

## 1

## Anti-Semitism in European and German history

This chapter will deal with three major issues.

- 1 The growth of anti-Jewish prejudice in Europe and its intellectual origins.
- 2 The specific role of such prejudice in modern German history and the extent to which a study of its roots helps to explain the appearance of the historical phenomenon known as ‘national socialism’.
- 3 Hitler’s personal anti-Semitism.

The first point to make, and it is an important one, is that any study of the Nazi persecution of the Jews during the 1930s and 1940s does not depend upon ‘claims that anti-Jewish ideology was a predominantly German doctrine or a constant preoccupation of the leaders of the Third Reich’.<sup>1</sup> Anti-Semitism was not the sole preserve of the German people; it was as old as European civilisation itself.

### The religious dimension

The harsh, historical fate of the Jewish people was linked to two crucial events: the first was the crucifixion and death of Jesus Christ in AD 33 and the second was the failure of the Jewish uprising against the Roman Empire from AD 69 to AD 70.

The first event placed the historical burden upon the Jews of the accusation of having been the murderers of Christ, the Messiah whom they refused to accept (in Judaism the Messiah is regarded as the ‘chosen one’, sent by God to save the Jewish people). The second event destroyed the kingdom of Israel as the Romans exacted their revenge on the Jews, forcing them to flee to every part of the known world. This ‘Diaspora’, or scattering, of the Jews would mean that they would not have a country which they could call their own again until 1948, when the modern state of Israel was founded.

Following the Diaspora, the history of the Jews was a melancholy one, for they became targeted for persecution throughout Christian Europe. In England, for example, there were massacres of Jews in London and York in 1263 and 1290 respectively, while in Germany Crusaders on their way to fight the Islamic Turks in the Holy Land (Palestine) massacred Jews in the Rhineland cities; in France anti-Jewish prejudice resulted in the confiscation of all Jewish property in 1306. Such massacres (and the theft of Jewish property) were frequently justified by the claim that the Jews were the ‘enemies’ of Christ.

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Religious observance also contributed to another traditional Christian prejudice against the Jews – that they were unscrupulous moneylenders (the Catholic Church decreed that usury, that is lending money at interest, was a sin). Rulers during the medieval period clearly needed to raise money for administrative and military purposes, but the only effective moneylenders available were the Jews. Because they fulfilled this function, which Christians could not, Jews were hated and reviled.

Matters got even worse for the Jews when the Reformation began in the early part of the sixteenth century. The German theological reformer Martin Luther (1483–1546) was strongly anti-Semitic during the early stages of his career, so that although his followers, the Protestants (as they became known), attacked the alleged abuses in the Catholic Church, they were not friends of the Jews. A rare beacon of tolerance shone out in England, however, when, in 1656, Oliver Cromwell, the Lord Protector of the Commonwealth, allowed the Jews to resettle there after their expulsion from the country in the thirteenth century.

## The Enlightenment

In the eighteenth century there was an atmosphere of religious scepticism in many parts of Europe as a result of the so-called ‘Enlightenment’. Its leading thinkers, like Voltaire (1694–1778) and Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712–78), were critical of the Christian churches and preached the need for personal liberty and equality before the law. This was intended to include equality of treatment for the Jews, too, but the ideals of the Enlightenment, which were strongly evident in France after the revolution of 1789, actually produced something of a nationalistic backlash in countries like Spain, Germany and Russia. (Progressive thinking was associated with France, but between 1792 and 1814 the French dominated Europe, often in an oppressive way.) Nevertheless, the Jews gained from the removal of anti-Semitic restrictions in French-occupied Italy and Germany.

## State-sponsored anti-Semitism

At the end of the nineteenth century a disturbing development took place in Russia, when the Tsarist government actually encouraged attacks on the Jews. Between 1880 and the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 there were numerous ‘pogroms’ (the word today generally used for anti-Jewish atrocities) and Jews were officially excluded from many areas of normal life. (One result of this anti-Semitic persecution was that many young Jews, Leon Trotsky and Grigori Zinoviev among them, joined revolutionary groups like the Bolshevik Party.)

