

A Revisionist view of Anti-Semitism

[Esau's Tears:](#)

[Modern Anti-Semitism and the Rise of the Jews](#)

Albert Lindemann

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Reviewed by Kevin MacDonald

Historians have become increasingly aware that their reconstructions of the past are often influenced by the intellectual blinders and political agendas of the present. This is paradigmatically true in the minefield that is Jewish history. So seldom do conscientious historians dare to tread there that unblinkered investigations of the Jewish past tend to have a more enduring value. Thus it is with Albert Lindemann's important 1997 book *Esau's Tears*—important because it deals courageously and honestly with very sensitive topics in the history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century anti-Semitism up to the rise of National Socialism. Lindemann's thesis is that modern European anti-Semitism is linked to the "rise of the Jews," that is, to the very substantial increase in the cultural, political, and economic power of Jews beginning in the nineteenth century. That thesis is controversial because it identifies real conflicts of interest between groups as central to anti-Semitism. Although Lindemann is well aware that anti-Semites often exaggerate Jewish behavior, and occasionally even invent it, his book challenges the still common view that anti-Semitic attitudes are nothing more than the fundamentally irrational residues of Christian religious ideology or the psychological projections of inadequate personalities.

Lindemann develops a comparative approach, discussing anti-Semitism in Austria, England, France, Germany, Romania, Russia, and the United States in an attempt to find commonalities and differences. Although the book contains authoritative analyses of anti-Semitism in all these countries, I will highlight Lindemann's analysis of anti-Semitism in Russia without, I am afraid, doing justice to the nuances of his presentation. Lindemann notes that Jews were highly resistant to attempts by the tsarist government to russify them, remaining a nation apart in dress, language, diet, and civil law. The tsarist authorities attempted to keep Jews apart from the Russian peasants because they believed Jews exploited the peasants economically and corrupted them with alcohol. Jews were often in the position of managing peasants for Russian aristocrats and in lending money and providing alcohol to them as innkeepers. Stereotypes of Jews as prominent in the liquor trade, usury, prostitution, and criminal activity were hardly figments of anti-Semitic imaginations.

Moreover, tsarist oppression of Jews was far less severe than usually depicted. Jews could own land, engage in commerce, and attend universities. Nor were Jews the only group subject to restrictions and under suspicion by the authorities. The requirement to

serve in the military reflected a suspension of a peculiar Jewish privilege, not an anti-Semitic persecution. Most Jews were restricted to the Pale of Settlement, but this area was larger than France or Spain, and forty times the area of modern Israel. Lindemann comments on the “cramped and intolerant life of the shtetl,” as illustrated by an incident in which Jewish men dragged a woman through the street, kicking her and spitting on her for violating sexual taboos.

Liberalization of restrictions on Jews in the 1860s and 1870s resulted in economic success for many Jews but left the vast majority impoverished—at least partly because of their very rapid rate of population increase, Jewish traditions that opposed strenuous physical labor, and Jewish religious laws that influenced them to avoid certain economic activities and enter others such as the clothing industry and the food preparation industry, in disproportionate numbers. Nevertheless, Jews were much more upwardly mobile than other groups in Russia, and their success placed them in competition with other groups that exerted pressures to control the numbers of Jews in business and the professions.

Rather than being planned by the government, as asserted by historians such as Simon Dubnow, anti-Jewish pogroms were spontaneous uprisings in opposition to Jewish economic domination facilitated by the liberalization of the 1860s. Indeed, the government abhorred outbreaks of mass violence as a sign of popular discontent and in some areas was quite effective at preventing it. The government’s response to the pogroms of 1881 was to place limits on Jewish economic activities in order to protect the peasants, to make it more difficult to move out of the Pale of Settlement, and to impose quotas of around 10 percent on Jewish admission to universities. The result was that Jewish emigration to the West intensified, but the tensions remained. Lindemann provides an extended discussion of the Kishinev pogrom of 1904, noting the complex economic and political context of the pogrom, the role of an anti-Jewish agitator, and the exaggerations and falsehoods contained in accounts of it by Jewish participants and organizations both in Russia and the West.

Jews within Russia increasingly turned to revolutionary socialism as a panacea for their blunted aspirations. Jews were overrepresented among socialist revolutionaries in Russia, as elsewhere in Europe and the United States, and Jewish capitalists were involved in financing their efforts. Jewish power and influence in Western countries was much commented on and was widely regarded by the Russian government as directed at undermining Russia and the tsar. For example, Jacob Schiff financed Japan’s war against Russia because of his antipathy to the tsar. During World War I a large portion of the world’s Jews could muster little sympathy for defending Russia and viewed Germany as being more tolerant to Jews.

