

ANTISEMITISM IN AMERICAN COLLEGES:  
THE INFLUENCE OF CHRISTIAN IDEOLOGIES IN THE TWENTIES AND THIRTIES

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HIST 190: Introduction to the Study of History

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December 15, 2020

The United States has been known as a Christian nation since it was founded in 1775 and one of the bases of its foundation has been the freedom to practice religion. However, America's Protestant origins have often led to religious prejudices that have resulted in violence and unfair treatment in extreme cases. Old antisemitic beliefs about the Jewish people led to discriminatory actions against them in American colleges and universities such as Columbia and Harvard. In the years leading up to World War II, Christian beliefs and ideologies greatly influenced the development of antisemitism in American colleges by reinforcing Protestant, Anglo-Saxon ideals.

Since the first Jewish immigrants came to America, colonists did whatever they could to avoid being around them. Long-held European beliefs about the Jews influenced the New World and while these ideas remained fairly hidden for about a century, both the Civil War and World War I very quickly brought them to the surface as the population made the Jews a scapegoat for mistakes that occurred. As a result, antisemitic acts became more and more evident in the education system and often in the colleges and universities of America.

A deep-seated fear of change and the unfamiliar pervaded American citizens by the end of the first World War. Much of the American population feared the Communist party and anything that could lead to the development of this in the U.S. The 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia brought about "an impact in the United States far out of proportion to any realistic concerns that Americans need have had about socialism and communism replacing the existing political structure."<sup>1</sup> Several media sources blamed the development of socialism and communism on the Jewish race. In the 1920s and 1930s groundless rumors that the Jews were "leading the charge for a domestic socialist revolution," circled among anxious Protestants and

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<sup>1</sup> Leonard Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 79.

Catholics.<sup>2</sup> A majority of antisemitic issues arose from the desire to preserve Protestant ideals and values. After the Red Scare, the periodical, *Literary Digest*, came out naming Jews and Bolsheviks as interchangeable terms.<sup>3</sup> Even businessmen accused Jewish peddlers of selling “Bolshevik literature” with their products.<sup>4</sup> Antisemitism was influenced considerably with the publication of the book *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and Henry Ford’s publication of the *Dearborn Independent* newspaper. Originally published by Russian secret police, it accused the Jews of “secretly plotting a world revolution to undermine Christian civilization,” an accusation that had no proof.<sup>5</sup> It quickly caught on in the U.S. when it was produced in Boston. When it was printed in the *Dearborn Independent*, millions of Americans absorbed the supposed stories of “Jewish vices.”<sup>6</sup> Henry Ford, who owned this newspaper and was an influential and respected man in the U.S., described the common Jew as a “mere huckster, a trader who doesn’t want to produce, but to make something out of what somebody else produces.”<sup>7</sup> Leonard Dinnerstein writes, “the publication of *The Protocols* in the United States in 1920 provided him with a vehicle that brought national attention to his fledgling weekly.”<sup>8</sup> Ford’s antisemitic views were known internationally. Adolf Hitler pinned a picture of Henry Ford in his office and called him his “inspiration.”<sup>9</sup> Many Americans subscribed to Ford’s view of the Jewish people, despite the flawed logic of these claims.

Religious leaders such as William Dudley Pelley and Father Charles Coughlin were proponents of antisemitism in the 1930s. Religious arguments for antisemitism stemmed from

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<sup>2</sup> Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America*, 79.

<sup>3</sup> “Are Bolsheviki Mainly Jewish?” *Literary Digest*, 59 (December 14, 1918), 32

<sup>4</sup> “Are Bolsheviki Mainly Jewish?” *Literary Digest*, 32

<sup>5</sup> Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America*, 80.

<sup>6</sup> Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America*, 81.

<sup>7</sup> Henry Feingold, *A Time for Searching: Entering the Mainstream, 1920-1945* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1992), 26-27.

<sup>8</sup> Henry Feingold, *A Time for Searching*, 26-27.

