Anti-Semitism in a United Germany

Werner Bergmann

In contrast to the main immigrant groups living in Germany such as the Turks and minorities who are clearly ‘atypical’ in terms of their appearance, the small minority of Jews (around 43,000 individuals) is inconspicuous in everyday life. The Jews are also socially and legally fully integrated and have citizen status by law. Whenever there are attacks on Jewish facilities or anti-Semitic opinions are voiced, this is motivated by the special German-Jewish history and by old anti-Semitic traditions and not by recent social conflicts. The Jews are primarily represented in the public eye as the victims of the Holocaust, whereas other victim groups such as gypsies, foreign forced labour or Russian prisoners of war have never achieved this status. On the one hand, this has meant that Jews have always represented their interests to a wider audience than other persecuted peoples or immigrant minorities who have settled in Germany more recently. On the other hand, anti-Semitism has become a taboo subject in public. The topic of ‘the Jews’ is ‘somehow unsettling’ and is avoided to the extreme, especially as this subject is always associated with unwelcome reminders about National Socialism.1

In the late eighties, survey results seemed to suggest that anti-Semitism was in steady decline in line with the natural ageing process of the older generation. Surveys of cohort groups after 1935 suggested that there was a hard core of only around 5 per cent of the population who supported anti-Semitism (on surveys up to 1989, see Bergmann and Erb, 1991). Western fears that many GDR citizens who were to be allowed to become part of the new FRG would be anti-Semitic and racist turned out to be completely unfounded. Comparative opinion polls carried out in 1990 found far fewer anti-Semites among GDR citizens (4–6 per cent) than in the former FRG (15 per cent) (Wittenberg et al., 1991; Jodice, 1991; Emnid Institute, 1992).
Discrimination against foreigners and asylum-seekers living in Germany was virtually the same in both east and west. Then the well-publicised wave of racist violence erupted after 1991. In its wake came renewed attacks on memorials for Jewish victims of the Holocaust and Jewish burial grounds as well as anti-Jewish propaganda and defamation. The way anti-semitism is so frequently reported in the press makes it appear to be some kind of xenophobia, although I do not support this view. Jews living among the population at large are not seen in the same context as the ‘immigrant problem’. The perpetrators do not see them as a threat to their jobs, homes or welfare, or even as a ‘cultural threat’. Anti-Jewish feeling is clearly related to the German heritage. It is highly unlikely that memorials to the Holocaust were almost exclusively attacked and vandalised simply because of the efficiency of the security provisions for Jewish community buildings. Current anti-semitism in Germany does not feed on the ethnic group conflict which is common practice in the US. It represents a sentiment derived from the unique German/Jewish history which is why we speak of ‘secondary anti-semitism’. The perpetrators of the attacks in Sachsenhausen or the Plitz Bridge in Berlin can be traced to the extreme right of the political spectrum. There, anti-semitism has retained its meaning since 1945 beside the new target of ‘foreigners’. The fact that these anti-Jewish attacks from the extreme right occurred in the wake of a new wave of racist activity only accounts for the link between anti-semitism and xenophobia within these groups and does not prove that both normally arise as a result of the same motive and conflict definitions.

Let us now examine anti-semitism on four levels: the attitude of the general public towards Jews, anti-Jewish actions, anti-semitic organisations, and opinion and public reaction of the political elite.

**Attitude of the general public towards Jews**

There have been several waves of anti-semitic violence in the FRG (for example, in 1953, in 1959/60, in 1965 and at the end of the 1970s), which have not necessarily been associated with any increase in anti-Jewish feeling among the general public. What is the position today? Following German unification, has a new nationalism begun to develop, and a desire to forget the past which has made the ‘admonishing’ of Jews ‘more undesirable’ than before 1989? The picture revealed by the latest opinion polls is inconsistent. Jews living in Germany at the end of 1991 were considered less likeable than in 1989. On an