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The Darker Side of Martin Luther

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Abstract

In 1543 Luther published his infamous *On the Jews and Their Lies*. His main arguments can be divided into four major parts. In the first part, Luther attacked what he considered the Jews' "false boasts," mainly their lineage and covenant of circumcision. In the second part, he debated key biblical passages. Third, he focused on the grossest medieval superstitions concerning the Jews are the focus of the third part. The fourth, and final, part included Luther's recommendations for actions concerning the Jews. For the purposes of this paper, the fourth part of this treatise will be primarily examined. It contains the most evidence for Luther's anti-Semitic views, and the Nazis quoted Luther most often from this section.

The Darker Side of Martin Luther

Emily Paras

If we wish to find a scapegoat on whose shoulders we may lay the miseries which Germany has brought upon the world-I am more and more convinced that the worst evil genius of that country is not Hitler or Bismarck or Frederick the Great, but Martin Luther.

-Reverend William Ralph Inge, 1944.

Martin Luther is remembered as one of the most famous religious figures in history, considered to be the founder of Protestantism. However, there was a lesser known side of him, one that was dark and full of hatred. Unknown to popular knowledge, Luther wrote a treatise in 1543 titled *On the Jews and Their Lies*. In this 65,000-word document, he repeatedly attacks the Jews. The consequences of this treatise were far reaching, even extending into the present day, as his writings continue to be reproduced in pamphlets by neo-Nazi and anti-Semitic groups. More devastating, his writings were circulated during the most horrifying event of the 20th century: the Holocaust. Hitler himself named Luther as one of history's greatest reformers in his novel, *Mein Kampf*. How much did Luther's writings affect Hitler and the Nazis? This paper will serve as evidence of how difficult it is to accurately recount past events, especially ones that involve unpleasant aspects of world history. I will examine this topic using primary sources written by Luther and Hitler and official documents concerning the International military tribunal at Nuremberg to explore Luther's influence on Hitler. Secondary sources such as books written by Peter Wiener, Eliot Wheaton, and Daniel Goldhagen, will also be considered in order to compare my findings to those of other scholars.

Luther's attitude toward the Jews appeared to change over his life. His earlier attitudes seemed more sympathetic towards the Jews. The most convincing evidence of this is his publication in 1523 of the essay *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*. In it, he urges Christians to treat Jews more gently, and condemns those who treat them as inhuman. Specifically he accuses Catholics of being unfair to them, arguing that,

If I had been a Jew and had seen such dolts and blockheads govern and teach the Christian faith, I would sooner have become a hog than a Christian. They have dealt with the Jews as if they were dogs rather than human beings; they have done little else than deride them and seize their property.¹

This quote will stand out later in stark contrast to Luther's later works about the Jews. He even goes so far as to write, "If we really want to help them, we must be guided in our dealings with them...we must receive them cordially, and permit them to...hear our Christian teachings and witness our Christian life."² Lutheran theologians who excuse Luther's later anti-Semitic attitudes, called "apologists," often use these two quotes to prove that Luther originally was friendly to the Jews. They offer excuses such as his old age and declining health as reasons why he adopted a negative attitude toward Jews. However, as I more thoroughly examined the primary source itself, I have come to believe that the real "truth," if this can be found, is that Luther was anti-Semitic all along, and only revealed his true colors after becoming agitated and frustrated with the Jews.

As Luther explains, he was prompted to write this earlier essay, *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*, in response to a lie that was circulating about him. This lie was that he did not believe that Mary was a virgin at the time of Jesus's birth. Through this book, he

¹ Martin Luther, *That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew*, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann, trans. Walther I. Brandt, vol. 45 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1962), 200.

