The persecution of the Jews[1]

by Bertrand Russell

TO UNDERSTAND OUR age, as it appears almost everywhere from the Rhine to the Pacific, it is necessary to go back to much earlier times. At the end of the wars of religion, in the seventeenth century, men discovered that life is more agreeable if there is general toleration than if nations are divided into hostile factions bent on destroying each other. Christian sects gave up mutual persecution, the belief in witch-craft suddenly ceased, and in one nation after another torture was abandoned as a recognized part of judicial procedure. Jews, like other minorities, profited by the decay of fanaticism, although they continued to suffer severe disabilities in Russia till 1917 and slighter ones in Germany till 1918. Everyone supposed that persecution was a thing of the past; the Spanish Inquisition roused retrospective horror even in the most devout Roman Catholics.

In the painful age in which we live, hardly anything is more horrible or more discouraging than the renewed persecution of the Jews. The sufferings which are inflicted upon them wherever the Nazis have power are, in one respect, worse than those of former ages, for, in the past, it was, at least nominally, the religion, not the race, that was persecuted. Jews who outwardly became converts to

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Christianity escaped from oppression, except in Spain, where the Inquisition attempted by torture to prove the insincerity of conversions. But when, as now, it is the race that is persecuted, no escape is possible except by emigration. The German government professes to desire that German Jews should leave the country but at the same time it makes this impossible for most of them, since intending emigrants are first deprived of all their property and then, for permission to emigrate, charged twenty-five per cent. of the property they no longer have. The result is that only those Jews can emigrate who have well-to-do friends or relations abroad, and then only by helping the finances of the State which is persecuting them.

Many Germans, perhaps a majority, no doubt, deplore the more extreme cruelties perpetrated against Jews; nevertheless most of them support the government which not only officially inflicts intolerable legal disabilities, but encourages unofficial sadistic outrages on the part of its criminal partisans. From what has happened in Austria, we know what would happen if Germany obtained control in the Sudeten districts of Czechoslovakia.[2] Whatever grievances the Germans in these districts may have, they are utterly insignificant in comparison with the misery which the Nazis would, if they could, inflict upon Jews, Socialists, and Communists who now profit by the liberality of the Prague government. Such questions cannot be reckoned by counting heads. That millions should have to put up with slight political disabilities is not so grave an evil as that hundreds should suffer the extreme of torture and agony. So long as Germans treat their Jewish minority as they do at present, they have no right to make demands on the behalf of German minorities in other countries. There is, from our point of view, no justification for treating such minorities badly; but from the point of view adopted by the Germans in dealing with *their* minorities there is every justification.

Speaking historically, such liberties as are enjoyed by individuals and subordinate groups in countries which practise toleration were originally won by majorities in conflict with unpopular governments, especially kings. It was in order to combat the despotic acts of monarchs that the doctrine of the Rights of Man was invented, and when governments became popular the doctrine was forgotten. But the oppression of a minority by a majority is no better, except

2 [For Russell's reactions to Munich and the annexation of the Sudetenland, see his "Munich rather than War", *The Nation*, N.Y., 148 (4 Feb. 1939): 173–5.]

numerically, than the oppression of a majority by a minority. The doctrine of the Rights of Man may be indefensible in its absolute theoretical form, but as a practical precept for the prevention of injustice and oppression it has been highly beneficial. It was forgotten when the evils against which it was directed appeared to have been overcome; but as soon as it was forgotten the old evils reappeared.

A government which is enthusiastically supported by a large majority of the population is a great danger, particularly if it has won its popularity by an organized appeal to hatred. This is one of the chief merits of democratic government, that at all times not much less than half the nation is opposed to the men in power, and free to criticize them. In the hang-the-Kaiser election in 1918, we saw what an appeal to hatred can do in our own country; but owing to free speech and parliamentary institutions the effect was temporary. There is no way of preventing occasional fits of insanity in nations, but it is only by a dictatorship that recovery can be prevented.

What, in actual fact, can we do to help the Jews who are victims of Nazi cruelty? In the first place, we can bring pressure to bear upon our own government to be hospitable to refugees, and not too niggardly in granting them permission to earn a living among us. In the second place, we can and should proclaim our horror of Nazi wickedness, and our contempt for Nazi stupidity, which is pursuing exactly the course that brought Spain to grief in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But I do not think that our dislike of the Nazis should make us willing to risk a great war. It is war and its aftermath that has made Germany fierce, and the next great war is likely to have the same effect upon us. In the course of defeating the Nazis in war, we shall acquire much of the Nazi mentality, and even if they are defeated their philosophy will triumph. It is only in peace, by propaganda and by readiness for economic cooperation wherever possible, that the *outlook* of the Nazis can be defeated.

At the time of the Tokyo earthquake, the inhabitants of that city turned upon the Koreans living there and massacred them, not because they supposed these harmless folk had caused the disaster, but because terror and misery made them wish to massacre somebody. We and the French spread terror and misery throughout Germany in the years after the armistice; they could not massacre us, so they turned upon the Jews. It was a gesture of insanity; but if, as I firmly believe, terror and misery caused the insanity, it will not be cured by a further dose of the same poison.