<sup>9</sup> Albert Lee, *Henry Ford and the Jews* (New York: Stein and Day, 1980), 47.

the supposed refusal of the Jewish people to accept Jesus Christ and the belief that they had killed him. One Jewish writer believed that antisemitism came from these beliefs, “Basically, in the Christian mind, every Jew bears responsibility for Calvary, precisely as if ever Jew repeated over and over again, in every generation, the crucifixion.”<sup>10</sup> The education system and the Sunday schools reinforced these beliefs in Protestants and Catholics from a young age. Children were taught to refer to the Jews as “Christ-killers” while they themselves were surrounded with terms such as “Church-loving citizens” and “Christian morals.”<sup>11</sup>

William Pelley, the son of a Protestant minister, founded the Silver Legion located in Minnesota in 1933.<sup>12</sup> Sarah Atwood wrote a journal detailing the rise of the Silver Legion, also called the Silver Shirts, and the resulting Jewish action against the organization titled *This List Not Complete*. The Silver Legion was based out of Minnesota and was called one of the “vocal, most wild-eyed, and in some ways most dangerous” out of all the groups like it.<sup>13</sup> William Pelley claimed to have had a vision in which he, “ascended to a heavenly plane and was granted the gifts of clairvoyance and divination.”<sup>14</sup> This spiritualism justified his antisemitic views. While not necessarily religious in nature, Pelley’s beliefs definitely influenced the organization and drew groups such as the Protestants and former KKK members.<sup>15</sup> By 1934, the group’s membership was thought to be between 75,000 and two million nationally.<sup>16</sup> The Silver Shirts were not a particularly violent group although they published and publicly libeled the Jews.

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<sup>10</sup> Albert Levitan, “Leave the Jewish Problem Alone!” *CC*, 51 (April 25, 1934): 555.

<sup>11</sup> Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America*, 100.

<sup>12</sup> Sarah Atwood, “‘This List Not Complete’ Minnesota’s Jewish Resistance To The Silver Legion Of America” *Minnesota History*, 66, no. 4 (Winter 2018-19): 144.

<sup>13</sup> Atwood, “This List Not Complete,” 144

<sup>14</sup> Travis Hokes, *Shirts!: A Survey of the New ‘Shirt’ Organizations in the United States Seeking a Fascist Dictatorship* (New York: American Civil Liberties Union, 1934), 12.

<sup>15</sup> Atwood, “This List Not Complete,” 144.

<sup>16</sup> Atwood, “This List Not Complete,” 144.

Their rhetoric about the Jews describes them as “at best, unwanted citizens and, at worst, subhuman.”<sup>17</sup>

Protestants were not the only religious group who discriminated against the Jews. Catholic priest, Father Charles Coughlin, had a reputation for being “a national critic of malevolent and predatory economic forces,” and his radio presence allowed him to reach many Americans with his ideals.<sup>18</sup> Although Catholics were also widely oppressed by the Protestants at this time, Coughlin’s hatred of the Jewish people garnered him many followers. A long history of enmity between the Jews and the Catholics influenced his hatred. Both antisemitic Catholics and Protestants followed and listened to Father Coughlin’s speeches on the radio. In spite of his numerous false and vitriolic claims about the Jews, many Americans revered him. As a controversial figure in American society, one of his biographers said that, “He was Christ; he was Hitler; he was savior ... he was demagogue.”<sup>19</sup> Leonard Dinnerstein writes that, “in December 1938, 45 radio stations carried his weekly address that 3.5 million Americans listened to regularly; another 14 million had heard him at least once.”<sup>20</sup> Catholic editorials such as the *Commonweal* and the *Catholic World* criticized Coughlin saying that he did not speak for all of the Catholic religion and that his facts were flawed and promoted antisemitism.<sup>21</sup> Not even reprimands from peers stopped him from making complaints about the “Tugwells, the Frankfurters, and the rest of the Jews,” who supposedly surrounded President Franklin

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<sup>17</sup> Atwood, “This List Not Complete,” 144.

<sup>18</sup> Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America*, 115.

<sup>19</sup> Sheldon Marcus, *Father Coughlin: The Tumultuous Life of the Priest of the Little Flower* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1973), 11.

<sup>20</sup> Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America*, 118.

<sup>21</sup> “Week by Week,” *Commonweal*, 29 (December 9, 1938) 169.

Roosevelt.<sup>22</sup> The results of Father Coughlin's fame and words led to a greater atmosphere of antisemitism among the citizens of the U.S.

