

Anti-Semitism in Thuringia

The hostility towards the Jews is the “oldest, social, cultural, religious, political jaundice of mankind” (Wolfgang Benz). Since two millennia, the “Jewish question” had caused sentiments to run high time and time again.

The Jewish people had to bear constant discrimination to the point of mass murder, across Europe and the beyond extending Diaspora. As social outsiders, they were especially assaulted in crisis-ridden times. The Anti-Semitism that had developed since the 19th century is the youngest outgrowth of anti-Jewish hostility.

The emancipation process of the Jews begun with the enlightenment and had led to far-reaching legal security and equality within the German ‘Länder’. However, in the German Empire (Deutsches Kaiser Reich) after 1871, the Jews remained in many respects ‘second-rate citizens’. Moreover, since the 1880es, out of the allegedly too extensive emancipation the modern Anti-Semitism had evolved. This ‘modern’ form of anti-Jewish sentiments held the Jews responsible for the various problems of industrial-urban modernity.

At the same time, the pseudo-scientific race-concept superimposed increasingly the traditional religious-cultural prejudices. Anti-Semitism gained considerable impetus in the years of crisis after the first, lost world war in 1914/18. Adolf Hitler’s extreme-right NSDAP (National Socialist Workers Party of Germany) advanced to its most radical advocate. Thuringia played a ‘pioneering role’ for the National-Socialist movement and the propagation of Anti-Semitism in the Weimar republic. In 1924, for the first time the racial Anti-Semites were elected as most influential faction into the parliament (Landtag) of Weimar.

In 1930/31, the National Socialists assumed government responsibility for the first time in the ‘era Frick’ (Wilhelm Frick was a prominent Nazi official, who served as Minister of the Interior of the Third Reich and Minister of Education in Thuringia) and conducted under the government of Fritz Sauckel the early ‘takeover’. The ever growing Anti-Semitism ultimately culminated in the radical, racial fanaticism of the Third Reich between 1933 and 1945, which led to the mass murder of six million European Jews in the Holocaust.

Anti-Semitism in the 19th Century

The 19th century entailed, after a long-winded process, equality under public law for the German Jews. Therewith, centuries of oppression and persecution ended.

The founding of the German Reich in 1871 finally made the Jews equal state citizens. As representatives of the liberal bourgeoisie, they had begun to claim their political rights also in Thuringia. They belonged to the stratum of dignitaries in their towns and parishes. Since the 1830s, they were increasingly represented in the communal and regional parliaments. This socio-political emancipation was connected to the partly arduous, social advancement of Jewish families. The long-lasting exclusion from all 'reputable' trades-/and craftsman professions had made many Jews into successful intellectuals, physicians, lawyers, entrepreneurs and financiers.

The Simson-family from Suhl founded one of the most successful vehicle- and weaponry businesses in Germany. Hermann Tietz ("Hertie") laid the foundation of a leading department-store chain in Gera, in 1882. In Erfurt, the horticultural entrepreneurs Benary, the shoe-fabricants Hess and the financiers Moos belonged to the establishment of the town.

On the other hand, the advancement of Jewish citizens also delivered the pretext for the 'modern' Anti-Semitism. The averseness to "Juda" received a significant stimulus after 1873. After economic prosperity and a wave of business establishments during the Wilhelminian period followed an economic crash, which abruptly ended the excess boom that took place after the formation of the German Kaiser Reich. For the first time after a longer period, the Jews were made responsible once again and this time they had to bear the blame for the unsavoury sides of the modern, capitalist, industrial society, by which especially the bourgeois middle-class felt threatened.

But also the upper echelons of the bourgeoisie demonstrated virulent animosity, which extended up to liberal circles. The respected national-liberal professor of history, Heinrich von Treitschke initiated 1879 the motto: "Die Juden sind unser Unglück!" ("The Jews are our calamity!"). Since the 1880s, the term 'Anti-Semitism' prevailed for this kind of mentality.

