

Historical antisemitism: the Strasbourg massacre



In **1348-50**, a plague known as the **Black Death** swept across Europe, killing between a third and a half of the continent's population. In this situation, people tried to find someone or something to blame: **in many parts of Europe, they blamed Jews**. It was argued that Jews had poisoned the wells from which people got their drinking water. Pope Clement VI said that people who blamed the Jews for the plague had been "seduced by that liar, the Devil" but he was ignored by many people.

This led to a **series of massacres of Jews, especially in France, Spain and Germany**. The worst massacre took place in Strasbourg. Although the Black Death had not yet reached the city, hundreds of Jews were publicly burned to death on 14th February 1349.

This is an early example of a **pogrom**: an organized massacre of a particular ethnic group, in particular that of Jews in Russia or eastern Europe.

Historical antisemitism: Martin Luther

Martin Luther was a **German monk who was the founder of Protestantism**. Luther and his supporters created a new form of Christianity which rejected the authority of the pope and many of the most important beliefs of Catholicism. In his early writings, in the 1510s and 1520s, Luther **condemned what he saw as the “cruelty” of the Catholic Church’s persecution of Jews**.

However, **Luther’s friendly attitude towards Jews was based on the idea that this would lead to them changing to Christianity**. He believed that they had not converted before because the Catholic Church itself was not truly Christian. **When Jews did not convert as Luther expected, he radically changed his views, leading him to write a book entitled On the Jews and their Lies in 1543**. He accused them of blasphemy for their failure to recognise Jesus as the son of God. Luther **called on Christian rulers to take violent action against Jews**. His suggestions included burning synagogues and Jewish houses, destroying Jewish religious books, and making Jews perform forced labour.



Historical antisemitism: the Rome ghetto



In 1555, Pope Paul IV ordered the creation of a ghetto in Rome. The ghetto was a poor area of the city where Jews were forced to live. It was surrounded by walls and could only be entered through gates which were locked at night. **When Jews left the ghetto to visit other parts of the city, they had to wear special yellow markings on their clothes.** Every year, the Jewish community had to pay a special tax to the pope for permission to continue living in the ghetto.

The Jews were also forced to listen to Christian sermons every Saturday. Paul IV claimed that it was “senseless and inappropriate” to let Jews live among Christians because their “own guilt has condemned them to eternal slavery” – this was a reference to the **common Christian belief that God had punished Jews for all time because they were supposedly responsible for the death of Jesus.**