Anti-Semitism in Politics and Society within Nazi Germany: Historical Research

By February 1920, the Nazi Party was established, with its nationalist and dictatorial ideology. This essay will examine to what extent the Nazi brand of antisemitism was unique and it will address the trends regarding anti-Semitism within politics and society throughout the time period of 1848-1945. Within this, the leaders of Anti-Semitism, the wider discrimination in politics and Anti-Semitism's link to propaganda; will be thoroughly explored. 'Anti-Semitism' refers to the hostility demonstrated toward Jews just because of their religion. 'Semitism' can also be referred to as a term for an ethnic, cultural or racial group. In order for the Nazi brand of Anti-Semitism to be without precedent in politics and society, its discrimination must be superior and incompatible to what has been demonstrated before and after it.

Historical debate surrounding the impact of anti-Semitism has been of plenty. The works of Helmut Walser Smith and Eberhard Jäckel represent the differentiating views amongst historians who focus on the impacts of anti-Semitism.

Helmut Walser Smith is a Professor of History at Vanderbilt University. His teachings and writings focus on modern German history, especially the long nineteenth century. Smith's most famous book 'The Butcher's Tale: Murder and Anti-Semitism in a German Town' , raises many debatable topics within the field of anti – Semitism. The main argument made throughout Smith's book, suggests that the Jewish faith and the religious rituals tied to it was much more to blame than Hitler and the rise of the Nazi party for the hate and discrimination against the Jews. Smith suggests that the discrimination of the Jews was a retaliation of civilians from when the 'blood libel' first emerged in the twelfth century, which was when Jews killed Christian children in order to use their blood for religiously prescribed purposes. The murder of a German high school student in March 1901 is the 'tale' that allows Helmut Walser Smith to explore the ancient and modern historical forces that turned this grisly crime into an event which caused the mass death of Jews within Germany.

In March 1900, a grisly murder came to light in Konitz, a town of about ten thousand inhabitants in the province of West Prussia. A torso, then other body parts of a high-school student were discovered in several locations around town. As the investigation began, rumors circulated that the boy was victim to a ritual murder by local Jews. The arrest of a Jewish skinner on the charge of murder gave the signal in Konitz and the surrounding region for a wave of riots, which continued for the next three months. Encouraged by antisemitic groups who descended on Konitz from Berlin, the violence against the Jews spread across the town.

'The Butcher's Tale: Murder and Anti-Semitism in a German Town' , was written in 1900 and is both a detective-story and an essay on antisemitism. Smith provides a detailed account of the investigation and documents how the efforts of the investigators were crippled by presumption, that the murderer must have been a Jew. The reasons for this presumption, which soon settled onto a local Jewish butcher, provide the focus for Smith's wide-ranging reflections on the cultural dynamics of ritual-murder accusations and the rise of anti – Semitism. The book intended for the general population to be the main audience, however Smith's book has caused wide spread discussion amongst historians of German history. Jay Howard Geller presents

interesting ideas when reviewing Smith’s book, as he suggests that through just one book, Smith can delve into the topic of anti-Semitism with great effort. “During the Butcher's Tale, written for both an academic and a popular audience, Helmut Walser Smith investigates the nature of antisemitism in imperial Germany.”

Eberhard Jäckel was a Social Democratic German historian, noted for his studies of Adolf Hitler's role in German history. Jäckel sees Hitler as being the historical equivalent to the Chernobyl disaster. Jäckel's PhD dissertation was turned into his first book, 1966's Frankreich in Hitlers Europa (France In Hitler's Europe) which is a study of German policy towards France from 1933 to 1945. However, Jäckel first rose to fame through his 1969 book Hitlers Weltanschauung (Hitler's Worldview) , which was an examination of Hitler's worldview and beliefs. The main argument made throughout ‘Hitler’s Weltanschauung,’ is that Hitler facilitated the discrimination of the Jews through his fixed belief in the ‘race and space’ philosophy which he used throughout the entirety of his career. Jäckel suggested that Hitler’s core beliefs caused a struggle for survival between the “Aryan race” (“Germanic race”) and the “Jewish race”. It is suggested throughout Jäckel’s book, that the main reason for the anti – Semitism and acts of hate towards the Jews, was because of Hitler and his determination of people’s racial value.