A very important source of twentieth-century anti-Semitism, exemplified by Hitler, has been the belief that Jews were instrumental to the success of the Bolshevik revolution. Contrary to many historians, Lindemann assigns Jews a very prominent role in the revolution. He notes that “citing the absolute numbers of Jews, or their percentage of the whole, fails to recognize certain key if intangible factors: the assertiveness and often dazzling verbal skills of Jewish Bolsheviks, their energy, and their strength of conviction” (p. 429). This comment fits well with the general tendency for Jews to be highly successful in a wide range of areas requiring high intelligence, conscientiousness,

and personal ambition.¹ Jews who became radicals retained their high IQ, their ambitiousness, their persistence, their work ethic, and their ability to organize and participate in cohesive, highly committed groups.

Contrary to claims by some that Jewish Bolsheviks had abandoned their Jewish identities, Lindemann shows that ethnic background was important to all participants in the conflict between Stalin and Trotsky and his supporters. Moreover, Lindemann points out that several of the leading non-Jews in the Bolshevik movement, including Lenin, might be termed “jewified non-Jews”—“a term, freed of its ugly connotations, [that] might be used to underline an often overlooked point: Even in Russia there were some non-Jews, whether Bolsheviks or not, who respected Jews, praised them abundantly, imitated them, cared about their welfare, and established intimate friendships or romantic liaisons with them” (p. 433). For example, Lenin “openly and repeatedly praised the role of the Jews in the revolutionary movement; he was one of the most adamant and consistent in the party in his denunciations of pogroms and anti-Semitism more generally. After the revolution, he backed away from his earlier resistance to Jewish nationalism, accepting that under Soviet rule Jewish nationality might be legitimate. On his death bed, Lenin spoke fondly of the Jewish Menshevik Julius Martov, for whom he had always retained a special personal affection in spite of their fierce ideological differences.”

Citing Paul Johnson’s *History of the Jews* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), Lindemann notes Trotsky’s “paramount” role in planning and leading the Bolshevik uprising and his role as a “brilliant military leader” in establishing the Red Army as a military force (p. 448). Moreover, many of Trotsky’s personality traits are stereotypically Jewish:

If one accepts that anti-Semitism was most potently driven by anxiety and fear, as distinguished from contempt, then the extent to which Trotsky became a source of preoccupation with anti-Semites is significant. Here, too, Johnson’s words are suggestive: He writes of Trotsky’s “demonic power”—the same term, revealingly, used repeatedly by others in referring to Zinoviev’s oratory or Uritsky’s ruthlessness. Trotsky’s boundless self-confidence, his notorious arrogance, and sense of superiority were other traits often associated with Jews. Fantasies there were about Trotsky and other Bolsheviks, but there were also realities around which the fantasies grew. (p. 448)

Lindemann notes that Jews were also highly overrepresented as leaders among the other communist governments in Eastern Europe as well as in communist revolutionary movements in Germany and Austria from 1918 to 1923. Jewish agents in the service of the Soviet Union also featured prominently in Western communist parties: “Even within the various and often violently contending factions of the nascent communist parties of the West, ‘foreign Jews, taking orders from Moscow’ became a hot issue. It remained mostly taboo in socialist ranks to refer openly to Moscow’s agents as Jewish, but the implication was often that such foreign Jews were destroying western socialism” (pp. 435–436).

Nor does Lindemann shrink from discussing the biological moment of Judaism, that is, the concern with preventing intermarriage, the concern with purity of blood, the low status of converts, and the lack of interest in proselytism. Judaism is “only uncertainly a

community of belief,” a comment indicating Lindemann’s belief that Judaism is much more an ethnic group than a religion—a position that I think is unavoidable.² Lindemann labels these practices “protoracism” and suggests that they “contributed in vague, often contradictory ways to modern racism, especially to its concern with racial exclusiveness and purity” (p. 74). Indeed, besides their traditional practices, which bespeak a primitive racialism among Jews, Jews were also in the forefront of racist thinking in the nineteenth century. Benjamin Disraeli “may have been, both as writer and even more as a personal symbol, the most influential propagator of the concept of race in the nineteenth century, particularly publicizing the Jews’ alleged taste for power, their sense of superiority, their mysteriousness, their clandestine international connections, and their arrogant pride in being a pure race” (p. 77). Racist thinking was typical of the nineteenth century generally. Among Jews racist thinking can be found throughout the Jewish intellectual spectrum; it was common among Zionists and typified several prominent Jewish intellectuals, such as Heinrich Graetz and Moses Hess. Thus, while there was some fantasy involved in anti-Semitic beliefs about Jews, the nineteenth-century anti-Semitic idea that Jews regarded themselves as a superior race was also based on real Jewish behavior and attitudes.

