



## Jews and Hitler: The Germany Lesson

*What American Jews Must Learn Before Warning Becomes History*

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Some historical papers inform. Others argue. Timothy W. Ryback's chilling Atlantic essay, "[The Jews Who Voted for Hitler](#)," feels more like a cold shower.

It tells the story of Max Naumann and the League of Nationalist German Jews—highly educated, successful, patriotic Jews who embraced German nationalism and eventually supported Adolf Hitler. They believed that their loyalty to Germany, their opposition to communism, their rejection of Zionism, and their willingness to distance themselves from less assimilated Jews would earn them a place in the new Germany.

It did not.

Naumann's followers represented less than 2 percent of Germany's approximately half-million Jews. They did not elect Hitler. They did not cause the destruction that followed. The lesson is not collective Jewish guilt.

Their failure was different—and perhaps more important for us today.

It was a failure to recognize what was directly in front of them.

## **The Danger They Explained Away**

Hitler and the Nazi movement did not conceal their hatred of Jews. Antisemitism was not a secret buried somewhere in their governing program. It was spoken, printed, organized, shouted, and acted upon.

Yet Naumann believed that the rhetoric would soften once Hitler assumed responsibility for governing. He thought antisemitism was partly a political instrument—an emotional appeal to an angry population—and that it would lose its usefulness after national order, economic stability, and German pride had been restored.

He also believed that some Jews had helped create the problem. Zionists, Eastern European Jewish immigrants, Jewish leftists, intellectuals, and other insufficiently “German” Jews had, in his mind, unnecessarily provoked German resentment. If those Jews could be marginalized, perhaps respectable and patriotic German Jews would be accepted.

Here lies one of the most dangerous ideas in Jewish political history: the belief that the antisemite can be satisfied by being given the right Jews.

Naumann believed that he understood the distinction. Hitler did not.

To Hitler, Naumann’s military decorations, German nationalism, professional success, rejection of Zionism, and criticism of other Jews changed nothing. Naumann could decide what kind of Jew he wanted to be. The regime would decide what being Jewish meant.

## **Loyalty Without Reciprocity**

Naumann had every reason to believe that he belonged in Germany. He had served courageously in the First World War. He had been decorated with the Iron Cross. He was a lawyer, a product of German education and culture, and a man deeply attached to his country.

His attachment was real.

The reciprocity he imagined was not.

That distinction is essential. Loving a country does not guarantee that the country—or a political movement claiming to represent it—will always love you in return. Patriotism is honorable, but it is not armor. Assimilation can provide acceptance, success, and deep national belonging. It cannot make an antisemite forget that a Jew is a Jew.

Naumann continued to support the regime even after Hitler became chancellor and anti-Jewish violence erupted. He urged patience. He treated the violence as an initial explosion of accumulated anger. He continued looking forward to a future reconciliation between Germans and Jews.

Meanwhile, Jewish lawyers—including Naumann himself—were losing their right to practice. Jews were being removed from government employment. Jewish students were being restricted in schools and universities. Assaults and humiliations were becoming part of ordinary life.

The evidence changed.

Naumann's conclusion did not.

This may be the most frightening part of the story. Denial is not always the refusal to see facts. Sometimes the facts are seen but repeatedly reorganized to preserve a conclusion that has become emotionally, socially, or politically indispensable.

## **The Wrong American Question**

The easiest response is to ask: Who is the American Hitler?

That may also be the least useful question.

America in the 2020s is not Germany in the 1930s. America has a far older constitutional tradition, a federal system, competing centers of political power, independent courts, elections conducted across 50 states, a vast civil society, and deeply established protections for religion and speech. The United States has not emerged from a lost world war, national dismemberment, hyperinflation, and the collapse of a recently created democratic system. No national government has stripped American Jews of citizenship or enacted a state doctrine declaring them racially alien.

These differences are profound. To ignore them would be historically irresponsible.

But the Germany lesson does not require America to be Germany. History does not repeat itself by reproducing every uniform, law, personality, and institution. It warns through recognizable human behavior: political fanaticism, institutional cowardice, selective enforcement, collective accusation, dehumanizing language, and the willingness of educated people to explain away what their preferred ideology does not permit them to confront.

The most important question is therefore not, “Who is Hitler?”

It is: What are we already rationalizing?

## **Antisemitism Does Not Need One Political Address**

American Jews are politically divided. That is normal in a free country. The danger begins when political affiliation becomes more important than the recognition of antisemitism.

Many Jews on the left readily identify antisemitism in white nationalism, neo-Nazi movements, racial conspiracy theories, and language about Jewish money, globalists, and hidden control. They are right to recognize it.

But some become remarkably hesitant when hostility toward Jews arrives through obsessive anti-Zionism, the collective indictment of Jews for every action of Israel, the exclusion of Zionists from public life, the targeting of synagogues and Jewish institutions as substitutes for the Israeli government, or the rationalization of violence against Jews as political “resistance.”

Many Jews on the right readily recognize that danger. They see the transformation of Israel from a country that can be criticized into the Jew among nations—a state to which moral standards are applied that are not applied to any other country. They recognize what happens when hostility to Israel becomes hostility to Jews who refuse to denounce Israel.

But some become hesitant when antisemitism emerges from ethnonationalists, conspiratorial influencers, political personalities, or supposed allies whose support for one Jewish interest coexists with contempt for Jews as a people.

These dangers are not identical, and they may not be numerically symmetrical. They do not need to be. A fire coming from one side of a house does not make the fire on the other side harmless.

