

**Talking to the Wandering Jew:
How Nazis Used Jews' Relationship to Language to Fuel Antisemitism**

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The Jewish (Language) Question

Jews as a people have a very dynamic relationship to language. While language plays a major role in defining and uniting many ethnic and national groups, this has not been the case for Jews—rather, they have adopted and dropped languages with impressive frequency through the centuries.¹ Thus, there remains today a general lack of clarity surrounding notions of “Jewish languages” and how they relate to Jewish peoplehood. A question posed to the Jewish Museum Berlin, written on a post-it note and showcased on the museum’s website as their “question of the month,” demonstrates this persisting murkiness: “Do Jews have their own language?”²

When asked this question, many people today would simply answer “Hebrew” (perhaps thinking of its status as the official language of the Jewish State of Israel and its prevalence in Jewish religious texts), but this does not begin to capture Jews’ historical relationship to language. Jews have lived in numerous nations across the Diaspora and have spoken myriad languages, even leaving their own linguistic mark on them, creating such languages varieties as Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Spanish, and Judeo-German—more commonly known as Yiddish,³ a major focus of this paper. Yiddish emerged in the Late Middle Ages and became the dominant vernacular for Eastern European Jews.⁴ Originally, it was a primarily spoken language, as

¹ Zvi Gitelman, “The Divergent Fates of Yiddish and Hebrew,” *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 35, no. 1-4 (2017-2018): 417, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44983551>.

² Martina Lüdicke, “‘Do Jews have their own language?’ Question of the Month in the Context of the Exhibition ‘The Whole Truth’,” Jewish Museum Berlin, archived 2013, at www.jmberlin.de/en/node/6257.

³ Some scholars hold that Judeo-German, Western Yiddish, and Eastern Yiddish are distinct varieties, though academic literature has not yet reached terminological consensus. See Jürg Fleischer, “Western Yiddish and Judeo-German,” in *Languages in Jewish Communities, Past and Present*, ed. Benjamin Hary and Sarah Bunin Benor (De Gruyter Mouton, 2019), 239, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781501504631-009>. The scope of this paper does not necessitate precise distinctions between these varieties, as it centers on Nazi attitudes toward and portrayals of the language, which did not make such distinctions.

⁴ Alexander Beider, “Yiddish in Eastern Europe,” in *Languages in Jewish Communities, Past and Present*, ed. Benjamin Hary and Sarah Bunin Benor (De Gruyter Mouton, 2019), 276, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781501504631-010>.

European liturgy, commentary, and scholarly works were generally written in a more highly regarded admixture of Hebrew and Aramaic⁵ (sometimes referred to as Judeo-Aramaic).⁶ Eventually, Yiddish reached a higher status and became a written language in nineteenth century Eastern Europe, “partially dispelling its reputation as a mere folk-loric jargon” and even becoming “the dominant Jewish language of the press and of good literature” in that region.⁷

In contrast, as Yiddish became more popular and socially elevated in Eastern European countries, it faced a steep decline in both status and use in Germany.⁸ During this period, Germans viewed Yiddish as a lesser or faulty form of German that evoked the undesirable image of the ghetto Jew.⁹ Many educated German Jews shared this opinion: Anton Rée, director of a Jewish school in Hamburg, then argued: “If a Jew wants to see the animosity towards him diminished, he has to expulse his dialect entirely, and if we want to reduce animosity against Jewry on the whole, we have to oust the latter from all its classes.”¹⁰ American scholars Abraham Myerson and Isaac Goldberg further explain, “Yiddish, which was a ghetto dialect that gradually

⁵ Ironically, just like Yiddish, Aramaic began as a language spoken by “the common people” while Hebrew was considered “the language of religion and government and of the upper class.” See “Aramaic language,” Encyclopedia Britannica, last modified February 21, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Aramaic-language>.

⁶ Bruce Mitchell, “Yiddish and the Hebrew Revival: A New Look at the Changing Role of Yiddish,” *Monatshefte* 90, no. 2 (1998): 191, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30153700>.

⁷ Mitchell, “Yiddish and Hebrew,” 191; Lewis Glinert, “The First Conference for Hebrew, or When is a congress not a congress?,” in *The Earliest Stages of Language Planning: The First Congress Phenomenon*, ed. Joshua A. Fishman (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter Mouton, 1993), 86, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110848984.85>.

⁸ Fleischer, “Western Yiddish and Judeo-German,” 252.

⁹ European Parliament, European Parliamentary Research Service, *Yiddish Language and Culture and Its Post-Holocaust Fate in Europe*, 2022; Barry Davis, “Yiddish and the Jewish Identity,” *History Workshop*, no. 23 (1987): 159, [http://www.jstor.org/stable/4288755](https://www.jstor.org/stable/4288755). *The Operated Jew*, a German novel originally published in 1893 by Oskar Panizza, further illustrates this perception of Yiddish: a Jewish man seeks to rid himself of all Jewish characteristics and, as part of his transformation, receives elocution lessons to replace his Yiddish with German. He deems this necessary since “[i]t was clear that one could not introduce him in high society with his speech...for it was the mode of expression of an oily, base, cowardly character.” See Oskar Panizza and Jack Zipes, *The Operated Jew: Two Tales of Anti-Semitism*, trans. Jack Zipes (Routledge, 1991), 56.

