Subtle Strides:
Mass Culture and Anti-Semitism during the Weimar Republic, 1920-1925

By: Tonya D. Lambert

Abstract

Alien, rootless, parasitic, strange, mysterious, ugly and deceptive: these were common stereotypes of the Jews during the years of the Weimar Republic. Although it is true that the Weimar Republic politically emancipated the Jews in Germany, mass culture of the 1920s clearly defined the minute differences between the German and the Jew. As the Germans read popular works of literature and viewed the various films produced during this time, the question of "*who is the Jew*" emerged. The mass culture of the Weimar Republic did much to answer this question. The authors of the literary works, as well as the producers of the films, preyed upon the prior years of anti-Semitism to subtly reintroduce the concept of *the other*. This concept had almost totally dissipated during Kaiser Wilhelm II's reign. The Jews faced racism and terror in prior years, but during the 1800s had begun to experience emancipation, which later the Weimar Republic tried to complete. This paper will argue that the mass culture of the 1920s encouraged anti-Semitism through the subtle use of prejudice in literature and films.

The common stereotypes of Jews[1], printed literature and the subtle use of prejudice that abounded in films during the interwar period and more specifically during the Weimar Republic, gave rise to anti-Semitic action against the Jews. A good example of this is an anti-Jewish riot, which occurred in the Eastern Jewish community of Scheunenviertel in Berlin. On November 6, 1923, the *Vossiche Zeitung* (a Jewish newspaper) reported:

> ...Looting is going on under cover of darkness. A shoe shop on the corner of Dragonerstra_e has been ransacked, and the smashed fragments of glass from the shop windows are littered on the street. ...On all sides, the same cry: 'Kill the Jews!' ...It is inflamed racial hatred...that has driven them to looting. If anyone with a Jewish appearance walks past, he is followed by a group of youngsters who pick their moment and then fall on him.

The Scheuenviertel incident was representative of past pogroms against the Jews. The police reluctantly stepped in and stopped the angry mob from committing further violence against the Jews.[3] The Scheuenviertel pogrom* is only one of the examples that show the rise of anti-Semitism as virulent and swift during the mid to late 1920s. The former subtle advances of common German anti-Semitic feeling became a frenzied race to the forefront when Hitler and the National Socialist Democratic Worker's Party rose to power in 1933. This paper will show that during the years of the Weimar Republic two types of anti-Semitism became prevalent, political and racial.[4]

The Weimar Republic became associated with the Jews because of the political emancipation its government offered the German Jews. The Weimar Republic allowed Jews to run for political offices, vote in the elections, and thus, be free to make a difference in Germany in many ways. Many Germans tagged the government as *Jewish*. Donald Niewyk states in his book, "The Weimar Republic's acceptance of Jews into the government service led to charges that they had glutted the bureaucracy; as a result, the republic was defamed as the 'Jew Republic'."[5] Indeed, more Jews were active in political roles. Jews became mayors, representatives in major political parties (such as the Socialist Party for Democrats) and leaders in their communities. This activity led to a rise in anti-Semitic feelings and actions.

The government was not the only reason the Weimar Republic became viewed as Jewish. Jost Hermand says that Weimar culture became known as "Judenkultur" (Jewish culture).[6] Many German Jews were noted authors, composers, actors and directors of films. The Jews in Germany were cultured and proud of their German heritage. Paul Bookbinder writes, "German Jews were an acculturated group, committed to the German language and culture. They were well-educated and dedicated to being an integrated part of the population."[7] The Jews in Germany strove to disassociate themselves from anything that that would dissimilate them from German culture. The influx of Eastern European Jewish immigration changed this by bringing anti-Semitism to the forefront in Germany because of the vast differences between the German Jews and the Eastern European Jews.