The worst anti-Semitic outbreak took place in Kishinev in 1903, when, for two days, the local population was allowed to attack Jews (as a result of which 50 people died) without interference from the police or army. The tsar, Nicholas II, was a known anti-Semite, like his father, Alexander III, and he, too, failed to

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intervene. Ten years later, in 1913, the notorious Beilis case occurred, when a young Jew was accused of murdering a child in order to obtain Christian blood for one of the alleged, secret rituals in which Jews were accused of taking part. This was also the time when the 'Protocols of the Elders of Zion' emerged in Russia, a forged document which claimed that the Jews were conspiring to take over the world.

A clear message was therefore being sent from Russia, which was to have strong echoes in twentieth-century Europe.

- 1 Jews were supposedly 'alien' and not part of the nation (in Russia they were forced to leave the cities and live in designated areas).
- 2 Their very presence was allegedly a threat to the 'ethnic purity' of the nation.

### The Dreyfus case

The pervasiveness of anti-Semitism in Europe was demonstrated during the 1890s in the notorious Dreyfus case in France, generally regarded as the most cultivated nation in Europe. In this instance, a Jewish army officer, Alfred Dreyfus (who also happened to be an Alsatian – Alsace was a region of France which was under German rule at that time), was accused of spying for Germany. Dreyfus was dismissed from the French army in 1894 and was sent to the penal colony of Devil's Island in French Guyana. In the end, Dreyfus was found to be an innocent man and was restored to his position in the army in 1906, but his case divided the nation. The political right – the army's high command and the Catholic Church – had been all too willing to condemn Dreyfus because he was a Jew and therefore supposedly not truly French (as it turned out, the real spy was not Jewish). At least Dreyfus ultimately obtained justice, something that many of his race were denied by the anti-Semitic excesses and hatred of the twentieth century.

### German anti-Semitism

The point about anti-Semitism being a European-wide phenomenon is an important one, but it still leaves the historical difficulty of explaining why German anti-Semitism during the Nazi period was so brutal and intolerant. The difference between the unpleasant and random persecution of a Jewish individual, such as Dreyfus, and the deliberately planned deaths of 6 million Jews in Nazi death camps is plainly enormous.

Anti-Semitism had been strong in Germany since the Reformation. Luther had established the Protestant Church in Germany, but in another sense he also became the 'father' of German anti-Semitism. Germany also reacted against the freedoms advocated by the French Revolution, which included equality for Jews.

This inherent German conservatism and prejudice was most strongly represented by the German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814) at the end of the eighteenth century, who denied that Jews were entitled to equality; he also described the Jews as being essentially 'alien' and therefore likely to

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undermine the German nation. The only way to deal with Jews, argued Fichte, was ‘to cut off all their heads in one night, and to set new ones on their shoulders, which should contain not a single Jewish idea’.<sup>2</sup> Like most German anti-Semites, Fichte was convinced of the superiority of German culture. The ideas of the French Revolution, focusing on liberty, equality and fraternity, were, Fichte believed, a threat to German culture and nationhood. He held these ideas even though Germany was then a ramshackle collection of states, the largest of which was Prussia. One of the implications of Germany’s fragmentation was that being German at that time was defined in cultural and ethnic terms: there was no German state as such, so Germans defined themselves in terms of their German *Volk* (race), language and culture.

#### German unity

The national unification of Germany was achieved under Prussian leadership after the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71. A ‘nation’ which had previously been defined by a shared language and culture was thus now recognised as having national boundaries and a place in the European national family.

Germans remained curiously insecure after the unification of their country, however, even though the new German *Reich* (empire) was the strongest industrial and military power in Europe.

#### Anti-Semitism and the political right

This insecurity was largely a characteristic of the German political right, as was the hatred of Jews. The German social-democratic leader August Bebel famously remarked that anti-Semitism was the ‘socialism of fools’ and that the political left did not need such a primitive prejudice. (It had its own, sophisticated, political-belief system in Marxism, the philosophical-political system developed by Karl Marx (1818–83) and Friedrich Engels (1820–95); anti-Semitic rightists were quick to point out the fact that Marx, the father of world communism, was a Jew.)