The Jews were declared a peregrine race that was impossible to integrate and which endangered the unity of the German nation and the 'inner-foundation' of the Reich. Soon, another allegation was added, which accused the Jews to be the motor of the international workers movement, meaning the "red danger" that was emerging from the left. Its most eminent theorist was Karl Marx, who was, like some other well-known left-wing intellectuals and SPD-politicians of Jewish origin.

The Anti-Semitism had developed strong roots in the polemically over-exaggerated conclusion that Jewish people in relation to their marginal proportion of the population, which was roughly one per cent, were above-average very strongly represented in the economic and upper class and leading positions. This peaked in the assertion that the “international Jewry” would live as rich ‘parasite’ at the expense of other nations and strive for world domination. Demands were raised to confine the Jews in their political and social status through miscellaneous discriminations. However, the politically organized Anti-Semitism even though its allegations were increasingly poisoning public life, it remained a marginal phenomenon until world war 1, 1914/18.

Radicalization after World War 1

The emancipation of the Jews reached its height with the November Revolution and the founding of the Weimar Republic in 1918. Many Jewish citizens rose to higher rank positions within state and society. On the other hand, the lost war also implicated the intensification of the old resentments. Especially the politically-right had chosen “the Jews” as universal scapegoat. In October 1918, the nationalist ‘Alldeutsche Verband’ (‘All-German Union’, a far-right organization that promoted pan-germanism and imperialism) had called “to use the situation against the Jewry and to use the Jews as ‘lightening rod’ for all injustice”.

In Thuringia, the transition from monarchy to republic meant also the end of the century-old particularism. On May 1, 1920, the ‘Freistaat’ Thuringia with its capital Weimar was founded. The circumstances and proportions of power in the country caused that Thuringia played a widely noted ‘vanguard role’ for the racist Anti-Semitic movement and respectively for the NSDAP. But also in other parties and social groups Anti-Semitism was deeply entrenched. Many saw the new republic as “non-German” form of government that was advocated by the Jews. All the more, the extreme right was looking to push slogans of the “Jewish republic” or the “Judocracy”.

Often they concentrated in a perfidious manner on selected individual people, like the assassinated foreign minister Walther Rathenau or the expert in constitutional law, Hugo Preuß, who was considerably involved in shaping the Weimar constitution. In Thuringia, a similar role was also assigned to the jurist Eduard Rosenthal from Jena, who was the founding figure of the Thuringian constitution of 1920/21.

The connection between the 'Jewry', democracy and Marxism that was constructed by the far-right, developed in Thuringia with growing impact due to a strong political polarization. The first government of the 'Land' that was formed by the liberal-left DDP (German Democratic Party), SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany) and USPD (Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany) under the leadership of Arnold Paulssen (DDP) in 1920/21 broke down rapidly. It followed the SPD-USPD government under August Frölich (SPD). The "red Thuringia" of 1921/23 heated up the political climate within the 'Land'. Cultural incisions, like the introduction of new public holidays (May 1 and November 9) at the expense of denominational holidays, the reform of the education system ("Greilsche Schulreform") or the furtherance of the state-"Bauhaus" in Weimar caused the bourgeois-national camp to protest. Frölich's office term was accompanied by an enormous economic crisis and inflation, which culminated in the popular front-government of SPD and KPD (Communist Party of Germany) in autumn 1923.

The confrontation between two irreconcilable camps had been reinforced.

Since 1920, the parliament of the 'Land' had to deal with anti-Semitic issues time and time again. The debate over the "problem of the Eastern Jews" on December 4, 1920 was exemplary. In the first instance, the SPD member of parliament, Louis Rennert, declared, "The popular, general anti-Semitic agitation is that what is working in the background. Under the dirty disguise of anti-Jewish baiting, the left-wing political parties including the democrats constitute the real target."