After World War I and in the early years of the Weimar Republic close to 100,000 Jews immigrated to Germany from Eastern Europe.[8] The Eastern European Jews were very different from the German Jews. They dressed strangely, looked different, held on to their Orthodox Jewish ways, spoke Yiddish and could not easily integrate into German society. This set them

apart from Germans, as well as from German Jews. These differences, which set them apart, provided the prejudiced Germans an excuse to foster their belief that the Jew was *the other*: "alien and rootless".[9] The anti-Semitic Germans took advantage of the increased Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe to prove that the Jews could never be truly German. According to Donald Niewyk the "Anti-Semitic agitators...alternately carped on the nation's inability to absorb the Eastern Jews and sought to obscure the distinctions between the newcomers and German Jews."[10] The high influx of Jews from Eastern Europe became the catalyst for a new set of anti-Semitic stereotypes of the Jews which would later be used by writers in literature and films.

The political emancipation of the German Jews, immigration from Eastern Europe, as well as scientific theories, such as the one which stated, "...Jews were a separate race whose goals and morality were alien to Germans and who were permanently conditioned by their biology",[11] addressed the Jews as a group, instead of as individuals. This made anti-Semitism more serious. It targeted the Jews as a whole, instead of as individuals. The anti-Semitism of the early 1920s grouped all Jews under the same stereotypes of the past, as well as the newer stereotypes of the Eastern European Jews. It no longer mattered if one practiced Judaism or did not, had a long line of German ancestry, had always spoken German or had never left Germany. Resentment of the Eastern European Jews abounded even among the German Jews. The immigration of the Eastern European Jews intensified the hatred against the Jews as a whole.[12] The stage was now set for mass culture to subtly foster, and in many cases reintroduce, the idea of anti-Jewish sentiment to Germans.

Mass culture is culture produced by the masses, for the masses. It reflects what the people want, believe and find important. Mass culture provided a vehicle for the reintroduction of anti-Semitism through literature and films. Perhaps subconsciously, the anti-Semitic tendencies portrayed in the movies and then in the books that the Germans were reading found its' ways deep into their hearts.

Literature played an important part in encouraging anti-Semitism. The books that discussed Jews in a negative light were widely read by upper middle class Germans.[13] This influenced the masses to see the Jews through the eyes of already existent stereotypes. The German writers realized, according to Robertson, that "Stereotypes are not only tenacious, but transferable."[14] Stereotypes generated through literature and film were easy to remember and hard to forget. Many important authors, including Thomas and Heinrich Mann, used common stereotypes such as the ones mentioned earlier in this paper, to describe the Jews in their books. Authors portrayed the Jews as deceptive, devious, parasitic, alien and rootless.[15] Often authors' descriptions of their Jewish characters seemed based upon the appearance of the Eastern Jews. Authors portrayed the Jews as having crooked noses, dark, curly hair and devious, shifty eyes. Another point authors often brought out was the belief that the Jews were shrewd in business and deceitful in all of their dealings.

Many authors also used the stereotypes to describe the parasitic and destructive nature of the Jews. Rudolf Hans Bartsch wrote about marriage between a Jew and a German, in his book, *Seine Jüden* (1921). The husband, in this story, tells his friend that the Jews "...penetrate our Aryan soul and ravage it as parasitic wasps do a wretched worm; painfully, slowly and fatally!"[16] In literature, Robertson points out that the Jew dominates the German. Pamphlets, he stresses, as well as books, described Jews as a *disease*, which would affect anyone who encountered it.[17] The literature written during the 1920s showed the Jews as harmful to German society.

Films portrayed these common beliefs and anti-Jewish sentiments as well. In many ways, films were more effective than literature in influencing Germans to see the Jew as *different*. Literature had a limited effect on the German culture because one had to be able to read to believe its message. Film, on the other hand, had a longer lasting affect because one could see the action and understand the message clearly. Due to this fact, anti-Semitism in films, rather than in literature, is discussed more in depth in this paper. Willi Münzenberg wrote in 1925, "...it ought not to be forgotten that film, through visual images, has a much stronger and penetrating effect on the viewer than the written word does on the newspaper reader".[18] It is true that people remember what they see longer than what they have only read.