Within ‘Hitler’s Weltanschauung’ , Jäckel asserts that for Hitler “the originators and bearers of all three counter positions are the Jews.” Jäckel's book was noteworthy as the first account of Hitler's beliefs written in Germany by someone from the left as Jäckel joined the SPD in 1967. One particular critic that has famously battled opinions with Jäckel, is Ernst Notle, who was a German historian and philosopher. Nolte's major interest was the comparative studies of fascism and communism. Originally trained in philosophy, he was a professor of modern history at the Free University of Berlin, where he taught from 1973 until his 1991 retirement. The main area on which these two historians disagreed, centered around the mass genocide of the Jewish community of Germany – the Holocaust. Nolte claims that the Holocaust was not unique but rather ‘one out of many genocides’, however, Jäckel rejects this view and proposes a distinctively different opinion. Jäckel claims; “I, however claim (and not for the first time) that the National Socialist murder of the Jews was unique because never before had a nation with the authority of its leader decided and announced that it would kill off as completely as possible a particular group of humans, including old people, women, children and infants, and actually put this decision into practice, using all the means of governmental power at its disposal.”

The views of Helmut Walser Smith, presented in his book ‘The Butcher's Tale: Murder and Anti-Semitism in a German Town' could be considered to be convincing, as he explores a real-life event in which a Jew is blamed for the murder of an innocent student. Smith tells this story and examines its meaning with great sensitivity. Jews who were eventually found to be guiltless of the murder, had their lives ruined and hopes destroyed. They experienced firsthand the 'fragility of individual human bonds,' finding that neighbors had become strangers. But Konitz itself was also changed for the worse by the 'Butcher's Tale.' Using vast amounts of previously undiscovered material, Helmut Walser Smith has pieced together the web of false stories and accusations that engulfed this Prussian town. The Butcher's Tale presciently anticipates the Nazi pogroms that would descend on Germany three decades later. Similarly, Eberhard Jäckel’s 1969 book ‘Hitlers Weltanschauung’ (Hitler's Worldview) and the views presented within it could be considered as convincing as there is a solid examination of the fundamentals of Hitler’s world view. Although it should be suggested that Smith’s book proposes an overall more convincing view, as the book includes significant details into the investigation of the

murder from March 1900. ‘The Butcher's Tale: Murder and Anti-Semitism in a German Town' overall, is an illuminating study of local-level anti-Semitism and its insinuation into the life of a small town in early 20th-century Germany.

It should be suggested that Smith’s views from his book prove to be more valuable as Jäckel’s views don’t incorporate Hitler or the Nazi party so may not be as useful for this specific enquiry. To add to this, ‘Hitlers Weltanschauung’ is by now quite dated, and some of Jäckel's formulations and conclusions would now be disputed by modern historian.

In terms of context however, Smith’s views may be considered to be less accurate when assessing the NEA question as Hitler was not even close to ruling Germany at the time of the event that Smith describes in his book. Jäckel, although in terms of validity his book lacks strength, for context ‘Hitlers Weltanschauung’ is more accurate as it reflects upon the entirety of Hitler’s ruling over Germany.

The aims of the leaders of Anti-Semitism and their policies were used in a decisive manner in order to make Anti-Semitism without precedent within politics and society. The 1930’s saw major growth in anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism seemed to be formally reintroduced in German society and politics by the racist and antisemitic Nuremberg Laws that were enacted by the Reichstag on 15th September 1935, as seen in Amy Newman’s book, ‘The Nuremberg Laws: institutionalized anti-Semitism.’

Semitism. It is now considered that “The Jew Eater” was a satirical answer to a letter by Wilhelm Marr. A Bremen friend of Marr had implored him to support the cause of Jewish emancipation, but Marr refused and instead published the book, Der Judenspiegel [A Mirror to the Jews] on June 22nd 1862. This publication unleashed debate in Hamburg’s political life and Marr was left to answer to the Democratic Club and the Association for the Advancement of the Freedom of Conscience, both of which he belonged to and eventually Marr finally agreed to resign his seat on the Association’s board of directors. This source is valuable in assessing the precedence of Anti-Semitism in politics and society as it gives an understanding of the establishment of anti – Semitism. This is seen in the source’s connection to Wilhelm Marr, the first person to use the term anti – Semitism as a way of describing the discrimination against the Jews. Source 1 also provides an understanding of how poetry and art was used in Germany to portray many political and cultural ideas. As “The Jew Eater” , was carried on poles around the streets, it can be inferred that poetry was an example of propaganda that influenced many members of society.

