A Thing of the Past—or Is It?

Anti-Semitism 1919-1939
New-York Historical Society
Through July 31

Stolen Heart: The Theft of Jewish Property in Berlin's Historic City Center, 1933-1945
Center for Jewish History
Through Oct., 2016

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New York

The 1000-Reichsmark bills on display at the New-York Historical Society's "Anti-Semitism 1919-1939" exhibition seem almost unused, fresh from the 1922 German mint, probably because rampant inflation quickly made them worthless. That also made them ripe for resurrection by the Nazis 10 years later, when they were overprinted with campaign slogans, swastikas and caricatures. Stamped over one bill's original engraving, Gothic German text proclaims: "The Jew takes our Gold, Silver and Bacon [Speck], and leaves us with this crap [Dreck]." The Dreck—Weimar's worthless currency—is evidence of the Jews' nefarious powers. "Come to Hitler," the recycled banknotes urge.

Another form of currency is also displayed at this compact but powerful exhibition of more than 50 German artifacts: a five-Reichsmark "currency conversion note" issued between 1933 and 1935. Soon after Adolf Hitler took power, Jews were dismissed from the civil service, Jewish businesses were boycotted and other restrictions were imposed: As the exhibition's catalog tells us, the Nazis saw this as Wiedergermanacht—making good again—repairs for Judeic evils done to Germany. Jews emigrating surrendered German currency in exchange for these notes, supposedly good for later conversion into foreign currencies. Only they weren't. Thus, the Jew who made currency worthless got worthless currency in return.

But I have the opposite reaction. Nazi analogies are too regularly invoked to simplify argument; and anti-Semitism is too often generalized, treated as another variety of racism. Instead, I am struck by how singular anti-Semitism is, how cunning the Nazi use of it was, and how different it is from racism, with which it is often confused.

Of course, the Nazis calculatedly turned Judaism into a racial matter. The Nuremberg Laws led to genealogical charts, like one here, on which Germans traced their bloodlines to guarantee freedom from Jewish taint. Nazi policy also segregated Jews from others, using Jim Crow-like German signs on display. And caricature proliferated, as we can see in an image of Julius Streicher's notorious newspaper Der Stürmer ("The Jewish beast. Do you know him?") or in a 1930 cane-handle shaped like a Jew's head.

While race can be an element of anti-Semitism, it is not the main point. For the Nazis it was an indicator of connection and collusion. Is there any other form of group hatred so preoccupied with conspiracy? The Jew, in this view, has hidden powers. The Jew is capable of imposing the Versailles treaty, devaluing currency and manipulating commerce. In medieval folklore, the Jew is close to being a vampire, prepared to feed on the circulatory system of the body politic. And what is that circulatory system? Money. That is also where the Nazis focused—before turning more horrific attention to blood.

The Nazi seizure of currency and property had typically venal motivations. But seizure also had symbolic import: It defeated the Jew on his own terrain. You can see an aspect of this at an exhibition at the Leo Baeck Institute at the Center for Jewish History's "Stolen Heart: The Theft of Jewish Property in Berlin's Historic City Center, 1933-1945." Before 1933, at least 225 properties out of 1,200 lots in Berlin's historic center were owned by Jews and Jewish businesses. This exhibition—an abridgement of one mounted in Berlin—looks at five properties and the fates of the families who owned them. They include the headquarters of one company (owned by the Intruder and Berglas families) that in the early 1930s produced about half of all German-made textiles. Another was the Hermann Gerson store, "the oldest, largest, and most prominent fashion store in Germany" owned by the Freudenberg family.

As a result of taxes, violence, threats, and legislation, the families were financially ruined and forced to flee. The buildings were taken over. Not only did this break Jewish control; the government also obliterated any sign of it. The textile building was used to manufacture almost a million yellow Star of David patches; the Hermann Gerson store property was used to house the SS's criminal police; and as a laboratory to perfect mass killing methods. (Incidentally, very few heirs to the 225 properties have received recompense according to a postwar policy that was, ironically enough, called Wiedergermanacht.) These beliefs might seem beyond contemporary imagining. Yet today similar assertions have attached themselves to Israel—a Jew among nations. Arab media regularly invoke Nazi caricatures and references. Recently, the former Mayor of London Ken Livingstone also suggested that Zionism and Nazism shared support from Hitler—adding to a string of comments by Labour leaders caricaturing Israel as uniquely satanic.

But there is no need to look so far afield. At Oberlin College, a Facebook post by an assistant professor of rhetoric and composition showed a member of the Rothschild banking family with an invented quote about his people: "We own nearly every central bank in the world. We financed both sides of every war since Napoleon. We own your news, the media, your oil and your government." The professor also accused the "Rothschild-led banksters" of "implementing the World War III option" by shooting down a Malaysian airliner over Ukraine; and she attacked Jews and the Mossad for funding ISIS. Such accusations are taken from Der Stürmer's play book (the Nazi's used Kristallnacht as an occasion to apply an "Atonement Tax," as one document at the historical society shows, forcing Jews to pay for damage caused by anti-Semitic attacks). The Oberlin professor, unrepentant, has treated assertions of anti-Semitism as attempts to silence her by the very conspiracy she was drawing attention to.

Clearly, the virus thrives. No exaggerated Nazi analogies are needed to reveal the similarities. The very language repeats itself. The examples also demonstrate the pride typically in anti-Semitic views: Unmasking the conspiracy requires intelligence and cunning equal to that of the perpetrators. Anti-Semites typically see their beliefs as virtuous—not offensive, but defensive. And if the Jew suffers as a result, well such is Wiedergermanacht.

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