, a precedent had been set as part of the open war against Jews.³⁴

²⁹ Meinecke, 2007, p. 118.

³⁰ Mosse, 2020, p. 189.

³¹ Wolfgang Benz, W. (2009). *A Concise History of the Third Reich*. (English Translation), University of California Press, 2006, p. 146.

³² Alan Steinweis. “A German Pogrom: The Kristallnacht in History and Memory,” The Ninth University of Glasgow Holocaust Memorial Lecture, 26 January 2009, p. 2.

³³ Lionel Kochan, *Pogrom 10 November 1939*, London, A. Deutsch, 1957, p. 76.

³⁴ Mosse, 2020, p. 192.

Kristallnacht clearly marked a transition from economic and social oppression to open violence, signalling the beginning of more systematic persecution.

An important and radical legislative piece that clearly reflected Nazi racial ideology and their plan for physical extermination of the Jewish population was the “Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring,” enacted on July 14, 1933. This law mandated the compulsory sterilization of individuals deemed to have genetic illnesses, such as schizophrenia, epilepsy, and hereditary blindness or deafness. The law aimed to eliminate perceived biological threats to the health of the German population and served as a cornerstone of the Nazi eugenics program. Approximately 400,000 people were forcibly sterilized under its provisions before the end of the regime.³⁵ While the law did not at least initially target Jews specifically, it represented the initial legal act towards the implementation of the “Final Solution” - the plan for the systematic extermination of the Jewish population. Namely, on 1st of September 1939, Hitler authorized the so-called “Euthanasia Decree” - a campaign of mass murder by involuntary euthanasia which allegedly targeted people with disabilities in Nazi Germany. It is estimated that from 275,000 to 300,000 people were killed in psychiatric hospitals in Germany and Austria, occupied Poland and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia.³⁶ The list of diseases which led to the euthanasia was constantly revised, but all of them were illnesses difficult to define accurately. Only one “disease” was precise: all Jewish patients were to be killed, regardless of medical findings.³⁷ Obviously, with the onset of World War II, Nazi antisemitism reached its most extreme form: genocide. The invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 saw the deployment of mobile killing units that executed mass shootings of Jews in occupied territories.³⁸ In 1942, the Wannsee Conference formalized the “Final Solution,” that led to the construction of extermination camps such as Auschwitz, Treblinka, and Sobibor, where millions of Jews were murdered in gas chambers.³⁹

Conclusion

In summary, antisemitism in Germany before World War II represents a dark chapter in history, where hatred against Jews was transformed from a social phenomenon into systematic state policy. This development was the result of a combination of historical, economic, and ideological factors,

³⁵ Mosse, 2020, p. 194.

³⁶ For more details see Peter Longerich. *Holocaust: The Nazi Persecution and Murder of the Jews*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 477.

³⁷ Mosse, 2020, p. 195.

³⁸ Mark Roseman. *The Wannsee Conference and the Final Solution: A Reconsideration*. Metropolitan Books, 2002, p. 43.

³⁹ Raul Hilberg. *The Destruction of the European Jews*, Third Edition. Yale University Press/New Haven and London, 2003, p. 952.

including extreme nationalism, social Darwinism, and institutionalized racism under the Nazi regime. The Nuremberg Laws and widespread propaganda played a pivotal role in escalating the exclusion and marginalization of Jews from German society, thereby setting the stage for the Holocaust.

Understanding these historical factors is crucial for recognizing how hatred can become institutionalized and lead to devastating consequences. For instance, the implementation of the Nuremberg Laws not only legitimized discrimination but also created a culture where antisemitism became the norm. Moreover, Nazi propaganda mobilized German society by reinforcing dangerous stereotypes and myths about Jews. These historical examples illustrate how racist and nationalist ideologies can lead to escalating violence and persecution.

Studying this period is essential not only for understanding the past but also for preventing similar mistakes in the future. The history of antisemitism in Germany serves as a powerful warning about the dangers of intolerance and fanaticism when combined with political power and societal complacency.

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