¹⁰ Fleischer, “Western Yiddish and Judeo-German,” 252. Some schools instituted rules outright forbidding the use of Yiddish to achieve this end. See Fleischer, “Western Yiddish and Judeo-German,” 252-53.

evolved into a language, became a badge of social inferiority....It was for those who could not or would not grasp the culture of the great nation outside the ghetto walls. It was for women, who could not master the Hebrew of the prayer-book and liturgy.¹¹ It pointed inward, away from the dazzling Western civilization."¹² Yiddish thus represented a past characterized by indignity, subjugation, and minority status.¹³ In order to become assimilated and accepted into greater society, German Jews saw it necessary to give up Yiddish for German, further integrating into the dominant culture.

One perceived threat to the cultural integration and social acceptance of German Jewry was the significant immigration of Eastern European Jews to Germany in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Assimilated German Jews fostered a deep antipathy toward the incoming Jewish immigrants,¹⁴ possibly because association with their foreign customs, manners, and clothing made German Jews' social acceptance all the more precarious. This antipathy was initially aimed at Polish Jews' Yiddish,¹⁵ which represented the linguistic alienation from German society that German Jews had earlier managed to shed. By the time immigrating Jews reintroduced Yiddish to Germany, assimilated German Jews already considered themselves entirely divorced from the language.

¹¹ Before written Yiddish was popularized and socially elevated in the nineteenth century, it was reserved for women and the uneducated, while educated men wrote in a Hebrew/Aramaic admixture. In this period, European liturgy was written in this admixture and was thereby relatively inaccessible to women. See Mitchell, "Yiddish and the Hebrew Revival."

¹² Abraham Myerson and Isaac Goldberg, *The German Jew, His Share in Modern Culture* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1933), 12-13, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015037033316>.

¹³ Gitelman, "Divergent Fates," 420.

¹⁴ *Die Juden im Nationalsozialistischen Deutschland 1933-1943 /The Jews in Nazi Germany 1933-1943*, ed. Arnold Paucker (Mohr Siebeck, 2024), 81, <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/93437>.

¹⁵ *Die Juden*, 81.

The historical trajectory of Yiddish alone supports the notion that Jewish peoplehood and identity have never been defined by a connection to a given language. One major cause of this is that while in the Diaspora, Jews have tended to adopt the language of their host country; indeed, as Martina Lüdicke (a curator of the Jewish Museum Berlin) explains in answer to the post-it note, “Most Jews simply speak the language of the country they live in. So, in fact, Jews speak ‘every language.’”¹⁶ This use of “every language” and lack of distinct linguistic connection have been used throughout the centuries as evidence for the “Wandering Jew” trope. When the Nazi Party came to power in 1933, it began disseminating its antisemitic dogma in no small part by promoting and substantiating the image of the Wandering Jew. This paper will explore the ways in which Nazi ideology used Jews’ relationship to language, through the Wandering Jew trope and otherwise, to promote antisemitism.

Hitler and Ahasver

In order to understand the particular role that Jews’ language(s) played in Nazi ideology and propaganda, one must first understand the Wandering Jew. This canard originated with the Christian legend that someone¹⁷ had taunted Jesus on his way to Calvary.¹⁸ The figure’s Jewish identity became part of the legend when the anonymously written German pamphlet “A Brief Description and Narration Regarding a Jew Named Ahasuerus”¹⁹ was published in 1602.²⁰ The trope then became a fixture in anti-Jewish attitudes, painting Jews as a nomadic people forced to

¹⁶ Lüdicke, “Do Jews have their own language?”

¹⁷ At the legend’s inception, there was no consensus as to who this figure was. See “Wandering Jew,” Encyclopedia Britannica, last modified February 7, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/wandering-Jew>.

¹⁸ Encyclopedia Britannica, “Wandering Jew.”

¹⁹ The name used to refer to this figure was eventually shortened to “Ahasver.”

²⁰ Encyclopedia Britannica, “Wandering Jew”; “Ahasver, the Wandering Jew: Between History and Literature,” German Princeton Department, last modified November 9, 2022, <https://german.princeton.edu/whats-on/events/past/ahasver-wandering-jewbetween-history-and-literature>.

roam the earth. In the legend's early conceptions, God cursed Ahasver to wander from nation to nation for mocking (or, in one variation of the legend, denying rest to²¹) Jesus. Some later manifestations of the trope saw Jews' diasporic existence as divine punishment for killing Jesus,²² thereby making the curse applicable to all Jews (living and future) and intensifying the severity of the punishment's causal crime. By the time the Wandering Jew image became popular in Nazi media, it had further come more broadly to represent Jews' purported foreignness and parasitic nature.