² *Ibid.*, 229.

was not addressing the Jews, but Christians who supposedly spread this lie about him. However, he does reveal another, more minor objective, when he writes: “that I might perhaps also win some Jews to the Christian faith.”³ A secondary source written by Andreas Pangritz supports my theory: “A close reading of Luther’s statements will prove that as early as 1523 he was interested in the Jews simply as objects of conversion...there is much more continuity than apologists of the Reformer would admit between Luther’s allegedly pro-Jewish attitude in 1523 and the explicitly anti-Semitic writings of his later years.”⁴ Lutherans are not proud of Luther’s anti-Semitic views. One way they have attempted to salvage his reputation is by alleging that he only became anti-Semitic when he grew older, perhaps due to psychological reasons. Through this and other excuses they have tried to hide the truth, in order to keep this embarrassing aspect of their religion secret.

Another event that demonstrates the continuity of Luther’s views throughout his life occurred in August of 1536. Elector John Frederick of Saxony, one of Luther’s biggest supporters, decreed that all Jews were to be driven out of his electorate. Josel von Rosheim, who at the time was considered the spokesman for the Jews, appealed to Luther for help. At this time Luther was considered to be friendly towards the Jews, especially because of his book, *That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew*. However, Luther refused, much to the surprise of von Rosheim. According to Heiko A. Oberman, a renowned biographer of Luther, “even today this refusal is often judged to be the decisive turning point in

³ Ibid., 200.

⁴ Andreas Pangritz, “Once More: Martin Luther and the Jews,” *Remembering for the Future: The Holocaust in an Age of Genocide 2* (2001): 604.

Luther's career from friendliness to hostility toward the Jews."⁵ During this time Luther tried to convert the Jews, but to no avail. He became frustrated with them, especially when he received a treatise from Count Wolfgang Schlick of Falkenau, which suggested that Jews were attempting to convert Christians to Judaism. Luther records this as justification for writing *On the Jews and Their Lies*, "so that I might be found among those who opposed such poisonous activities of the Jews and who warned the Christians to be on their guard against them."⁶ I believe this event pushed Luther over the edge, and thus began his explicitly anti-Semitic writing.

In 1543 Luther published his infamous *On the Jews and Their Lies*. His main arguments can be divided into four major parts. In the first part, Luther attacked what he considered the Jews' "false boasts," mainly their lineage and covenant of circumcision. In the second part, he debated key biblical passages. Third, he focused on the grossest medieval superstitions concerning the Jews are the focus of the third part. The fourth, and final, part included Luther's recommendations for actions concerning the Jews. For the purposes of this paper, the fourth part of this treatise will be primarily examined. It contains the most evidence for Luther's anti-Semitic views, and the Nazis quoted Luther most often from this section.

Throughout the treatise he decried the Jews, claiming they were "an idle and lazy people, such a useless, evil, pernicious people, such blasphemous enemies of God."⁷ He especially stressed the commonly held belief during this time that because Jews made their livelihood through usury, they were able to steal and rob from others: "we let them

⁵ Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 293.

⁶ Martin Luther, *On the Jews and Their Lies*, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann, trans. Martin H. Bertram, vol. 47, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 137.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 276.

get rich on our sweat and blood, while we remain poor and they suck the marrow from our bones.”⁸ After ranting and raving about the Jews, he gave his advice to his fellow Christians. This advice is in the form of an eight-point plan to deal with the Jews. This plan is most often referred to when scholars attempt to connect Luther with Hitler.

First, Luther told Christians to “set fire to their synagogues or schools and to bury and cover with dirt whatever will not burn.”⁹ This advice was implemented by the Nazis during the anti-Semitic pogrom known as Kristallnacht, which will be elaborated on later in this paper. Second, he recommended that “their houses also be razed and destroyed.”¹⁰ Third, he advised that “all their prayer books and Talmudic writings, in which such idolatry, lies, cursing, and blasphemy are taught, be taken from them.”¹¹ Fourth, he declared that “rabbis be forbidden to teach henceforth on pain of loss of life and limb.”¹²

Fifth, he urged that “safe-conduct on the highways be abolished completely for the Jews.”¹³ Sixth, he wrote that “usury should be prohibited to them, and that all cash and treasure of silver and gold be taken from them and put aside for safekeeping.”¹⁴ This recommendation directly contradicted one of Luther’s earlier statements defending Jews in his treatise, *That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew*, and was also taken by the Nazis. Acting on this advice during the Third Reich, the Nazis often stole money and valuables from the Jews, especially after they were sent to concentration camps. Seventh, he recommended “putting a flail, an ax, a hoe, a spade, a distaff, or a spindle into the

⁸ Ibid., 273.