It was not only leaders of Anti-Semitism and their policies that increased the precedence of Anti-Semitism in politics and society, but it was also influenced by propaganda that increased Anti-Semitism in wider society. Houston Stewart Chamberlain’s ‘The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century’ presented as a key piece of propaganda, which acted as a warning to the German people about the supposed damage that the Jews could cause. Chamberlain's portrayed the German Jews as greedy and immoral. He concluded by warning that before the 'pure' Germans could become 'lords of the world' they must defeat and suppress the German Jews.) A 1901 cartoon ‘Der Weltboxer’ , by Bower is another key example which helps to depict the influence that propaganda had on politics and society in terms of Anti-Semitism. Source 1 is suggested to be depicting a demonic looking Jewish figure holding a flag while standing on the body of a fallen Aryan. On the flag it states, “Du wirst alle Völker fressen und sollst ihrer nicht schonen”, and across the bottom of the source it states, “Der Weltboxer' Ein zukunftbild aus dem jahre

1901”. A common translation of

terms of depicting the timeline of anti – Semitism and showing the growth of the hatred against the Jews in Germany. However due to this source being written in 1901, it could be suggested that it is not key when discussing how much anti-Semitism was prominent in German politics and society. As this essay is assessing the Nazi party’s use of anti – Semitism and its impact on Germany, Bewer’s cartoon does not have much relevance to this as it explores ideas that are not fully established until a further 30 years after the time of the cartoon being published.

Wider Anti-Semitism in politics also influenced the precedence of Anti-Semitism in society. The article written by David P Conradt gives insight to Anti-Semetic parties present within the German political system. The article tells about how the German Social Party was a far-right political party active in the German Empire. Also called the Deutschsoziale Antisemitische Partei, the DSP had antisemitism as its ideological basis. Also, within politics, oppression and violence was used as a key method of ensuring Anti-semitism was precedent within the whole political system and the greater society of Germany.

Kristallnacht, also called the “Night of Broken Glass,” 30,000 Jewish men were arrested and sent to Nazi concentration camps. The author of this source, therefore, is not a specific person but rather someone who witnessed the horrific events that occurred during “Kristallnacht”. ‘They dragged him onto the streetcar tracks and left him there’ shows the uncalled–for aggression shown by German people towards the Jewish community during “Kristallnacht”. Within Source 2, separate views are expressed, the view of the interviewee and the apparent views of the interviewee’s cousin Klaus Gunter. This is valuable in relation to answering the question of if Anti-Semitism was precedent in politics and society as this source suggests that there were opposing views in terms of if the anti – Semitism in Germany was necessary or not. The interviewee expresses concern for the Jewish victims when she states ‘I offered to take them home with me’, however her cousin presents with much disregard for the Jews and actually blames them for the attack, labeling them ‘nothing but parasites.’ This source therefore is crucial in showing the contrasting views of the German people and their attitudes to the attacks and acts of anti -Semitism towards the Jews. Overall, this source proves to be significant as it makes clear that anti – Semitism was precedent within the society of Germany due to the opposing views expressed throughout source 3. This is shown through the interviewee’s cousins remark of ‘one decisive stroke is preferable to a hundred-year struggle!’ as this suggests that the Nazi party had influenced non - Jewish civilians to believe that anti – Semitism was justified as Germany had ‘picked up almost half a million more Jews’ when Germany annexed Austria.

In conclusion, many factors affected the precedence of Anti-Semitism in politics and society within Germany. Germany was customed to immense political influence and decisive propaganda which in turn strengthened the Anti-Semitic feeling of the people. However, none of these isolated alone would have caused a strong precedence of Anti-Semitism, but rather combined and made more by the significant leaders of the Anti-Semitism ideology of Germany, the precedence of Anti-Semitism within politics and society was inevitable. Political, social and economic strength, heightened the impact and amount of Anti-Semitism, therefore making the precedence of it a natural but devastating path for Germany.