By the 1890s, anti-Semitism was a potent force in the new Germany. This was partly a reaction to the rise of social democracy (by 1914 the Social Democratic Party (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*, SPD) was the largest party in the Reichstag, the German parliament), which was, perhaps inevitably, linked with Judaism. German anti-Semitism was also a result of age-old Protestant prejudice against the Jews, however (and the influence of Luther should therefore be noted here). Anti-Semites tended to be Protestant members of the *Mittelstand* (middle class), although during the Nazi period some of the most virulent racists were Austrian Catholics, like Hitler. These members of the middle class were alarmed by the rise of working-class power through the SPD and looked for easy scapegoats for their anxieties, finding them in the Jews (as always, irrational fear and hysteria played its part in anti-Semitism). By 1914, some 90 anti-Semitic members of the political centre-right had been elected to the Reichstag. Their success also reflected the fact that Jews had a dominant position in German banking and finance houses, which was resented in German

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society (as illustrated by an unpleasant attack on the German chancellor, Otto von Bismarck's, Jewish personal banker, Gerson Blechröder, in 1875 by a conservative newspaper).

### Leading anti-Semites

Nineteenth-century anti-Semites in Germany tended to be more obsessed with race and less concerned with Christianity than their predecessors. Among them were Karl Dühring, a member of the right-wing German Reform Party; Wilhelm Marr (who described Christianity as a 'disease of consciousness'); and Adolf Stöcker, who founded the Christian Social Workers' Party. Such men were heavily influenced by the essay by the French racial theorist Arthur de Gobineau (1816–82) on the inequality of races, published during the 1850s, which argued that race was the key factor in the rise and fall of nation states. Another influence on them was the famous German composer Richard Wagner (1813–83), a ferocious anti-Semite who looked back to a pre-Christian, mythical Germany free of Jews and the home of flaxen-haired heroes and heroines, who frequently appeared in his operas. Wagner's son-in-law was the Englishman Houston Chamberlain, who wrote the influential work *Foundations of the nineteenth century*, another key anti-Semitic text.

Gobineau, Wagner and Chamberlain, in particular, all contributed to the concept of racial superiority as being an inbred characteristic that was an essential component of Nazism. Yet the anti-Semitism of the 1890s also owed a good deal to the complex insecurities of the extreme political right, which would also feed into national socialism after the First World War. Anti-Semites were often worshippers of the outdoors, food-faddists and occultists; they were also, like the Nazis, almost invariably extreme nationalists. The Pan-German League, for example, which had been set up in 1893 to campaign for the creation of a German empire and the associated unification of all ethnic Germans living in Europe, was clearly anti-Jewish by 1908: Jews were excluded from its membership. The same exclusion was true of the National Germanic League of Clerks, dating from 1893, and the Agrarian League. All these fringe lobby groups regarded Jews as being both 'alien' and wielding too much influence in Germany (anti-Semitic propaganda always exaggerated the degree to which Jews dominated the professions).

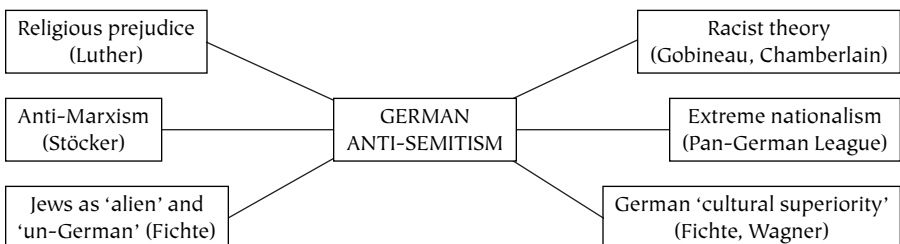


Figure 1. The roots of German anti-Semitism.

## The impact of the First World War

The war of 1914 to 1918 is recognised by historians as having been a crucial component in the development of German post-war fascism, or Nazism. In 1914, on the outbreak of war, there was an outburst of extreme patriotism as all loyal Germans were encouraged to rally around the national flag. This *Burgfrieden* ('truce') spirit of 1914 between the political left and right initially included the Jews, but when Germany began to lose the war anti-Jewish prejudice was revived (the fact that 12,000 German Jews gave their lives for the 'Fatherland' was all too easily forgotten).

The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 in Russia furthermore created a sinister link in the minds of right-wing German nationalists between Judaism and communism (it was undeniably true that some Bolshevik leaders, like Trotsky and Zinoviev, were Jewish). The lie that Jews were somehow profiting financially from the war also proved to be attractive to the right-wing nationalists.

