As for the Jewish question no Nazi and few Germans except the violent anti-Nazis were sane on the subject. Their hate of the Jews was like a rabies that had infected a whole nation. Yet, if there is to be appeasement in Europe and some measure of understanding with Germany, the German attitude towards Jewry cannot be ignored. Hate is always unreasonable, but it is rarely groundless, even if the grounds themselves are mean and despicable.

R. H. Bruce Lockhart

Introduction

In 1939 Martha Dodd, the daughter of the American ambassador to Germany, wrote these words of warning:

If Hitler is allowed by his own people and by the people and leaders of the world to remain in Germany, I fully believe that eventually there will be no Jews in Germany. ... the Jews should recognize, once and for all time, that Fascism, no matter what its local colour or brand, is bent on the extermination of their people. They must join, rich and poor alike, in fierce and uncompromising action, against its continued existence and future conquests.²

That such words were published in Britain before the outbreak of World War II is significant. But perhaps even more significant is the fact that very few British writers were ever so explicit. In order to understand why, it is important to bear in mind Tony Kushner’s warning that British writers’ views on the persecution of the Jews in Germany cannot be understood without taking into account existing attitudes towards the Jews in Britain. Kushner writes that the dominant discourse regarding Jews in Britain was ‘a liberal discourse demanding that the Jew should assimilate totally into British society’. Whilst one can also identify extreme, ‘exclusionary anti-Semitism’ – which
argues that the Jews will always be alien and a threat to the British way of life – and ‘social anti-Semitism’ – typified by genteel golf club prejudice – it is ‘assimilationist anti-Semitism’ that derives most clearly from the British liberal tradition. This is a tradition that does not tolerate violence against minorities, but in return demands their adoption of British ways. This ‘unwritten emancipation contract’ is summed up by Kushner: ‘Britain was a tolerant society and was thus opposed to the intolerance of anti-Semitism. The Jew, in return for his total acceptance in Britain, would remove any distinctiveness. The corollary of this, however, was that if anti-Semitism persisted after emancipation then it was the Jew’s own responsibility.’ Kushner suggests that the ‘emancipation contract’ theory explains the development of ambiguous and complex attitudes towards Jews that took place in Britain, and which must be taken into account when explaining British responses to the Nazi rise to power in Germany: ‘Only by referring to these ideological traditions can one understand the complicated and, on the surface, often contradictory reactions to the persecution of the Jews in the 1930s.’

Todd Endelman criticizes Kushner’s theory of assimilationist antisemitism, arguing that antisemitism in Britain has little to do with liberalism or any other political creed, and more to do with ‘deeply ingrained cultural habits that would not have disappeared if the British political and economic system had been miraculously transformed overnight’. He also claims that there is little evidence to support the view that emancipation was seen at the time as a contractual agreement. Whoever is correct, there can be no doubt that the range of attitudes to Jews in Britain, and thus the range of responses to their persecution in Nazi Germany, was complex, and often apparently incoherent.

This complexity is typified by Harold Nicolson’s statement: ‘Although I loathe antisemitism I do dislike Jews’, or by George Orwell’s claim that whilst antisemitism was never respectable, ‘it was accepted more or less as a law of nature that a Jew was a figure of fun’ and that the widespread antisemitism in England ‘does not at present lead to open persecution, but it has the effect of making people callous to the sufferings of Jews in other countries’. Even among Jews themselves such complexity was the norm. Victor Gollancz, for example (himself hardly representative of British Jews), reported to Lord Bearsted: ‘The other day I heard of a very wealthy Jew who remarked: “I am not against Fascism. I am against the anti-semitic side of Fascism.” With such a point of view I can have nothing whatever to do.’

This chapter shows that, on the level of ideas that were available to the public (as opposed to confined to the desks of civil service mandarins), there were many types of antisemitism, just as there were many types of sympathetic response to the persecution of the Jews in Germany. The ways in which existing attitudes to the Jews in Britain influenced the responses made to their treatment in the Third Reich reveal how complex are the trajectories of prejudice and concern. Apart from the extreme cases, few were