⁹ Ibid., 268.

¹⁰ Ibid., 269.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 270.

¹⁴ Ibid.

hands...letting them earn their bread in the sweat of their brow.”¹⁵ The Nazis also took this advice when they implemented concentration camps, where Jews were forced into hard manual labor.

Finally, he wrote that “if we wish to wash our hands of the Jews’ blasphemy and not share in their guilt, we have to part company with them. They must be driven from our country...like mad dogs.”¹⁶ This also directly contradicted Luther’s earlier statement criticizing the Catholics treatment of the Jews. This advice was taken by the Nazis as well, but they took it a step farther when they implemented their “final solution.”

Is it “true” that Luther was anti-Semitic? I have to answer with a resounding yes. However, I think the term “anti-Judaic” better describes Luther, considering the fact that “anti-Semitic” is a modern word, first used in the mid-19th century. Anti-Semitism also concerns the issue of race, whereas Luther’s objection to the Jews had nothing to do with their race, but their religious beliefs.

In trying to uncover the “truth” about Luther’s views, the main problem I encountered was the depth of his writings. Luther’s works fill volumes upon volumes of books. To read all of them would be nearly impossible, especially in my case where I had a limited amount of time to research. Therefore I read only the two books that most directly impacted this paper. There may be other important writings of his on this matter that I have not been able to uncover due to time constraints. Also, my readings of Luther’s work are dependent on the translated version. How much should I trust that the translator was accurate? On balance, however, I believe the evidence I did uncover is extensive enough to prove that Luther was anti-Semitic.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 272.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 292.

The influence of Luther's writings on the Nazis was quite profound. Several of Hitler's top advisors quoted Luther, as well as Hitler himself. In the chapter entitled "The Beginning of My Political Activity" from *Mein Kampf*, Hitler's infamous book, he discussed the "great warriors" in this world, who:

though not understood by the present, are nevertheless prepared to carry the fight for their ideas and ideals to their end...to them belong, not only the truly great statesmen, but all other great reformers as well. Beside Frederick the Great stands Martin Luther.¹⁷

Hitler also quoted Luther during one of his speeches: "I do insist on the certainty that sooner or later-once we hold power...the German church established...without a Pope and without the Bible, and Luther, if he could be with us, would give us his blessing."¹⁸

Hitler's top officials soon followed his example, beginning with Bernhard Rust.

Bernhard Rust, Hitler's Education Minister, was quoted in the *Volkischer Beobachter* as saying: "Since Martin Luther closed his eyes, no such son of our people has appeared again...we shall be the first to witness his reappearance...I think the time is past when one may not say the names of Hitler and Luther in the same breath. They belong together; they are of the same old stamp."¹⁹ This quote by Rust demonstrates that he was influenced by Luther, and believed his teachings paralleled Hitler's. In arguing that they "belong together" he tried to justify Hitler's actions through Luther's beliefs.

Hans Hinkel, a journalist and ministerial official during the Nazi regime, was also influenced by Luther. He paid tribute to him during his acceptance speech of Goebbels's Chamber of Culture and Propaganda Ministry, saying that "through his acts and his

¹⁷ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1971), 213.

¹⁸ Peter F. Wiener, *Martin Luther: Hitler's Spiritual Ancestor* (Cranford, New Jersey: American Atheist Press, 1999), ix-x.

¹⁹ Richard Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919-1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 136-7.

spiritual attitude he began the fight which we still wage today; with Luther the revolution of German blood and feeling against alien elements of the Volk was begun.”²⁰ Again, this quote demonstrates that Luther’s works were used to justify Nazi actions. In this case, Hinkel alluded to the fact that Luther began the revolution that the Nazis continued.

