Improved Perception of Jews in 1950s America

Joshua Barnes - University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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.

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.

  • 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

  • 1917-1930: 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

  • 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

Role of Movies

• Two popular movies from the late 1940s show that antisemitism was decreasing in the USA.

  • 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.

Conclusion

• Although anti-Semitism still existed, it declined during the 1950s.
  • 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.

Jewish Newspapers

• 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.

Northeastern/Midwestern Newspapers

• 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.

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:
    1. Temple bombings in Atlanta, Nashville, Charlotte, Jacksonville, and Miami during 1968 and 1959 demonstrated that antisemitism still existed.

  • Although there were also signs of decreasing tolerance for antisemitism:
    1. 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.

  • 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.

Selected References

General Dwight D. Eisenhower. www.netra.net
Jewish Women’s Archive. “Recording of The Temple, Atlanta, Georgia.” http://jwa.org/media/recording-of-the-temple-atlanta-georgia
Hill’s Marketplace. 2014
Ktav. 1974. The Marketplace
Libraries I conducted a search. “Jew,” “Red Scare,” and “HUAC” were used to narrow down search results.
Marcus, Dr. 2003. “Bombing of The Temple, Atlanta, Georgia.” Jewish Women’s Archive. “Bombing of The Temple, Atlanta, Georgia.”
Wall St. For Main St., 2014
Wall Street Poster. www.wallstreetposter.com
Wall St. For Main St., 2014