The biggest anti-Semitic lie of all, propagated at the end of the First World War, became particularly potent in right-wing circles. This was the *Dolchstoß-legende* (the stab-in-the-back legend), which claimed that Jews had somehow betrayed Germany by fomenting revolution when the German army was winning the war. Individual Jews, like Walter Rathenau (a future foreign minister of the post-war Weimar Republic), were made somehow responsible for the German Revolution of 1918, when, in fact, most of its leaders were not Jewish. This was nonsense, as Germany's military leaders, Erich Ludendorff and Paul von Hindenburg, well knew: the German army had been defeated by the Allied powers, but Germany's war lords, who had effectively been running the country since 1916, could not bring themselves to admit it. The legend of the *Dolchstoß* would be the most potent of all the right-wing, nationalist myths during the post-war period. It increased the impact of historical German anti-Semitism and encouraged the spawning of a number of far-right political parties, of which the NSDAP (*Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*, the National Socialist German Workers' Party), soon to be led by Adolf Hitler, was one.

Another important point about the First World War in relation to anti-Semitism was that it produced a generation of disillusioned former soldiers who rejected Germany's post-war democracy as effete and corrupt. These men, who almost invariably found their way into the racist, political right, identified the Jews as a 'cancer' in the body politic. Only when the Jews and their communist allies were neutralised, they believed, could the shame and defeat of 1918 be avenged. One of these former soldiers, who was recovering from being gassed in France when the war ended, was Adolf Hitler.

## Hitler's anti-Semitism

Adolf Hitler was born in Austria in 1889. This fact is in itself highly significant, for the young Hitler was a citizen of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It was an empire which had traditionally been dominated by the Austrian Germans before becoming the so-called 'Dual Monarchy' in 1867. It was also a hotchpotch of



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different races, however, most of which (such as the Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Ruthenes and Croats) were Slavs. Ethnic Germans, one of whom was Hitler's own father, Alois, tended to look down on the Slavs as being 'racially inferior'. This feeling of superiority was even more pronounced in the case of the Jews, even though some of the most powerful and influential families in the empire were Jewish (the most notable being the Rothschilds, a famous banking dynasty). In the minds of anti-Semites, such Jewish success seemed proof of the Jews' alleged traditional manipulation of the empire's financial resources.

### The young Hitler

Hitler's family background was complicated. His father married three times and Adolf was the fourth child of his third wife, Klara, who was 23 years younger than Alois. Hitler had several half-brothers and half-sisters as a result of Alois Hitler's serial marital experience.

More pertinently, and intriguingly, there is some mystery about Hitler's paternal grandfather: according to one version, attributed to Hitler's cousin, William Patrick Hitler, his grandfather may have been Jewish, but this allegation is almost certainly without foundation. Nevertheless, as one leading historian of the Holocaust has pointed out, 'uncertainties about his own ancestry must have obsessed the man who made ancestry the measure of the Aryan [those of Germanic race] man'.<sup>3</sup>

When Adolf was five the family left its home in Braunau-am-Inn, on the Austro-German border, and moved to Leonding, a suburb of the city of Linz. Hitler was not a success at school and was described later by one of his teachers as being 'notoriously cantankerous, wilful, arrogant and bad tempered'.<sup>4</sup> He never took his final examinations and thus never received a secondary-school diploma. His relationship with his father, who died in 1903, was tense and acrimonious. Young Adolf seems to have been a typical teenage rebel: he wanted to become an artist, whereas Alois Hitler wanted his son to go into business or to have a technical career. Unfortunately for Hitler, and, in the long run, the whole of Europe, he lacked the talent to become a professional painter.

Hitler's schooldays seem to have been significant only in the sense that he developed a life-long inferiority complex about his lack of formal educational qualifications, as well as an abiding hatred of 'professors'. Only his history master at secondary school is selected for praise in Hitler's book, *Mein Kampf* ('My struggle'), and Hitler, characteristically, got his name wrong!

We look in vain to Hitler's early years for an explanation of his later extreme anti-Semitism, although a recent, controversial study may throw light on it. This book, *The Jew of Linz*, by Kimberley Cornish,<sup>5</sup> suggests that the 'one Jewish boy' referred to by Hitler in *Mein Kampf* was, in fact, Ludwig Wittgenstein, later a famous philosopher at Cambridge University during the 1930s. Wittgenstein was the son of extremely wealthy, Viennese Jews (his father became one of the greatest industrialists in the Austro-Hungarian Empire) and Hitler might well have envied such material success, which contrasted sharply with his own, relatively humble, origins. It has to be acknowledged, however, that Hitler and

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Wittgenstein's schooldays overlapped only in the academic year of 1904 to 1905, and that Cornish perhaps sets too much store by a photograph of the schoolboy Hitler at Linz, with Wittgenstein appearing in a row below him.

