



Improved Perception of Jews in 1950s America

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Abstract

- **Goal: address how Jewish people were perceived in the USA during the 1950s**
- Thesis: The decline of antisemitism in the 1950s contributed to a prosperous decade for American Jews in which negative stereotypes were less prevalent. This is contrary to what may be expected in the context of the Cold War.
- Use historical background information to show why negative stereotypes were applied to American Jews in the Cold War
- Although it was still prevalent, reduced levels of antisemitism made the 1950s into a prosperous decade for American Jews.
- Methods: using the historical newspaper archive through UNC Chapel Hill's Libraries I conducted a search for information on Jews in American newspapers during the 1950s. I selected one newspaper to represent certain regions, such as the South, Midwest, and Eastern United States. Different phrases, such as "Jew," "Red Scare," and "HUAC" were used to narrow down search results.

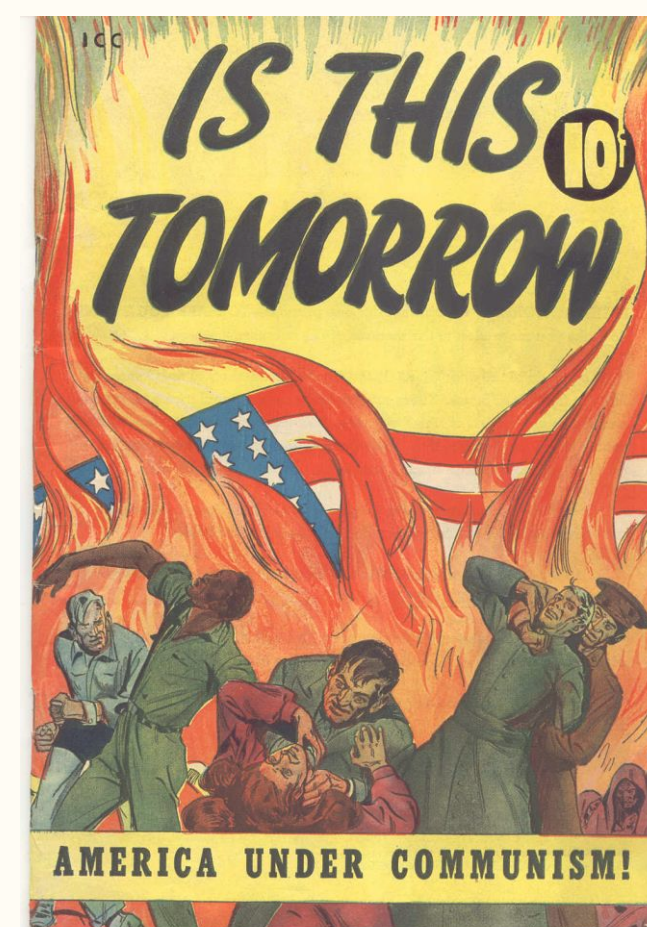
Historical Overview

- A brief overview of the history of Jews in the USA helps to establish the context for how Jews were perceived during the 1950s.



Statue of Liberty, Adamski, 2012

- **1880-1920:** largest wave of Jewish immigration to USA
 1. Roughly one third of European Jews fled to the USA
 2. Many Jews assimilate
 3. The highly educated, influential classes resist assimilation; refused most Jews entry to private universities
 4. Populist Party in the South and Midwest claimed "greedy Jewish bankers" had caused the economic decline of the 1890s



Is This Tomorrow? America Under Communism, 1947

- **1917-1930s:** the first Red Scare in America
 1. Widespread fear of communism and socialism, this was connected to foreigners (especially Jews) and led to immigration restrictions
 2. Some blame Great Depression on Jews, this was because many prominent bankers were Jewish
 3. Common people viewed Jews as outsiders still and placed blame on them



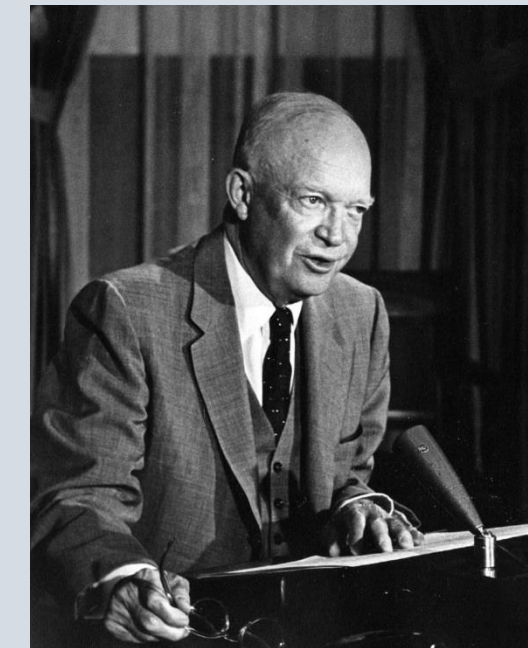
1950s Suburbs, The Marketplace, 1950s

- **Post World War II:**
 1. Attitudes towards Jews begin to change
 2. Popular movies condemn antisemitism
 3. 1950s emerge as period of prosperity for Jews

Northeastern/Midwestern Newspapers

Articles in the New York Times and the Chicago Daily Tribune suggest that Jews were better off in the 1950s than in previous.