One of the most vehement anti-Semitic Nazis during this time period was Julius Streicher, editor of the Nazi newspaper *Der Sturmer*. After the end of World War II, he was arrested and accused of committing war crimes. During his trial, he claimed that “Dr. Martin Luther would very probably sit in my place in the defendants’ dock today, if this book [*On the Jews and Their Lies*] had been taken into consideration by the Prosecution.”²¹ This statement from Streicher shows that he believed Luther was just as guilty as himself, and he uses Luther to defend himself against the accusations being made against him. On October 1st, 1946, he was found guilty of crimes against humanity, and he was executed on October 16th of that year.

Not only did Luther influence important Nazi officials, but it has been suggested that he also helped inspire certain major events during the Third Reich. One of these events was *Kristallnacht*. On this night, November 10th, 1938, Nazis killed Jews, shattered glass windows, and destroyed hundreds of synagogues. Bishop Martin Sasse, a leading Lutheran churchman, immediately saw the connection between this event and Luther’s writing. Shortly after the event, he published a compendium of Luther’s anti-Semitic works. In the foreword, he applauded the event, especially since it occurred on Luther’s birthday. He also wrote that the German people should pay attention to the

²⁰ Ibid., 137.

²¹ The International Military Tribunal, *Trial of the Major War Criminals*, vol. 12, (Nuremburg, Germany, 1947), 318.

writings of Luther, who was the “greatest anti-Semite of this time, the warner of his people against the Jews.”²² Another event in which Luther’s presence was felt was the Nuremberg rallies. During the rallies, a copy of *On the Jews and Their Lies* was publicly exhibited in a glass case, and the city of Nuremberg presented a first edition to Julius Streicher.

Another Nazi propaganda pamphlet that cited Luther was titled “Why the Aryan Law? A Contribution to the Jewish Question.” It was written for mass circulation by Dr. E.H. Schulz and Dr. R. Frercks in 1934. It summarized the “Aryan Law,” which was implemented early in Hitler’s rule with the intent of driving Jews out of the professions. This pamphlet quoted Luther in an attempt to justify Nazi racial legislation. The quote is from *On the Jews and Their Lies*: “They [Jews] hold we Christians captive in our own land. They have seized our goods by their cursed usury, they mock and insult us because we work.”²³ Following this, Schulz and Frercks elaborated on Luther’s ideas and writings, and the connections it had with Nazi legislation. Schulz and Frercks ended the pamphlet by writing that “[i]f in the coming days the Jewish race is driven out of the non-Jewish world...It has made clear to them for all time the value of maintaining the purity of race and blood in clear, understandable and unforgettable ways.”²⁴ Even though Luther does not mention race in his writings of the Jews, the Nazis were able to twist and warp his writings to support their beliefs.

Articles written during the Third Reich also used Luther to support their beliefs. Kurt Hilmar Eitzen’s article written in the party monthly for propagandists, entitled “Ten

²² Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, (New York: Vintage, 1997), 265.

²³ Schulz and Frercks. Accessed from <http://www.calvin.edu/academic/cas/gpa/arier.htm>

²⁴ Ibid.

Responses to Jewish Lackeys,” is one example. This article presented counterarguments to the most common objections the Nazis encountered. These counterarguments were supposed to be used in everyday conversations among common citizens. Luther is quoted to counter argument number 5: “Argument 5: ‘Mr. Levi is not a Jew, since he has been baptized!’ — Counterargument: ‘I have no desire to convert the Jews,’ Martin Luther wrote, ‘since that is impossible.’ A Jew remains a Jew.”²⁵ This is yet another instance of the Nazis’ misuse of Luther’s works. Luther very often contradicted himself on the possibility of converting Jews. However, he wrote that “whenever a Jew is sincerely converted, he should be handed one hundred, two hundred, or three hundred florins.”²⁶ From this statement, one can conclude that Luther believed Jews could be converted. His last sentence in his treatise *On the Jews and Their Lies*, deals with the possibility of conversion: “May Christ, our dear lord, convert them mercifully.”²⁷ Again, Luther might have seen the possibility of Jews converting to Christianity. However, this article uses Luther’s work to support the Nazis’ belief that Jews could not convert because Judaism is a race. The idea of race and the purity of blood was one fundamental belief of the Nazi party. However, not once does Luther mention the idea that Jews were a separate race. The article takes Luther’s quote completely out of context, distorting it to support their claims.