Also the DDP positioned itself clearly with Marie Schulz, "We deem Anti-Semitism as a highly dangerous, widespread disease that has developed to a new height in consequence of the war and a particular degree of dangerousness. Clearly, its origin is to find within political motives and interests, because this anti- Jewish agitation emanates from the circle of the All-German Union, which is in need to dispose its stake in the source of the war". In his objection, the conservative DNVP (German National People's Party) delegate, Friedrich von Eichel-Streiber emphasized that the problem should be taken seriously considering the great social hardships of the German people. Therefore, he considered it impossible to allow "foreign peoples", who accelerated "extortion, profiteering, smuggling and illicit trade" the right to hospitality. The shared concept of the enemy, picturing a "mass" of alien "Eastern Jews", taken up by the bourgeois-national parties, the "Thüringer Landbund", the DNVP and the right-wing liberal DVP (German People's Party) was as much present as the reproaches against German Jews, which were accusing them to be hedgers and wartime profiteers.

In parliament, the KPD strove for a left version of Anti-Semitism that focused on the “Jewish capitalism”. Nevertheless, there was a clear division between the two camps: anti-democratic parties and groups from the right wing avowed themselves to Anti-Semitism filled with hatred.

In 1924, the right-wing conservative parties (DDP, DVP, DNVP, Landbund) formed the “Thüringer Ordnungsbund” and took over the government. Because they could not achieve the absolute majority – 35 delegates from the “Thüringer Ordnungsbund” stood against 30 left-wing delegates (SPD 17, KPD 13) at in total 72 mandates – they were reliant on the seven delegates from the “Vereinten Völkischen Liste” (Unified Folkish Liste) including the NSDAP. For the first time, right-wing extremists had moved into parliament (Landtag). As they could tip the scales, they sparked under the faction-leader Artur Dinter (1925-1927, first NSDAP Gauleiter – the head of a Nazi district) a large scale propaganda campaign. Dinter demanded in exchange of the electoral votes that the bourgeois government needed to be elected, under the leadership of Richard Leutheußer (DVP) that the following condition had to be fulfilled, “the government has to be formed of German (blood-origin), non-marxist men”. The Jewish DDP-candidate Eduard Rosenthal, one of the prominent figures of the Thuringian democracy fell victim to this requirement.

Far beyond the borders of Thuringia, the Anti-Semitic agitation against the Weimar state bank director Walter Loeb caused a public stir. He resigned from office in September 1924. He did not receive any support from the government.

The minister of finance, Wilko von Klüchtzner (DNVP) had replied to Loeb’s question, “Am I being dismissed, because I am Jewish?” with the words, “I consider the question of you being a Jew less from the religious perspective but more from the racial side”. Facilitated by the acceptance of many bourgeois-nationalist representatives, the folkish, national-socialist faction could consistently campaign against the Jews. This applied also for the debates over the Weimar Bauhaus, which relocated to Dresden in 1925.

In Erfurt, the Jewish shoe fabricant Alfred Hess, who had established a town museum and in his house a centre for expressionist art, came to the fore of the Anti-Semites. The stereotypical buzzword of “Jewish cultural bolshevism” revealed that the fight for the “German culture” also had strong Anti-Semitic connotations in its heartland. From 1930, Anti-Semitism had even become part of the state doctrine in Thuringia and that earlier than in the Reich or all other “Länder”.

A radical Anti-Semite was appointed to a ministerial office for the first time. Similar to 1924, after the parliamentary elections (Landtagswahlen) in 1929, the bourgeois parties (23 delegates) were reliant on the six NSDAP delegates in order to form a government against the worker's parties (24 delegates). Hitler himself pushed through the appointment of the convicted participant of the 'March on Munich', Wilhelm Frick to become minister of the interior and minister of education, who was supposed to make Thuringia into a testing ground for the national-socialist take-over. Frick proceeded swiftly to the ruthless implementation of his ideas. Next to the power-political measures this focused predominantly on cultural-ideological areas. The decree "Wider der Negerkultur für deutsches Volkstum" (Against Negro-culture in German culture) was supposed to eradicate "alien-racial/foreign influences" on German culture and entertainment. With Paul Schultze-Naumburg the former Bauhaus became a prominent cultural racist as its head, who made an end to the "degenerated art" (entartete Kunst) in the Weimar castle museum. A headline-catching event across the German Reich also posed the so-called 'school-prayers', which were justified with Anti-Semitic platitudes, "The economic hardship is only partly cause for the German misery. Foreign and racially alien forces attempt to destroy the spiritual, moral and religious principles of our German way of thinking and feeling since a long time. The aim is to deracinate the German people in order to dominate them more easily." The appointment of the "race-theorist" Hans F.K Günther ('Rasse-Günther') per ministerial ruling, to the Thuringian University of Jena, the radical right valued this as Frick's "greatest race-political deed". Together with Frick, who was in office as NSDAP-Gauleiter since 1927, there was Fritz Sauckel, who distinguished himself, being leader of the faction in parliament, as Anti-Semitic whip.

