

# THE ORIGINS OF TOTALITARIANISM PART 2: ANTISEMITISM

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The Origins of Totalitarianism Part 1:  
Introduction.

In section 1 of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, titled Antisemitism, Arendt describes the history of the Jews in Europe. Beginning with the rise of the nation-state in the late 18th and early 19th centuries most, Jews who were long-term residents of nation-states were given the status of citizen, although they never achieved social status, and were always suspected of allegiances outside the nation-state.

Wealthy Jewish bankers historically were treated more or less civilly, because of their utility in providing loans to governments. This group received various privileges, but generally was not admitted to society. They were more interested in remaining part of the Jewish Community, Arendt says, and did not seek assimilation. Many of the sons of the middle class Jews were highly educated. This group, the intellectual Jews, saw themselves as heirs to the traditions of educated Europeans, and sought assimilation. The great masses of poor Jews were isolated in most nations, by choice to enable them to maintain their religious practice, or by custom or by force.

Antisemitic parties grew in Germany, France and Austria beginning around 1880. Arendt attributes the rise of these parties in Germany in part to the creation of the German state by Bismarck who had always maintained working relations with the Jews. The aristocracy hated him because he ended their remaining feudal privileges, and they found it easy to attack him on Antisemitic grounds. Arendt says French Antisemitism is deeply rooted, and even though there was support

for citizenship, there was always a great deal of suspicion throughout French society.

Arendt thinks a more important factor in the rise of Antisemitic parties was the massive corruption and fraud that came with the rise of capitalist systems, and which led to a financial crash in 1873 that lingered for years. The frauds were not perpetrated by Jews or by Jewish banks, but were enabled by the financial sector which was dominated by a few Jews. Arendt says that much of the loss fell on the lower middle class, small merchants and artisans. P. 37. The Jews who made loans to individuals among the lower middle classes were not the wealthy Jews who dealt with the nation-state, but small lenders who lived in local communities. They were thought to have political ambitions, seeking to rise to power on the backs of small, non-Jewish, borrowers. Antisemitic parties were a response to these perceived ambitions.

The essence of the first section may be the title of the second part: "Between Pariah and Parvenu". As noted, some Jews were admitted to society and to roles in the State and intellectual life, but the Jewish people as a whole were excluded. Even social classes prepared to accord those masses a degree of legal, economic and even political equality would not accept Jews into social equality. Most Jewish people of Europe were never fully integrated, and were always on the edge of attack, as the Dreyfus Affair reveals. For those not familiar with this matter, there is a short description of the main facts beginning at P. 89. Arendt doesn't say so, but Dreyfus' granddaughter Madeleine fought in the French Resistance, was captured by the Nazis, and murdered in the Holocaust. Her name is on the family's tombstone in a crowded corner of the Montparnasse Cemetery in Paris. I've seen it.

The Dreyfus Affair split French society between the Anti-Dreyfusards who supported the Army in its quest to punish Dreyfus even after it was established he was framed; and the Dreyfusards,

who stood for the rule of law fairly applied. Here's an absolutely fascinating discussion from the New York Times in 1904 of one well-known Anti-Dreyfusard, Madame de Loynes, whose portrait by Amaury-Duval hangs in the d'Orsay in Paris, and is one of my favorites. After Zola produced his *J'accuse*, people were in the streets on both sides. Leading Anti-Dreyfusards organized the Butcher Brigades, largely groups of Parisian butchers, to attack the Dreyfusards wherever they gathered, ostensibly on the grounds that they were opposed to the Army, and thus to the nation. See P. 111. This group is a precursor to the Brownshirts, who used violence to attack forces arrayed against the economic establishment in Germany, or the Blackshirts in Italy in the early 20s.

Arendt's history is much more complex, and even a bit troubling in its emphasis on the role played by Jewish bankers. This brief discussion is intended to point out two of the ideas that resonate throughout *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. First, it demonstrates the importance of economic issues in creating political movements. The main cause of the financial crash was the unrestrained market organization of the economy, led by the Aristos and the rich Capitalists. The lower middle class supporters of the Antisemitic parties were deflected from identifying the actual cause, in large part because of centuries-old distrust and hatred of the Jews. Thus, the position of the capitalists and the Aristos was never seriously threatened.

It also highlights a crucial point about assimilation. European Jews were always available as a scapegoat in times of crisis. The status of French citizen didn't protect French Jews, even the famous, like the family of Nissim-Camondo, from being deported to Auschwitz by the Vichy Government.

The Butcher Brigades offer a parallel to the Klan and others who attacked and murdered Black people for decades. They're like the Pinkertons

and the militias attacking union workers across the US for decades. The dead African-Americans, these dead union members and their families, found that they had no political rights despite their putative status as US citizens. We might even see echoes of the attacks on the antiwar protesters in the 60s and Black Lives Matter today, or gun-toting anti-Muslim morons.

Here's a good example of fear of immigrants from President Wilson's Third Annual Message to Congress in 1915:

I am sorry to say that the gravest threats against our national peace and safety have been uttered within our own borders. There are citizens of the United States, I blush to admit, born under other flags but welcomed under our generous naturalization laws to the full freedom and opportunity of America, who have poured the poison of disloyalty into the very arteries of our national life; who have sought to bring the authority and good name of our Government into contempt, to destroy our industries wherever they thought it effective for their vindictive purposes to strike at them, and to debase our politics to the uses of foreign intrigue. ... Such creatures of passion, disloyalty, and anarchy must be crushed out. They are not many, but they are infinitely malignant, and the hand of our power should close over them at once. They have formed plots to destroy property, they have entered into conspiracies against the neutrality of the Government, they have sought to pry into every confidential transaction of the Government in order to serve interests alien to our own.

According to Wilson, the crime of participating in politics is at the heart of the damage done by these immigrants. They have no right to object to government policies or to argue for

one side or the other in WWI. They have no right to organize as unions and take on the capitalists. These are equally grave crimes to Wilson. And his 1915 speech could easily have been given by any of today's Republican presidential candidate about all immigrants.

And it goes without saying that there is one group of US citizens who have never been assimilated.