

Lesson 2 Antisemitism

STUDENT HANDOUT - Summary of Antisemitism

Antisemitism is often referred to as “the longest hatred.” Antisemitism had long been deeply rooted in Germany and other European countries, and grounded in the doctrine of Christianity. The image of the Jew as the murderer of Jesus and the fact that Jews had rejected Christianity’s embrace led to widespread hatred and suspicion. Jews were also falsely accused as traitors. For example, in many theological texts, Jews have been associated with Judas, originally a disciple and later the betrayer of Jesus Christ. Jews in Christendom were humiliated, banished from their places of residence, forced to wear identifying marks, and confined to separate residential quarters. They were portrayed as offspring of the Devil and maliciously accused of the ritual murder of Christian children. Persecutions increased during periods of religious and social tension such as the Crusades.

The French Revolution of 1789 seemed to mark a turning point in the lives of West European Jews. Although countries in Western Europe began to grant Jews economic and citizenship rights, antisemitism continued to rear its ugly head. In the 1890s in France, Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish army officer, was falsely accused of treason. In Russia, throughout the reign of the Czars, antisemitism was official government policy. Particularly in Eastern Europe, there were also numerous organized violent rampages (*pogroms*) in which Jews were murdered and their homes and businesses plundered.

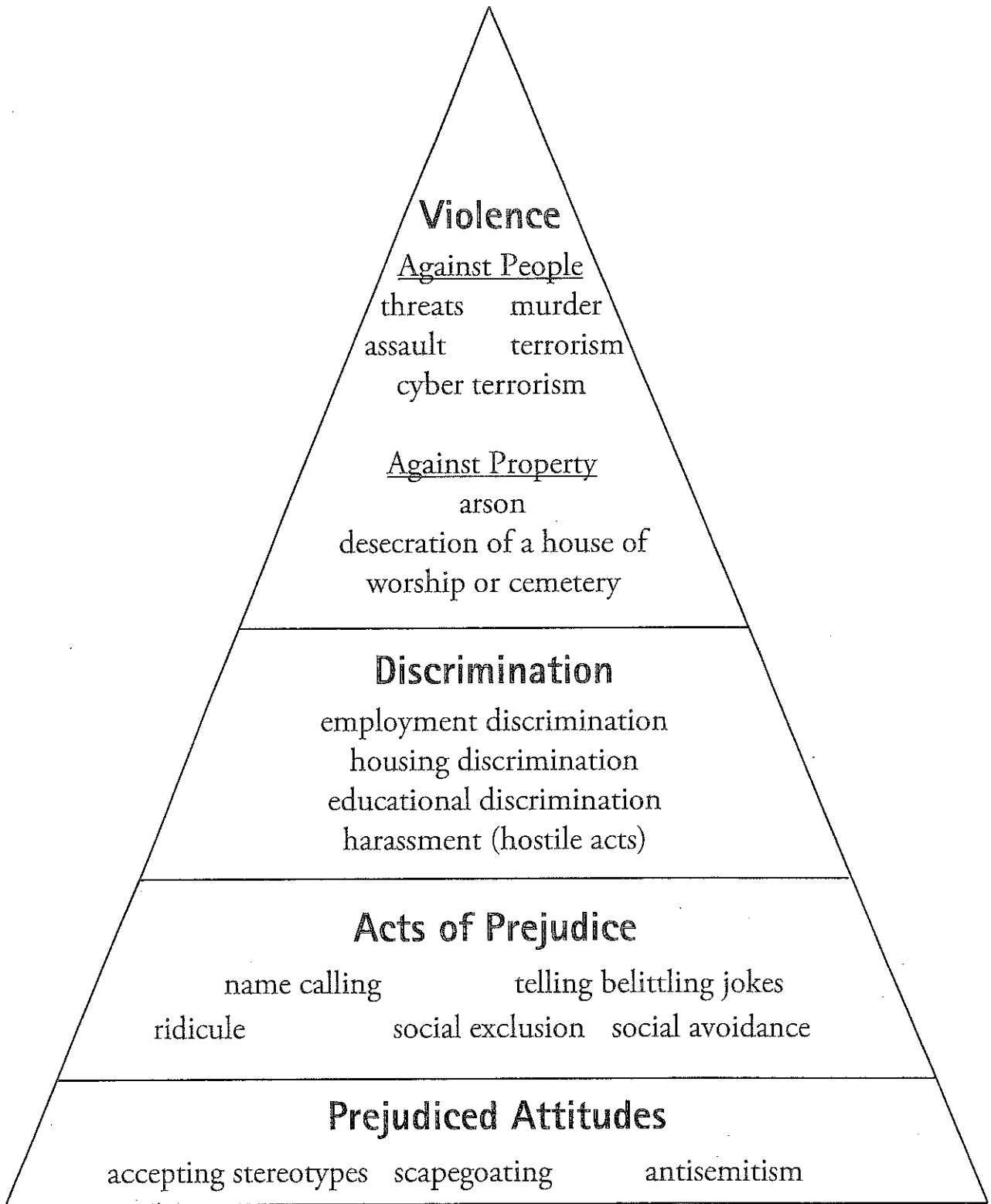
In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, antisemitism that emphasized economic, social, or political differences between Jews and the rest of society gained strength. A combination of racial antisemitism and Social Darwinism (a social theory of the time), however, invested this traditional antisemitism with a new image and dynamic. Racial theories became common in Europe, especially in Germany in the second half of the nineteenth century. The very term “antisemitism,” which signals hatred toward Jews not as followers of a different faith or holders of a separate nationality, but as members of a separate race, was first coined by Jew-haters in Germany in the 1870s. This false characterization of Jews as a race was to have serious implications in the years to follow.

Modern Antisemitism

Antisemites in the nineteenth century objected to the Jews’ new status and economic achievements and were repulsed by their mixing into general society. They defined Jews as symbols of a threatening progress. Ethnic national movements reinforced the tendency to isolate “the Jew” and brand him as an “other.” This attitude spawned two special motifs of modern antisemitism: the myth of the “Jewish conspiracy,” in which Jews are accused of devising a secret plot to take over the world; and an ostensibly scientific racial theory that attributes to Jews negative stereotypes. This form of antisemitism rejected the Jews’ social integration and paved the way for the evil vision of the Nazis.

Political antisemitism — Jew-hatred as a factor in political life — was meant to serve as a tool in the struggle for the minds of the masses. Not until the 1930s, however, with the rise of National Socialism and Adolf Hitler’s rise to power in Germany, did racial antisemitism become a political instrument in the hands of the masses and, later on, official policy of a modern state. From then on, the essence of Jewishness was believed to be biological uniqueness, preventing a Jew from avoiding persecution by assimilating, renouncing the customs of his tradition, or adopting a non-Jewish faith.

PYRAMID OF HATE



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