The Jewish political trap is simple: we detect the antisemitism of our opponents and reinterpret the antisemitism of our allies.

That is the Naumann mechanism.

## **The Search for the Acceptable Jew**

Naumann believed that German nationalism could distinguish between loyal German Jews and objectionable Jews: Zionists, immigrants, intellectuals, leftists, and others he considered responsible for antagonizing the German population.

We hear modern versions of this distinction today.

There is the acceptable Jew who publicly distances himself from Israel and the unacceptable Jew who remains a Zionist. There is the acceptable Jew who supports the correct political movement and the unacceptable Jew who questions it. There is the religious Jew, the secular Jew, the

progressive Jew, the conservative Jew, the assimilated Jew, and the visibly Jewish Jew—each sometimes tempted to believe that the storm is directed primarily at someone else.

History offers no comfort here.

Antisemites may temporarily praise Jews who validate their arguments. They may place a useful Jew on a stage, publish him, quote her, or point to a Jewish supporter as proof that they cannot possibly be antisemitic.

But political usefulness is not acceptance. It is a temporary employment arrangement.

When the definition of the enemy expands, the exemption disappears.

## **America's Warning Lights**

The current situation should not be exaggerated, but neither can it be dismissed. The ADL recorded 6,274 incidents of antisemitic assault, harassment, and vandalism in the United States during 2025—lower than the extraordinary totals of 2023 and 2024, but still the third-highest annual number in its records and an average of approximately 17 incidents a day. Its methodology is broader than criminal hate-crime reporting, but the persistence of these numbers cannot be waved away as imagination. The [AJC's 2025 survey](#) found that 93 percent of American Jewish adults regarded antisemitism as a problem in the United States.

Numbers alone do not make America Germany. They do tell us that American Jews are not reacting to a phantom.

The more important warning lights are qualitative.

Are Jews being told that violence against them must first be placed “in context”? Are Jewish institutions being treated as legitimate targets because of events thousands of miles away? Are Jewish students learning when to conceal their identity? Are political leaders denouncing antisemitism only when the antisemites belong to the opposing party? Are universities, professional organizations, media institutions, and technology platforms applying protections unevenly? Are Jews being pressured to prove political loyalty before their safety is considered worthy of concern?

And perhaps most importantly: when these things occur, do we confront them—or do we explain why they are not yet serious enough?

# What the Germany Lesson Requires

The lesson is not panic. Panic produces its own blindness.

The lesson is early recognition followed by disciplined action.

American Jews must stop subcontracting their judgment to political parties. No party, movement, leader, university, newspaper, religious coalition, or social cause should receive a Jewish blank check. Support must remain conditional on conduct.

We must oppose antisemitism even when doing so is politically inconvenient—especially when it comes from people whose other positions we support.

We must defend constitutional protections and equal enforcement not only for Jews but for every minority. Institutions that protect only politically favored groups will eventually protect no one reliably. Jewish security cannot rest on special pleading. It must rest on a culture in which collective guilt, political violence, religious discrimination, and unequal citizenship are unacceptable regardless of the victim.

We must strengthen Jewish solidarity without demanding Jewish uniformity. A conservative Jew and a progressive Jew do not need to vote alike. A religious Jew and a secular Jew do not need to live alike. An American Jew may criticize an Israeli government without rejecting Israel, just as another may passionately defend Israel without surrendering his right to criticize it.

But Jews must understand that internal political disagreement does not erase a shared vulnerability.

We must also teach the Holocaust differently. Too often, the story begins near its conclusion—with ghettos, deportations, camps, and mass murder. By then, almost every meaningful political opportunity had been lost.

The period American Jews most urgently need to study is not only 1941–45. It is 1930–35: the rhetoric, the rationalizations, the institutional surrender, the incremental laws, the political bargains, and the repeated insistence that the worst could not really happen.

That is where the usable lesson lives.

## Israel Changes the Lesson—but Does Not Cancel It

German Jews facing Hitler had no sovereign Jewish state capable of receiving and defending them. American Jews live in a different Jewish history. Israel exists.

That reality matters enormously. But Israel's existence must not become another excuse for passivity in America. The answer to American antisemitism cannot be indifference to the future

of the country in which American Jews live, raise families, build institutions, and participate as citizens.

We love this country. Precisely because we love it, we must refuse both hysteria and complacency.

Defending Jewish life in America is part of defending America itself. A country that becomes unsafe for Jews is not simply becoming unsafe for one small minority. It is undergoing a deeper moral and constitutional deterioration.

Antisemitism is rarely an isolated social disease. It is a diagnostic marker.

## **The Clock**

Max Naumann spent years demonstrating his German patriotism. When the Nazi government stripped Jews of their citizenship, it stripped his away as well. His league was dissolved. He was arrested by the Gestapo. Other members of his movement were eventually murdered in Theresienstadt.

Their loyalty did not save them.

Their criticism of other Jews did not save them.

Their willingness to overlook each successive escalation did not save them.

The Germany lesson is not that every contemporary danger will end in another Holocaust. It is that Jews cannot wait for another Holocaust before deciding that the danger was real.

The clock did not begin at Auschwitz. It began when explicit threats were dismissed as rhetoric, when violence was excused as an excess, when unequal treatment became normal, and when Jews continued telling themselves to be patient.

That is the Germany lesson.

Here, in the country we all love, we must study it hard.

The clock is ticking.

The question is whether we are studying history—or waiting to become part of it.