The idea that Hitler's anti-Semitism evolved from his dislike of Wittgenstein is a fascinating one. But most historians have dated the origins of Hitler's anti-Semitism to his early manhood and have generally been at a loss to explain its virulence. Ultimately, as Ian Kershaw has pointed out, in his biography of Hitler, 'we remain in the dark about why Hitler became a manic anti-Semite'.<sup>6</sup>

#### The evolution of Hitler's anti-Semitism

In the absence of any convincing support for Cornish's theory, it seems safer to accept the more conventional view: that Hitler's anti-Semitism dates from a later period. The traditional view, that Hitler's anti-Semitic obsession derived from the period that he spent in Vienna after 1908, has recently been challenged. In her book *Hitler's Vienna*, Brigitte Hamann suggests that Hitler only became a convinced anti-Semite after the First World War. She points out that Hitler went to Jewish parties and mixed with Jews in his decrepit lodging-house. In 1952, too, Alan Bullock referred in his biography, *Hitler. A study in tyranny*,<sup>7</sup> to the relationship between the aspiring artist, Hitler, and the Jew Neumann, who befriended him in the doss-house.

Hitler continued to be a failure in Vienna. He failed to get into either the art academy or the architectural academy and became a restless drifter who was dependent on a small family legacy. He read voraciously, if unsystematically, went to the opera a good deal and imposed his increasingly right-wing ideas on those who would listen to him in working-men's hostels. Hitler the demagogue was in the process of being born.

At this juncture it should be pointed out that anti-Semitism was endemic in Vienna when Hitler was living there between 1908 and 1913 and that it therefore influenced Hitler at this time. But the more modern view is that in *Mein Kampf* Hitler overstated his anti-Jewish prejudice in this early part of his life. Hitler reflected the prejudices of those in the Viennese working and middle classes who tended to support right-wing parties before 1914. Before he came to Vienna, on his own admission, Hitler knew few Jews, yet by the time he left the city, in 1913, for Germany, Hitler was aware of the writings of virulent anti-Semites, even though he may not then have been a convinced anti-Semite himself.

Historians still remain in the dark for an explanation of his pathological hatred of a people who had never done him or his family any personal harm. The extreme nature of Hitler's subsequent anti-Semitism is demonstrated in the following passage, one of many which could have been selected from Hitler's writings.

Was there any shady undertaking, any form of foulness, especially in cultural life, in which at least one Jew did not participate? On putting the probing knife carefully to that kind of abscess one immediately discovered, like a maggot in a putrescent body, a little Jew who was often blinded by the sudden light.<sup>8</sup>



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For Hitler, the Jew was a creature of the night, waiting to pollute the German race.

Some so-called 'psycho-historians' have sought an explanation for Hitler's racism in his sexuality. His constant references to Jews as 'seducers' of 'innocent German maidens' have suggested that Hitler may have contracted syphilis in his youth or have undergone an unfortunate sexual experience. Alternatively, Hitler's difficult relationship with his father, or his key relationship with his mother, Klara, have been blamed for his latent, obsessive racism. Klara died in 1907, and the family doctor, Dr Bloch, reported that 'In all my career, I never saw anyone so prostrate with grief as Adolf Hitler'.<sup>9</sup> Was Hitler, as some have suggested, full of guilt because of his feckless lifestyle, his academic failure and his arrival home when his mother was on her deathbed (his first visit to Vienna was just before Klara Hitler's death)? There will probably never be a satisfactory explanation for Hitler's manic anti-Semitism. What is beyond doubt, however, are its consequences.

### Hitler the soldier

The personality patterns which were laid down in Vienna re-emerged when Hitler joined the German army in 1914 (he had avoided conscription into the Austro-Hungarian army). The war gave Hitler the cause that he had been looking for and he appears to have been a brave enough soldier, winning the Iron Cross, First Class. In the army, he subjected his comrades to his anti-Jewish, anti-Slavic and anti-socialist rantings, which makes the point that the Jews were not the only victims of Hitler's prejudices. Nevertheless, army life seems to have given Hitler the comradeship and security that he craved.