It was the culmination of these beliefs that led to considerable discrimination among the Jews in major colleges and universities. President Lowell of Harvard University became worried about increase in Jewish students because the "percentage of Jewish undergraduates from 6 percent in 1908 to 22 percent in 1922."<sup>23</sup> President Lowell's idea of a perfect American was a person who was Protestant and he thought that too many Jews enrolled in Harvard might lead to a loss of what it had become as a democratic university.<sup>24</sup> Many of the faculty agreed with Lowell's assumptions of the Jews. When there was an open spot in Harvard's Board of Overseers, one member wrote a letter to President Lowell asking him not to elect another Jew to the Board saying that "the Jew is always a Jew first and an American second."<sup>25</sup> Dean Frederick Keppel of Columbia University worried too about the influx of Jewish undergraduates and was concerned that this might drive away students who came from socially affluent homes.<sup>26</sup> Jewish discrimination did not just occur among the faculty, many students took part in it as well. Helen Horowitz writes, "In a world that valued style, the poverty, dress, and rough manners of the immigrants marked them as distinctive and inferior."<sup>27</sup> The narrowmindedness among the students and faculty led to the Jewish students being unable to participate in sports, clubs, and fraternities. Antisemitism also pervaded the Harvard clubs. When a respected family from

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<sup>22</sup> John F. Stack Jr., *International Conflict in an American City: Boston's Irish, Italians, and Jews, 1935-1944* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979), 92.

<sup>23</sup> Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America*, 84.

<sup>24</sup> Henry Aaron Yeomans, *Abbot Lawrence Lowell* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948), 209.

<sup>25</sup> Morgan's letter quoted in Ron Chernow, *The House of Morgan: An American Dynasty and the Rise of Modern Finance* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1990), 214-255.

<sup>26</sup> Harold S. Weschler, *The Qualified Student: A History of Selective College Admission in America* (Piscataway: Taylor & Francis Group, 2014), 128.

<sup>27</sup> Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Campus Life: Undergraduate Cultures from the End of the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 76.

Philadelphia invited Professor Felix Frankfurter to speak at a prestigious club dinner, many refused to attend on the basis of having to socialize with a Jew.<sup>28</sup> Leonard Dinnerstein writes that “the elevated number of Jews at many other American universities was perceived as an invasion that would ultimately undermine both Christian traditions and the social prestige of schools that housed too many of them.”<sup>29</sup> The ultimate fear of the colleges and universities was that their Democratic institutions would fall apart as more Jewish immigrants came into America. It was extremely hard for Jews to become faculty in these spaces. English and History were especially hard areas to get into as it was thought “inconceivable for a Jew to transmit or comprehend the culture and traditions of an American Christian society.”<sup>30</sup> For President Lowell, the influx so worried him that he limited the number of Jews allowed to enroll in Harvard. Many other universities and colleges followed suit including Princeton, Yale, and Cornell. This resulted in fewer places for Jews to apply for higher education.<sup>31</sup> Those who were allowed in were excluded from many activities.

Robert Strauss, who later became the ambassador to the Soviet Union, described his experience at the University of Texas as uneventful, but he discovered his Jewish roots, “which meant that you were ostracized from certain things.”<sup>32</sup> The lack of places to enroll led the Jewish people on two occasions to attempt to found their own college from both a liberal and orthodox standpoint.<sup>33</sup> In the 1920s, Jewish fraternities in colleges remained a highly controversial issue. Kirsten Fermaglich writes that, “Although most Gentile fraternities at that

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<sup>28</sup> Francis Biddle, *A Casual Past*, (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1961), 219.

<sup>29</sup> Ralph Phillip Boas, “Who Shall Go to College?” *The Atlantic*, 130 (October, 1922), 446.

<sup>30</sup> Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America*, 87.

<sup>31</sup> Dan A. Oren, *Joining the Club: A History of Jews and Yale* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 47.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Elizabeth Drew, “Profile of Robert Strauss,” *The New Yorker*, (May 17, 1979), 117.

<sup>33</sup> Zev Eleff, “The Envy of the World and the Pride of the Jews: Debating the American Jewish University in the Twenties,” *Modern Judaism*, 31, no. 2 (May, 2011): 230.

time restricted their membership by religion, and thus excluded Jews, Gentile students and administrators attacked Jewish fraternities as unnecessary, undesirable symbols of Jewish insularity.”<sup>34</sup> President William Herbert Perry France of Brown University said to a Jewish student that starting a fraternity would “kindle the fires of racial antagonism.”<sup>35</sup> It was ironic that college faculty refused to include Jewish students on the basis of preventing racism while by their refusal they enforced their racist and Anglo-Saxon ideas.