Still before the Nuremberg Trials against the leading war criminals in 1945, he admitted openly that the Anti-Semitic thought was the incitement of his political activity right from the beginning. As he states, "I strongly believed in foreign infiltration and saw it within all crucial ranks in the entire public life of the German people and considered it therefore as too extensive and harmful influence. By the same token, I regarded racial intermixture as something unnatural."

In 1935, the fierce verbal attacks that Sauckel directed at the bourgeois-conservative parties led to the breach of the coalition. The bourgeois minority Cabinet still governed with the acquiescence of the SPD until July 1932, before the weak 'marriage of convenience' fell apart under the impact of the world economic crisis. The National Socialists enjoyed increasing popularity as the national- anti-marxist "integration-party" - motivated by that they began to intensify their demands in the Thuringian parliament (Landtag). Already in the debate over the

motion of no-confidence against Frick in 1931, Sauckel predicted his former partners, "We are going to come back and the German people will walk over the dead body of your party!".

This "prophecy" should become reality with the election to the Landtag (Thuringian parliament) on Juli 31, 1932. With 42,5 per cent of the votes and 26 of 61 delegate seats, the NSDAP had clearly won this election. On August 26, 1932, Sauckel took up the leadership of the government, which was made possible by the 'Landbund' and one privy council. The early take-over (i.e. in comparison to the rest of Germany) provided a glimpse of what political and racial 'outsiders' had to expect in case of a German-wide take over by the NSDAP. Already in his government declaration on August 29, 1932, Sauckel pointed out that the "time of most grievous political, cultural and economic hardships" could only be overcome through the establishment of a "veracious and social collective with a common destiny", which only includes the "worthy forces within race and nation (blood and soil)". Instantly, Anti-Semitic measures were introduced, like the shortening of the means for the Jewish community leaderships, the formulation of new school curricula, which should serve the new (blood and soil) education, an "animal protection law" against kosher butchering as well as an appeal to boycott Jewish businesses already in December 1932.

Anti-Semitism and Holocaust in the Third Reich

The process of the power take-over in Germany begun with the appointment of Adolf Hitler to Reichs Chancellor by the Reichs President Paul von Hindenburg on January 30, 1933. Due to the steady forerun taking place in Thuringia, the take-over proved to be a relatively smooth transition to NS-dictatorship. Thereby, Hitler's model-'Gauleiter' (head of Nazi district) Fritz Sauckel made a continuous effort to excel in his 'pioneer role'. On May 5, 1933, he was appointed by the Reichs President to be Reich governor (Reichsstatthalter) for Thuringia and since then he had built up a vigorous power base. In 1942, he was promoted to be "Generalbevollmächtigter für den Arbeitseinsatz" (plenipotentiary for the employment of forced labour), when he organised the deportation of millions of forced labourers. As Thuringian "dictator", Sauckel acted out his hatred against Jews from 1933 onward. Before the take-over, an estimated 4500 Jews were living in 37 parishes within the 'Gau'-area. Already since August 1932, daily life for the Jews had been made difficult with discriminating measures enforced by the NSDAP-government, however Fritz Sauckel was still looking to excel in regards to the "Jewish question". The by Sauckel hated association "Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger

jüdischen Glaubens" (Central Association for German Citizens of Jewish Faith) was banned in Thuringia in 1933, under the false pretence that it was damaging the German reputation abroad. This should become exemplary for the association's prohibition across the Reich territory.