The German military collapse in the autumn of 1918 came as a shock to Hitler. Unable to accept the defeat of his adopted country, Hitler sought refuge in fantasy. The Jews, he believed, were to blame for the downfall of his beloved 'Fatherland' and, years later, when Hitler had supreme power in Germany, he determined that if he were to be defeated in a European war the Jews would be made to pay.

Ironically, it was the army that gave Hitler his entry into far-right politics. When he was asked to report on the activities of the newly formed German Workers' Party (*Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*, DAP) in 1919, Hitler was so impressed by what he heard that he decided to join the party instead (it soon changed its name to the National Socialist German Workers' Party). He now had a platform for his racism and his xenophobia.

## Document case study

### The origins of anti-Semitism

#### 1.1 Luther's influence on anti-Semitism

Know Christian, that next to the devil thou hast no enemy more cruel, more venomous and violent than a true Jew.

Source: L. Dawidowicz, *The war against the Jews, 1933–45*, London, 1975, p. 50

#### 1.2 Anti-Semitism as a European phenomenon: the Dreyfus case

Above all Dreyfus was a Jew. The fact that he was Jewish, Marcel Thomas has observed, played no role at the beginning of the Affair . . . But from the moment his name was mentioned by d'Abboville . . . the fact that he was a Jew became – complementary or conclusive – grounds for presuming his guilt.

Source: J. D. Bredin, *The affair. The case of Alfred Dreyfus*, London, 1987, p. 533

#### 1.3 Viennese anti-Semitism

Are You Blond? Then You Are A Culture-Creator  
 And A Culture Supporter!  
 Are You Blond? If so, danger threatens you!

Source: the anti-Semitic magazine *Ostara*, Vienna, 1900s

#### 1.4 Hitler's first encounter with a Viennese Jew

One day when passing through the Inner City, I suddenly encountered a phenomenon in a long caftan and wearing black sidelocks. My first thought was: is this a Jew? They certainly did not have this appearance in Linz, I watched the man stealthily and cautiously, but the longer I gazed at this strange countenance and examined it section by section, the more the question shaped itself in my brain: is this a German? I turned to my books for help in removing my doubts. For the first time in my life I bought myself some anti-Semitic pamphlets for a few pence.

Source: A. Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, Munich, 1925, p. 59

#### 1.5 Germany, 1918: the trauma of defeat

The situation of the German army by November 1918 was in fact without hope. It was only a matter of time before it was driven back into Germany and destroyed. Yet, at the moment when the German Government signed the capitulation, the German army still stood outside Germany's frontiers and still preserved an unbroken front in the west. Moreover, although the initiative for ending the war had come from the High Command, from General Ludendorff himself, this fact was concealed. The High Command not only left the civil government, hitherto denied any voice in the conduct of the war, to take the full responsibility for ending it, but tried to dissociate itself from the consequences of the decision.

Source: A. Bullock, *Hitler. A study in tyranny*, revised edn, London, 1962, pp. 57–58

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### Document case-study questions

- 1 Briefly describe Luther's attitude to the Jews, referred to in 1.1.
- 2 What grounds are presented in 1.2 for assuming the guilt of Alfred Dreyfus?
- 3 How helpful are 1.1, 1.2 and 1.3 as historical sources for explaining the phenomenon of European anti-Semitism?
- 4 What light does 1.4 throw on the origins of Hitler's personal anti-Semitism?
- 5 What link can be established between Hitler's comments in 1.4 and the events described in 1.5?

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### Notes and references

- 1 M. Marrus, *The Holocaust in history*, London, 1987, p. 8.
- 2 L. Dawidowicz, *The war against the Jews, 1933–45*, London, 1975, p. 54.
- 3 Dawidowicz, *War against the Jews*, p. 30.
- 4 A. Bullock, *Hitler. A study in tyranny*, revised edn, London, 1962, p. 27.
- 5 K. Cornish, *The Jew of Linz*, London, 1998.
- 6 I. Kershaw, *Hitler*, London, 1991, p. 19.
- 7 Bullock, *Hitler*, pp. 34–36.
- 8 A. Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, translation by James Murphy, London, 1939, p. 60.
- 9 J. Tolland, *Adolf Hitler*, New York, 1976, p. 27.