It is not possible to write in this area without being aware of the intense passions of many who have written before. The book therefore, perhaps inevitably, deals centrally with Jewish historiography and Jewish self-conceptions. Lindemann (p. 535; italics in text) writes that “Jews actually do not *want* to understand their past—or at least those aspects of their past that have to do with the hatred directed at them, since understanding may threaten other elements of their complex and often contradictory identities.” He notes that

especially in popular history, a strong tendency exists to favor an emotionally laden description and narrative, especially of colorful, dramatic, or violent episodes, over explanation that employs calm analysis or a searching attention to historical context. Pogroms, famous anti-Semitic affairs, and the description of the ideas of anti-Semitic authors and agitators are described with moral fervor, rhetorical flair, and considerable attention to the details of murder, arson, and rape. Background, context, and motives are often slighted or dealt with in a remarkably thin and tendentious fashion. (p. 12)

Lindemann considers (pp. ix–x) the impassioned, moralistic rhetoric and simplistic analyses to be found in Robert Wistrich’s *Anti-Semitism: The Longest Hatred* and in the writings of Holocaust historians Lucy Dawidowicz and Daniel J. Goldhagen. (Wistrich in turn labeled Lindemann’s book “deeply pernicious.”)³ “In order to write ‘genuine’ German history, [Dawidowicz] seems to think, hatred and resentment rather than sympathy or love constitute the appropriate state of mind,” Lindemann writes. “She makes precious little effort to understand the motivations of nineteenth-century nationalistic Germans. They are simply contemptible ‘other people’” (p. 509). He describes Howard Morley Sachar’s chapter on Romanian anti-Semitism as “a tirade, without the slightest effort at balance” (p. 509).

Finally, one detects in Lindemann a certain incomprehension regarding the powerful need among Jews to remain a people apart in the contemporary world. After showing that modern anti-Semitism is fundamentally rooted in real conflict between ethnic groups and

that it has resulted in enormous bloodshed and intrasocietal animosity, he asks, “What is the meaning of Jewish survival in modern times to a modern, secular consciousness? . . . How can Jewish survival be considered any more important than, say, the survival of the Wends, Byelo-Russians, Chechens, or Croats? In the context of a multicultural society such as the United States why should a Jewish ethnicity or cultural style resist blending and ‘disappearing’ any more than the cultural styles of the Germans, Swedes, or Irish? Intermarriage and assimilation have occurred and are occurring in most other communities, but do prominent Armenian-American or Japanese-American leaders publicly address the issues with such terms as ‘bloodless Holocaust’ and ‘candy-coated poison’?” (p. 543). He notes that Jewish leaders regard the Jewish case as fundamentally different from other groups and that the Jewish position comes close to ethnic chauvinism. These questions are particularly relevant because, as Lindemann notes, Jewish power and influence are quite high in the contemporary world, particularly in the United States, and there is no question that official American Judaism is becoming more traditionally separatist in its focus and more concerned to prevent intermarriage.⁴ It is by no means clear that multicultural societies characterized by ethnic chauvinism and conflicts of interest among their constituent groups can long survive without the intense intrasocietal hatreds and animosities that have been the consistent consequence of the rise of a powerful Judaism in Western societies.⁵

Lindemann’s findings fit well with an evolutionary approach to group conflict.⁶ His book is concerned with nineteenth- and early twentieth-century anti-Semitism, but these kinds of findings may be generalized throughout Jewish history. Jewish characteristics, including especially resource competition with non-Jews, have always been central to understanding historically important examples of anti-Semitism. Moreover, there is a long history of Jewish religious apologetics and historiography that has functioned in the same way as much contemporary Jewish historiography, that is, to interpret history and Jewish religious law in a manner that presents Judaism as a morally superior beacon to the rest of humanity.⁷ And Lindemann is quite correct in emphasizing the ethnic, “protoracist” elements of Judaism, although here, as in many other parts of the book, he is clearly bending over backwards to avoid offending Jewish sensibilities. Jews have indeed remained a people apart throughout their history, and they have been deeply concerned about marrying each other. There is a pronounced tendency toward idealizing endogamy and condemning exogamy apparent in Jewish religious writings, and the data indicate that Jews have remained genetically distinct from the groups they have lived among despite having lived among them for centuries.⁸

Albert Lindemann’s thoroughly researched, informed, and forthright interpretation of a key period in the past of the Jews and the European peoples among whom they lived is a vital contribution to that larger history as well as to the history of anti-Semitism.

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Endnotes

1. Kevin MacDonald, *A People That Shall Dwell Alone: Judaism As a Group Evolutionary Strategy* (Westport, CT: Praeger), pp. 165–226.
2. *Ibid.*, passim.
3. Robert Wistrich, “Blaming the Victim,” *Commentary* (February 1998), p. 60.
4. Kevin MacDonald, *Separation and Its Discontents: Toward an Evolutionary Theory of Anti-Semitism* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998), pp. 263–278.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 89–175. Kevin MacDonald, *The Culture of Critique: An Evolutionary Analysis of Jewish Involvement in Twentieth-Century Intellectual and Political Movements* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998), pp. 303–332.
6. MacDonald, *Separation and Its Discontents*.
7. *Ibid.*
8. MacDonald, *A People That Shall Dwell Alone*, pp. 23–110.