As films provided entertainment after the long workday, more workers attended the theaters to escape the realities of the depression, inflation and life. The writers and directors of films tried to reflect the "popular tastes and preferences...*that* [italics mine] the attitudes of white-collar workers"[19] displayed. The theater became a very popular place, not only on the weekends, but during the workweek as well.[20]

Filmmakers realized this and began to use films as tools of propaganda. Cinematic propaganda was instrumental in reintroducing old ideas, as well as in promoting new ideas of anti-Semitic beliefs. The propaganda introduced in the films had three components, "action, suspense, and subtlety".[21] The purposes of the films

produced during the Weimar Republic were to entertain its audience and elusively show that the Jews were harmful to German society.

The Golem[22] is a film produced in 1920, which cunningly shows the harmful nature of the Jews. The basic plot of the film is the story of a Jewish Rabbi and his desire to protect his ghetto from harm. In order to accomplish this, he forms a monster out of clay and casts a spell over him, by which he receives a word from the god, Ashteroth, that will give life to the clay monster. He takes a piece of paper, writes down the word and places it inside of a clay star. The Rabbi then attaches the star to the monster's chest and the Golem comes to life. The Golem is to protect the ghetto from the pogroms against the Jews by the Gentiles. This all works for a while, but the writer of the film adds a startling twist to the old legend and the Golem attacks the Jewish ghetto. The Jews in the ghetto are in a state of confusion as the monster destroys everything in his path. Later in the film, as the monster leaves through the huge gates of the ghetto, he sees a group of children playing outside the gates. The blonde and obviously Aryan children are not even frightened by the monster's size or appearance, but as soon as the Jews run outside the ghetto the children flee, screaming and terrified.

The Golem includes many subtle references to anti-Semitism. One can easily start from the beginning of the film and point out these depictions of the Jews, which set them apart from the Germans. The Jews in *The Golem* lived inside of a ghetto, closed off from the rest of the city. The ghetto was dark, crowded, and guarded by a gatekeeper. The Rabbi practiced witchcraft, black magic and astrology, even though Judaism and Christianity believed that God is all-powerful and that the sinful powers of Alchemy belonged to the devil. The Rabbi also calls on Ashteroth, instead of God. Jews and Christians believe in one God and are not to practice idolatry. In addition, the Rabbi creates the monster out of clay, just as God had formed the first man out of clay. Here the film depicts the Jews as taking the place of God. God formed the man in his own image and breathed breath into the monster; the Rabbi forms the monster and calls upon magic to give the monster life. Next, the Golem's facial features have been described as "Asiatic, Mongolian and Eastern European."[23] Another hint of anti-Semitic discrimination appears in the final minutes of the movie. When the Golem sees a group of children playing in the field outside of the ghetto his rage diminishes. He is enthralled with a beautiful, innocent, little, blonde Aryan girl playing with flowers. She strolls over to him, holds up her arms and the monster picks her up. She finds the star on his chest fascinating and plucks it out. The Golem/monster topples over, all breath gone and the children laugh. After the Jews appear and the children flee from the scene in terror, the gates of the ghetto swing closed on their own; the Jews are once again put in their place, and the Gentile town is spared from the harmful Jews. This film includes sly references of danger, harm, and destruction that the Jews bring upon a society. Professor Jennifer Good stated in a German film course that, "The anti-Semitism in this film reflects more closely the political view of the 1920s than the 16th Century...the Jews are portrayed as...a threatening presence to the...society."[24] This movie is not the only one produced during the Weimar Republic that showed anti-Jewish sentiments.

The movie *Nosferatu*[25] , produced in 1922, is the story of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and includes subtle references to anti-Semitism. The plot in this movie concerns the vampire's desire for blood. Nosferatu, the vampire, sees a picture of a young, beautiful woman and starts out on a voyage to find her. He travels slowly on a boat, encased in coffins and rising only in the darkness of the night to prey upon his victims. He draws strength and nourishment from the blood of his victims, as well as the soil in the coffins. His journey brings a plague to every port his ship enters. Finally, Nosferatu finds Jane, the young woman whose picture he noticed and seeks to make her his next victim. Instead, Jane finds a book that her husband brought home and realizes that only true love can destroy the vampire. She willingly offers herself up as Nosferatu's victim and through her sacrificial death the vampire disappears just as the sun rises over the horizon.

