

Anti-Semitism as “lived by” historian and professor, Sebastian Haffner

The following excerpt is from a memoir written in 1939, but only recently published by the author’s son after the father’s death. Sebastian Haffner immigrated to England in 1939, unable to live in the hostile, anti-intellectual, anti-Semitic Nazi society.

At the end of March, 1933—just weeks after taking control of the German government, the Nazis began to express open hostility against the Jews of Germany. The first concrete act was an official, government sponsored boycott of Jewish shops, businesses, doctors, lawyers, etc. on April 1, 1933. Store windows carried signs denoting a Jewish owned establishment and warning people not to shop there. Storm troopers stood guard outside many Jewish establishments. The Storm troopers would check the consulting rooms of doctors and lawyers to ensure that the boycott was obeyed.

An “education campaign” against the Jews was set in motion. The Germans were informed through pamphlets, posters, and meetings that it had been a mistake to consider the Jews as human beings. In reality they were a kind of “subhuman” animal, but with the characteristics of a devil. The “campaign slogan” read: “Juda verrecke” (Perish Judah). You could find this printed regularly in the Nazi controlled newspapers.

By publicly threatening a person, an ethnic group, a nation, a region with death and destruction, the Nazis provoke a general discussion not about their own existence, but about the right of their victims to exist. Suddenly everyone felt justified, and indeed required, to have an opinion about the Jews, and to state it publicly. Distinctions were made between “decent” Jews and the others. If some pointed to the achievements of Jewish scientists, artists and doctors to justify the Jews,... others would counter that they were a detrimental “foreign influence” in these spheres. Indeed, it soon became customary to count it against the Jews if they had a respectable or intellectually valuable profession. This was treated as a crime or, at the very least, a lack of tact. The defenders of the Jews were frowningly told that it was reprehensible of the Jews to have such-and-such percentage of doctors, lawyers, journalists, etc. Indeed, percentage calculations were a popular ingredient of the “Jewish question.” People discussed whether the percentage of Jews among the members of the Communist Party was too high, and among the casualties of World War 1 perhaps too low. (This is the literal truth. I heard this argument in the mouth of an educated man with a Ph.D., who reckoned himself a member of the cultured class. He argued quite seriously that the twelve thousand Jewish dead in the war was too small a proportion of the Jewish population in comparison with the corresponding number of “Aryans” killed, and derived from this a certain justification for Nazi Anti-Semitism.)*

- NOTE: This ridiculous statistical analysis was called the “Jew Count.” Historians later did calculations which proved clearly that the German Jews who fought in World War 1 were as brave and dedicated as any other German and that in

proportion to their representation in Germany, as many Jewish soldiers lost their lives fighting for Germany as did the so-called blue-blooded Aryan.

There is an evil instinct in man, which under the right conditions, can be “cultivated.” Once the violence and readiness to kill that lies beneath the surface of human nature has been awakened and turned against other humans, and even made into a DUTY, it is a simple matter to change the target. That can be clearly seen today; instead of “Jews.” one can just as easily say “Czechs” or “Poles” or anyone else.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. What is the significance of having Germans view the Jews as “subhuman” or as the devil? (i.e., In what way does it make it easier to hate and fear them?)**
- 2. What propaganda effect resulted from constantly reading and hearing the slogan : “Perish Judah”**
- 3. Did you know that the German Jews made up less than 1% of the total population? Why then were the Germans so hostile and suspicious of intellectual Jews and those who had successful careers in science, law, medicine?**
- 4. Can you see any danger signs for later anti-Semitic events which took place against the Jews in Germany in the Nazi’s early concern for percentages of Jews in professions of importance and in the Jews having fought in World War 1 less heroically than the non-Jewish German soldier?**
- 5. What do you learn from the fact that a Ph.D. could be anti-Semitic?**
- 6. The author is certainly prophetic when he speaks of man’s instinctual propensity to commit violence against minority groups? Remember this was written in 1939. Give examples in today’s world which unfortunately validate the author’s belief.**