- The President of the World Jewish Congress, Nahum Goldmann says that "Jews nearly everywhere are equal citizens, both politically and economically."
- Joint Jewish-Christian Thanksgiving service was led by a rabbi in a prominent Christian church.



Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1953

- When President Dwight D. Eisenhower says that the "teaching of [the Jews'] ancient belief is filled with truth for the present day," he is supporting Jews and attempting to combat the negative views of Jews that were held by Christians and others in America.

However, there was some evidence that antisemitism still existed:

- One study shows that from 1930 to 1960, Christians outnumbered Jews 30 to 1 in top economic positions.



Wall St. For Main St., 2014

Southern Newspapers

The Atlanta Daily World presented similar stories to ones in the New York Times and the Chicago Daily Tribune, but also had more reports related to antisemitism.

There were outbreaks of antisemitism:



Atlanta Temple Bombing 1958, The Temple, 1958

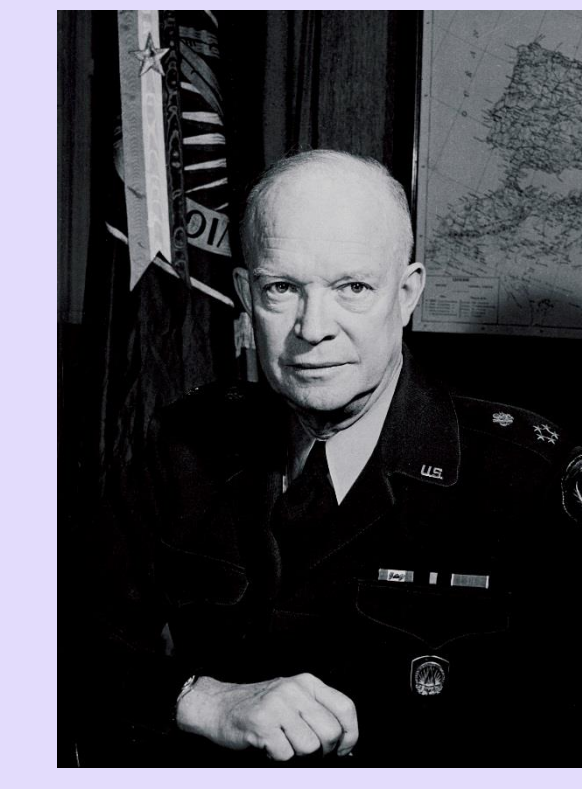
- Temple bombings in Atlanta, Nashville, Charlotte, Jacksonville, and Miami during 1958 and 1959 demonstrated that antisemitism still existed.

Although there were also signs of decreasing tolerance for antisemitism:



United States Congress Building, Frost, 2013

- Congressman James Roosevelt of California tries to disband the House Un-American Activities Committee. Receives some support from other members of Congress. This was in response to Red Scare returning.



General Dwight D. Eisenhower, NATO Photos, 1950

- President Eisenhower took a hard line against the temple bombers, telling the American public that the targeting of innocent civilians is unacceptable, regardless of religious affiliation.

Jewish Newspapers

Overall the Jewish newspapers such as the American Israelite and Jewish Exponent had positive outlook on 1950s:

- Professor Oscar Handlin of Harvard University worried Jews will lose culture amid low antisemitism. This showed that even prominent Jewish scholars viewed antisemitism as on the decline.



The Jewish Post, May 8, 1936.

- Dr. Jacob R. Marcus believes that Jews finally believe that they are Americans, and no longer view themselves as immigrants. Dr. Marcus and Handlin were chosen as they were prominent academics who spoke of the decline in antisemitism during the 1950s.

Role of Movies



Crossfire, BlogSpot, 1947

Crossfire

1. An innocent man is found dead
2. No initial ideas for motive
3. As the investigation unfolds, it is suggested that a group of antisemitic ex-soldiers committed the murder.



A Gentleman's Agreement, WorldPress, 1947

A Gentleman's Agreement

1. A journalist goes undercover as a Jewish man.
2. Sees the awful treatment Jewish-Americans endure
3. Theme of the movie that antisemitism is unjust and has no place in the world.

- A Gentleman's Agreement won the Academy Award for Best Picture in 1947 – showing the popularity of these movies

Conclusion

- Although anti-Semitism still existed, it declined during the 1950s.
- Key Findings:
 - Jews were perceived differently in the South than they were in other regions of the USA.
 - Antisemitism was more prevalent in the South, where temple bombings occurred during the 1950s, but evidence suggests that attitudes toward Jews were improving.
 - **The 1950s appear to have been a time of relative peace and prosperity for Jews in the USA. This may come as a surprise given the tension of the Cold War environment.**

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