Luther also had an impact on the Lutherans living in Germany during the Third Reich. In 1941, Hitler declared his intent to reform the Evangelical Church and coordinate it with the state. On November 13th, a big rally was held in support of this idea. The movement’s leader, Reinhardt Krause, delivered a speech which dealt with

²⁵ Eitzen, Kurt accessed from <http://www.calvin.edu/academic/cas/gpa/responses.htm>

²⁶ Luther, *On the Jews and Their Lies*, 270.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 306.

“the tasks of a Reich Church in the Spirit of Dr. Martin Luther.”²⁸ Lutherans throughout Germany embraced this idea, and in general the majority did not oppose Hitler and his policies. This may be hard to understand in retrospect, but author William Shirer explains “it is difficult to understand the behavior of most German Protestants in the first Nazi years unless one is aware of...the influence of Martin Luther. The great founder...was both a passionate anti-Semite and a ferocious believer in absolute obedience to political authority.”²⁹ This influence on Lutherans led many of them to accept the Nazis’ anti-Semitic views, and to blindly obey Hitler and other authorities as Luther had preached.

There was one group of dissent, the “Confessing Church,” which was founded in 1934 by a group of pastors. These pastors opposed Hitler’s idea to create a Reich Church. While it has been suggested by many scholars that this group proved that not all Lutherans went along with Hitler, the evidence does not support this claim. Author Eliot Wheaton writes that the Confessing Church “never ceased to resist Nazi encroachments in the religious sphere. Outside that sphere...they...made little effort to oppose the progress of Nazi tyranny and protect its victims.”³⁰ This group was opposed to the Nazis’ interfering in their church, but they were not opposed, or at least publicly, with the Nazi’s ethics. This is not to say that there were not Lutherans who resisted the Nazis, but it is true that the majority were compliant.

How much did Luther actually influence the Nazis? Scholars are split on this issue. Author Robert Waite argues that “Luther would have been appalled by the Third

²⁸ Eliot B. Wheaton, *Prelude to Calamity: The Nazi Revolution 1933-35* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1968), 365.

²⁹ William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), 236.

³⁰ Wheaton, 367.

Reich...he would have denounced Hitler...would have been among the first executed.”³¹ Yet, he also concedes that “we must also say that the great religious reformer did unwittingly help pave the way for Hitler.”³² In this realm, “truth” is harder to find. First of all, the actual pamphlets that were written in Germany during the Third Reich are stored in archives that are not easily accessible. These pamphlets are the primary documents that would offer concrete evidence of Luther’s influence. Another difficulty to discerning the truth is the actions of the Lutheran churches. While Luther did have many positive contributions, this does not excuse or compensate for his negative contributions to society. I was raised as a Lutheran, and yet I never learned of Luther’s anti-Semitism. Now that I think about it, it makes sense that the Lutheran Church would want to keep Luther’s anti-Semitism a secret. There are also very few secondary sources that connect Luther and Hitler, and so I was not able to use a lot of these sources to aid my investigation into the truth of my claim.

In the end, I believe I have uncovered a substantial amount of evidence that proves that Martin Luther was anti-Semitic. However, I believe that I have not uncovered enough truth to thoroughly support my claim that Luther significantly influenced Hitler and the Nazis. Perhaps, in the future, with more time to investigate and research sources, my claim will be proven.

³¹ Robert G.L. Waite, *The Psychopathic God Adolf Hitler* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1977), 249.

³² *Ibid.*, 249.