Centuries of Christian animosity influenced many of these college and university departments. In the prologue to *Antisemitism in America*, Leonard Dinnerstein writes, “ancestral Christian obsessions with Jews ... have... become an irrevocable part of the American heritage.”<sup>36</sup> Although Jewish students were seen as outsiders among other peers and professors, these students sought to gain academic knowledge and “took their classes seriously” compared to their peers.<sup>37</sup> Jewish students suffered both socially and religiously when on campus. When students at Columbia University requested to have the High Holy Days off of school, Professor Young complained that if students “wish to attend a Christian college, let them submit to its requirements or stay away. If I wished to attend a Jewish college, I should go prepared to work on Sundays.”<sup>38</sup> The number of Jews flooding into Columbia University distressed the faculty to the point that they decided to come up with a solution to this issue. As Columbia University only desired students who came from upper class families and had the social requirements necessary, they sought to cut down on the students applying who had less desirable traits. This resulted in modified scholarships and asking questions on admissions forms that included religious

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<sup>34</sup> Kirsten Fermaglich, “The Social Problems Club Riot of 1935: A Window into Antiradicalism and Antisemitism at Michigan State College,” *Michigan Historical Review*, 30, no. 1 (Spring, 2004): 102.

<sup>35</sup> Fermaglich, “The Social Problems Club,” 102.

<sup>36</sup> Leonard Dinnerstein, prologue to *Antisemitism in America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), xxvii.

<sup>37</sup> Horowitz, *Campus Life*, 78.

<sup>38</sup> Weschler, *The Qualified Student*, 139.

affiliation.<sup>39</sup> Columbia University also eventually used the SATC and IQ tests as part of their application process to determine student eligibility. Students were accepted based on the grade they received on the tests. In this way they were able to weed out some of the Jews who were considered undesirable. Many of these tests made the common Jew to be less intelligent than was actually proven.<sup>40</sup> President Lowell thought that the general “clannishness” of Jews contributed to the growth of these students in Harvard.<sup>41</sup> The universities of Michigan and Nebraska advised their students against “associating with Jewish males.”<sup>42</sup>

In 1935, a riot broke out at Michigan State College that showed the depths of antisemitism on campus. Kirsten Fermaglich writes that a “mob of about five hundred MSC students marched on the small local peace rally held across from the college campus.”<sup>43</sup> They harassed the rally with name calling and by hurling rotten food at them. The mob became so heated that they “grabbed five of the rally participants, dragged them across campus, and dumped them in the Red Cedar River.”<sup>44</sup> Coincidentally, the evening before, MSC students went to the Jewish fraternity with the intent to hurl antisemitic threats at the inhabitants. The article claims that these students were trying to dissuade the leaders of the rally from participating.<sup>45</sup> As a conservative college, the students didn’t really appreciate the peace rally across campus. Those who started the rally were from the Social Problems Club which pushed for change within the college. With the rise of incoming Jewish students at the campus and the progressive Social Problems Club, there was most certainly tension among faculty and pupils. There was some

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<sup>39</sup> Weschler, *The Qualified Student*, 145-151.

<sup>40</sup> Weschler, *The Qualified Student*, 152.

<sup>41</sup> Weschler, *The Qualified Student*, 154.

<sup>42</sup> Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America*, 86.

<sup>43</sup> Fermaglich, “The Social Problems Club” 94.

<sup>44</sup> Fermaglich, “The Social Problems Club” 94.

<sup>45</sup> Fermaglich, “The Social Problems Club” 94.

evidence that leaders and members of the club were of Jewish descent. The night before the rally took place, a smaller mob most likely “shouted antisemitic insults—either in front of a boarding house that welcomed Jewish occupants or in front of the only Jewish fraternity on campus, or both.”<sup>46</sup> There was also evidence that the faculty knew about the action that the mob was going to take against the peace rally. One journal writes that, “this peace meeting is a blind for a radical gathering. The administration of the college will have no objection if other students toss these radicals in the river.”<sup>47</sup> Not only did these students behave violently towards a peaceful group meeting, but they also discriminated against Jewish students who were a part of the group as well.

Jews have been the subject of discrimination in America since the colonists made their first settlements. While many injustices and acts have been committed against them, antisemitism seemed to decline after World War II. Prior to this, universities and colleges were especially harsh to the Jews. Faculty and student alike ostracized the Jews and made them feel unwelcome on their campuses. In the years leading up to World War II, Christian beliefs and ideologies greatly influenced the development of antisemitism in American colleges by reinforcing Protestant, Anglo-Saxon ideals.

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<sup>46</sup> Fermaglich, “The Social Problems Club,” 107.

<sup>47</sup> “Campus Peace Being Periled by Pacifists,” *State Journal*, 1 (April 12, 1935), 15.

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