CHAPTER 8

Anti-Semitism in the Late 1990s

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Introduction

Since 1986 surveys on anti-Semitism have been conducted in rapid succession, inspired by a series of public conflicts over the attitudes of Germans toward Jews and their Nazi past (see an overview by Bergmann and Erb, 1997). The reunification of Germany, the electoral success of extreme Right-wing parties, and the wave of violence directed against foreigners in 1991–93 have occasioned further studies (Wittenberg et al., 1991; Jodice, 1991; Emnid-Institut, 1992; Golub, 1994; Freytag and Sturzbecher, 1997; Weil, 1997, cf. Bergmann and Erb, 1997). Investigations of xenophobia and of the electorate of extreme Right-wing parties have included anti-Jewish attitudes in their scope (Förster et al., 1993; Falter, 1994). In their essential features, the studies of the 1980s and early 1990s drew a coherent picture of the distribution of attitudes among the west German population. The primary influences on attitudes toward Jews were such factors as age, level of education, and political orientation: anti-Semitism was found mostly among people who belonged to the so-called National Socialist generation, who had a lower level of schooling, and who labeled themselves politically to the Right.

This picture remained stable for over a decade but has begun to change since the mid-1990s. In the first years after unification, the population in the new Länder differed from the west German population in a number of aspects: for one, anti-Semitic attitudes were considerably less widespread, though this may have changed since two studies from 1998 no longer indicate any difference between east and west.
Germans (Forsa-Institut, 1998; Stöss and Niedermayer, 1998). For another, as a result of the GDR’s homogenous social and educational structure, education and vocation have only had a small influence on attitudes toward Jews. Yet, in east Germany, like in the west, the oldest generation shows the most intense anti-Semitism. However, unlike in west Germany, there are signs of rising anti-Semitism among the youngest cohorts as compared to the middle-age groups. Recent youth studies indicate that more east German youths can be categorized as anti-Semitic, antiforeigner, and Right-wing oriented than is true for their west German age mates (Freytag and Sturzbecher, 1997; also Stöss and Niedermayer, 1998, for the Right-wing extremism potential). Gender and educational level play significant roles in this phenomenon. Both in east and west Germany, young men from elementary and vocational schools are disproportionally anti-Semitic. The age distribution of anti-Semitism therefore could become more diffuse with the dying out of the generation that lived through National Socialism, for with it will pass the heretofore dominant pattern, a generational effect conditioned by historical events.

As the following analysis will show, external factors of an economic, social, and political nature appear to have had little visible impact on attitudes toward Jews over the past 15 years. One exception is the large-scale immigration to Germany, which has led to the development of sizable ethnic minorities that are judged negatively by political groups, the media, and the German population at large. A xenophobic attitude has developed among the population that to some degree now includes Jews in its scope. Anti-Jewish attitudes, which were primarily determined by past German–Jewish relations, in particular by the Nazi persecution of Jews and its aftermath, can now develop among the younger generation in the context of xenophobia. A possible indicator is the fact that among east Germans the historically conditioned form of anti-Semitism was lower than for west Germans as a result of the antifascist orientation of the GDR, but in questions of social distance, lifestyle, and legal rights Jews received a higher level of rejection in the east. The role of anti-Semitism in the context of xenophobia will therefore be closely investigated in this chapter (see also Bergmann, 1993; Bergmann and Erb, 1997; Herrmann and Schmidt, 1995).

Our analysis will also pay attention to some important theoretical concepts, such as anomie, authoritarianism, ethnocentrism, and relative deprivation, that have been slighted in the most recent research. Their analytic value is established by previous analyses confirming interconnections between anti-Semitism and attitudinal syndromes such as