Anti-Semitism in *Nosferatu* is very subtle and relies heavily on prior knowledge of how the Germans viewed the Jews. In this movie, the audience views Nosferatu as the cause of the plague. During the middle ages, Germans often accused the Jews of being responsible for the Black Death plague. Nosferatu's strength and vitality comes through sapping the life out of others, just as a parasite does to its host. The literature, stereotypes and films of the 1900s portrayed the Jews as parasitic. Nosferatu's very appearance is eastern. His nose is long and crooked, hair and eyes are dark and he looks scary. The viewers see the vampire as unnatural, disfigured and very different. He stands out from among the other characters; there is nothing ordinary about him. The stereotypes of the Jews portrayed them in the same fashion. Once again, the subtle reference that the Jews are dangerous to one's health and safety is included in this movie. It is also Jane's innocence and purity (obviously from a German perspective) which brings about the vampire's destruction.

The Golem and *Nosferatu* are prime examples of

Weimar culture. Both movies received recognition in Germany and abroad, especially *Nosferatu*. The movies were popular. Sabine Hake points out that these films "...were not...free of racial stereotyping...through the negative depiction of Jewish characters and the fixation on typical 'Jewish' features and qualities."[26] The viewers of the films would have recognized the stereotypes that were present and been familiar with the anti-Semitic remarks, looks and suggestions made in each movie.

During the years of the Weimar Republic, the Jews received almost total political emancipation, but tensions began to rise as the level of anti-Semitism rose in literature and films. Although most of the anti-Semitism present in Germany at this time was subtle, sporadically, violent attacks did occur against the Jews. Walter Rathenau, a Jewish political leader in the Weimar Republic, stated, "Every Jew no matter how wealthy or well-educated comes to the realization that he will always live as a second class citizen."[27] Rathenau was later assassinated because he was Jewish. Albert Einstein, another German Jew who noted anti-Semitism was on the rise in Germany stated, "...I saw worthy Jews basely caricatured and the sight made my heart bleed. I saw how schools, comic papers, and innumerable other forces of the Gentile majority undermined the confidence of even the best of my fellow Jews."[28] Propaganda and the use of literature and films did make a difference in Germany during the Weimar Republic. In a time when Jews seemed to have gained ground politically, they lost ground in every other way. Germans fell prey to the subtle nurturing of hatred through film and literature, and anti-Semitism increased allowing for the rise of the Nazi Party and the terror that the Jews and others would later face.

Footnotes

[1]See the following books for examples of stereotypes:
Sarah Gordon, Hitler, Germans and the "Jewish Question" (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 25.
Walter Grab and Julius H. Schoeps, Juden In Der Weimarer Republik. (Stuttgart: Burg Verlag, 1986), 10.

[2] As quoted in: Detlev J. Peukert, The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity. Translated by Richard Deveson (Suhrkamp Verlag am Main, Germany: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1987), 160.

[3] See: ibid, 160.

* A pogrom is a violent attack against the Jews, their properties and beliefs.

[4] See: Omer Bartov, "Defining Enemies, Making Victims: Germans, Jews, and the Holocaust." The American Historical Review 103.3 (June, 1998): 779.

[5] Donald L. Niewyk, The Jews in Weimar Germany (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 9.

[6] Walter Grab and Julius H. Schoeps, Juden In Der Weimarer Republic (Stuttgart: Burg Verlag, 1986), 9.

[7] Paul Bookbinder, Weimar Germany: The Republic of the Reasonable (NY: Manchester University Press, 1996), 195.
See also: William W. Hagen, "Before the 'Final Solution': Toward a Comparative Analysis of Political Anti-Semitism in Interwar Germany and Poland." The Journal of Modern History 68.2 (June 1996): 359.

> *William W. Hagen writes in his article*, "The German Jews compromised only about 1 percent of the general population, to which they were-apart from the small number of immigrant Ostjuden (eastern Jews) in the midst-highly assimilated linguistically and culturally, as well as in many other respects."