The liquidation of the Simson plant in Suhl in 1935 became an early precedence for the 'Aryanisation' of assets and property holdings, which attracted international attention and resentment. Until 1939, the Thuringian economy had been made "judenfrei" (free of Jews) to a large extent, especially within the retail trade, from the small shop to large department stores (Hertie in Gera, Kaufhaus Römischer Kaiser in Erfurt, Sachs & Berlowitz in Weimar and many more) had been 'Arianized' with ostentation.

The trail of deprivation of rights and the murder of Jewish citizens begins with the bockott of Jewish businesses on April 1, 1933, continued with the Nuremberg laws of 1935, the of November 9, 1938 and culminated in the deportations leading to the 'final solution' after the Wannsee conference on January 20, 1942. Despite the daily harassment, degrading race-laws, the 'Reichskristallnacht', the the socio-economic relegation and the ghettoisation since 1940, many Jews hoped to survive in their homeland 'Germany' and did not use the until 1941 existing possibility, even though it was connected to various obstacles and extensive depredation, of emigration. Most of them were to pay this with their lives. After the end of the NS-dictatorship, only 400 Jewish citizens had survived in Thuringia. Most explicit becomes the felonious character of the NS-regime in the concentration camp 'Buchenwald', which had been one of the major camps within the Reich alongside Dachau and Sachsenhausen since 1937. Buchenwald with its strong SS-organizations helped Sauckel to make Thuringia to the "model"-Gau of the Reich.

After the "Reichskristallnacht" in 1938, while also in Thuringia many synagoges had been destroyed (Gotha, Eisenach, Meiningen, Nordhausen, Erfurt), Jewish business had been looted and Jewish citizens abused, thousands of them had been abducted to the 'concentration camp' closely situated to the town of German classicism. Alongside other prisoners and prisoners of war tens of thousands of Jews suffered there until the end of the NS-dictatorship. An estimated 11.000 people lost their lives. Especially, the 1942 built "small camp" with its catastrophic living conditions was infamous amongst the concentration camp prisoners. After its liberation by the American troops on April 11, 1945, Buchenwald was to become synonymous with the national socialist murder and terror in Germany. But also people in local positions of responsibility drove the practical implementation of the Third Reich's state doctrine of Anti-Semitism. For example,

the mayor of Erfurt, Walter Kießling, in competition with the 'Gauleiter' Fritz Sauckel in Weimar, had set out to make his town particularly swiftly "free of Jews" ("Judenfrei"). The radical persecution of the Jews by the NSDAP was by not generally welcomed, as 'Gestapo'-reports proof for Thuringia. Despite deeply seated prejudices, especially within the petty bourgeoisie, there was also rejection, the more so as some Jews belonged to the caste of dignitaries that was setting the tone in many cities until 1933. Notwithstanding, the gradual withdrawal of all rights, persecution and deportation of the Jews to the extermination camps of the East while the 2nd World War took place amidst society without any resistance from the observing population. This also applies to the involvement of the economy in the Holocaust. A drastic example is the crematoria business "Topf & Söhne" that manufactured the mass-incinerators of Auschwitz.

Anti-Semitism Today

The Holocaust and the Shoa respectively (Hebrew: calamity, destruction) as the mass murder of six million Jews is being called, is one of the most outrageous felonies of world history. The acceptance of the moral responsibility by the Federal Republic of Germany that has become manifest in the Holocaust memorial in Berlin, does by no means imply the end of Anti-Semitism, as assumed at one point.

The symptoms of Anti-Semitic continuity are too obvious as Wolfgang Benz documented just recently. The tenacious survivability of a with time transforming hostility against Jews demands 'preventive measures'. It is imperative to sensitize the public that the "new" Anti-Semitism begins to serve as a bridge between the middle of society and the extreme right. Thuringia is no exception. Rightist baiting and assaults on Jewish cemeteries and synagogues represent just one face of Anti-Semitism. At the same time, many right-wing extremist present themselves as honest, well-behaved and reliable citizens and distribute their racist way of thinking in seemingly harmless local periodicals or through "community" associations. Particularly, in the historically "charged" centre of Germany that had played erstwhile a 'pioneering role' in Anti-Semitic discrimination and excess, it is essential to prevent the fatal recurrence of history with the help of continued and intensive remembrance of the past.

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