[8] Sarah Gordon, Hitler, Germans and the "Jewish Question" (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 9,10, 51-53.
9 Ibid, 9&10.

[9] Ibid, 9&10.

[10] Donald L. Niewyk, The Jews in Weimar Germany (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 15.

[11] Paul Bookbinder, Weimar Germany: The Republic of the Reasonable (NY: Manchester University Press, 1996), 198.
See also: Ritchie Robertson, The 'Jewish Question' in German Literature 1749-1939: Emancipation and its Discontents (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 184.

12 See: Benz, Wolfgang, Arnold Paucker and Peter Pulzer. Jüdisches Leben in der Weimarer Republik. (London: Leo Baeck Institute/ Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1998), 179.

Juliane Wetzel and Werner Bergmann state in their article "Der Miterlebende weiß nichts":

> "Eine verbreitete Strategie, die Gefährlichkeit des Antisemitismus herunterzustufen, bestand darin, sich selbst oder die jüdische Bezugsgruppe als nicht betroffen anzusehen.

Hier schien für viele die Existenz der eingewanderten, haüfig sozial deklassierten Gruppe von Ostjuden eine naheliegende Erklärung für den in der unmittelbaren Nachkriegszeit pogromartig aufbrechenden Antisemitismus zu bieten."

The basic idea in this quote is that anti-Semitic Germans classified the German Jews with the Eastern Jews. The German Jews realized that the category the Germans placed the Eastern Jews into would cause many problems (i.e. Pogroms, stereotypes, etc.), because of this they realized that danger laid ahead of them.

[13] Sarah Gordon, Hitler, Germans and the "Jewish Question" (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 26.

[14] Ritchie Robertson, The 'Jewish Question' in German Literature 1749-1939: Emancipation and its Discontents. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 184.

[15] Once again see the following books for more examples of stereotypes:

Sarah Gordon, Hitler, Germans and the "Jewish Question" (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 25.

Walter Grab and Julius H. Schoeps, Juden In Der Weimarer Republik. (Stuttgart: Burg Verlag, 1986), 10.

[16] As quoted in: Ritchie Robertson, The 'Jewish Question' in German Literature 1749-1939: Emancipation and its Discontents (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 195.

[17] Ritchie Robertson, The 'Jewish Question' in German Literature 1749-1939: Emancipation and its Discontents (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 195.

[18] Willi Münzenberg, "Conqueor Film!," in The Weimar Republic Source Book (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 228-229.

[19] Sabine Hake, German National Cinema (NY: Routledge, 2002), 47.

[20] Günther D. Dehm, "Berlin Workers' District", in The Weimar Republic Source Book (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 245-247.

[21] Bruce Murray, Film and the German Left in the Weimar Republic: From Caligari to Kuhle Wampe (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 25.

[22] Der Golem: wie er in die Welt Kam. Dir. Paul Wegner. Perf. Paul Wegner, Albert Steinröck, Lydia Salmonova, and Hans Strum. UFA, 1920.

[23] Jennifer Good, Class notes on the "Golem: wie er in die Welt kam." (IUSB German Cinema G370, South Bend, June 2002).

[24] Jennifer Good, Class notes on the "Golem: wie er in die Welt kam." (IUSB German Cinema G370, South Bend, June 2002).

[25] Nosferatu. Dir. F.W. Murnau. Perf. Max Shrek, Gustav von Wangenheim, Alexander Granach, Greta Schroeder. Prana-Film, 1922.

[26] Sabine Hake, German National Cinema, (NY: Routledge, 2002), 29.

[27] Paul Bookbinder, Weimar Germany: The Republic of the Reasonable (NY: Manchester University Press, 1996), 196.

[28] Ibid, 196.

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Tonya L. Lambert is a currently a senior, double majoring in History and German, and plans to graduate in May 2004. She wrote her paper, *Subtle Strides: Mass Culture and Anti-Semitism during the Weimar Republic, 1920-1925*, for Dr. Sace Elder's History in the Twentieth Century course.