The Nazi Party made great use of the Wandering Jew trope, invoking it, either explicitly or indirectly, in a significant portion of its anti-Jewish propaganda. A satirical essay on Jewish immigrants titled "The Panic Party" and written by a Nazi journalist states that "Ahasver has been moving around the world since a bit longer than 1933 without finding rest."²³ In a Nazi book of humorous stories titled *Onward! Humor from the Period of Struggle of the National Socialist Movement*, the author describes a Jewish character whose hatred for right-wing German patriotism is motivated by "[t]he instincts of his nomadic people, which recognizes no

²¹ Encyclopedia Britannica, "Wandering Jew."

²² In his book *City of God* (426 CE), Saint Augustine makes this implicit claim: he cites a verse of Psalms, "Thou shalt not slay [my enemies], lest they should at last forget Thy law: disperse them in Thy might." He takes this as confirmation that Jews' dispersal was punishment for killing Jesus: "But the Jews who slew Him...were yet more miserably wasted by the Romans, and utterly rooted out from their kingdom, where aliens had already ruled over them, and were dispersed through the lands (so that indeed there is no place where they are not), and are thus by their own Scriptures a testimony to us that we have not forged the prophecies about Christ." See Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (Roman Roads Media, 2015), 594.

The Nazi Party considered and referenced Saint Augustine's anti-Jewish ideas in its propaganda and resources. Its Central Propaganda Office published a bulletin (meant for party members to consult while writing speeches to be delivered across the country) that states, "St. Augustine saw through the Jews, and realized the danger [they] represented." See "Our Battle Against Judah," German Propaganda Archive, Calvin University, archived 2008, at <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/rim3.htm>.

²³ Valentin Schuster, "The Panic Party," German Propaganda Archive, Calvin University, archived 2000, at <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/mungo1.htm>. (Editorial insert omitted.)

fatherland.”²⁴ The story ends with the Jew missing his train (due to the harassment of two “noble souls”²⁵), and the author compares his predicament to “the end of Ahasaver, who perished due to his own evil.”²⁶ A children’s book published by Julius Streicher’s *Stürmer* Publishing House titled *Trust No Fox on His Green Heath and No Jew on His Oath* includes a section named “The Eternal Jew,”²⁷ which retells the original myth of Ahasver:

Two thousand years he has sought rest,
That wretched Jew Ahasuerus,
The curse has passed to all his race,
Restless he wanders far and wide,
One land to another.
He has no home to call his own,
The alien Jew, that scurvy knave.
His nomad soul finds nowhere rest,
Everywhere he’s just a pest.²⁸

Moreover, the Wandering Jew trope exists not only in explicit mentions of Ahasver, but also in broader characterizations of Jews as a homeless, parasitic people. A Nazi book titled *The Jewish World Plague* describes how “[o]ver the centuries, Jewry has infiltrated every nation and every people,” then proclaims: “Each Jew individually, and Jewry as a whole, is without a home. Jewry undermines every people and every state that it infiltrates. It feeds as a parasite and a

²⁴ Karl Springer, “Onward! Humor from the Period of Struggle of the National Socialist Movement,” German Propaganda Archive, Calvin University, archived 2002, at <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/springer.htm>.

²⁵ Springer, “Onward!”

²⁶ Springer, “Onward!” (Editorial insert omitted.)

²⁷ The “Eternal Jew” is an alternative name for the “Wandering Jew” myth.

²⁸ Elvira Bauer, “Trust No Fox on His Green Heath and No Jew on His Oath,” German Propaganda Archive, Calvin University, archived 2003, at <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/fuchs.htm>.

culture-killing worm in the host people.”²⁹ As these texts testify, the Wandering Jew trope clearly plays a prominent role in Nazi propagandist depictions of and arguments against Jews.

In addition to using the Wandering Jew trope for its own merit as an antisemitic image, the Nazis used it to substantiate other antisemitic tropes and arguments. One common example of this is presenting Jews’ wandering as definitive evidence for their alleged goal of world domination. A 1934 pamphlet titled *The Jew as World Parasite*, published for use in the Nazi Party’s internal education program, demonstrates this in its explicit assertion that “what the Jewish world parasite sees as its final goal [is] world domination.”³⁰ The author elaborates, “He wanders from country to country, gathering his forces, at the head of which he ruins Europe with sadistic horror and lust for destruction....”³¹ The pamphlet cites Adolf Hitler as describing how “[the Jew] goes his way, sneaking into every people to hollow them out...intensifying the battle until the bloody extermination of his hated enemy.”³² The pamphlet also asks directly whether it may be said that Jews have no fatherland, then answers with a quote from Ferdinand Zimmermann, a Nazi journalist: “They are not rooted in any land, but they proliferate everywhere, acting as destructive parasitic bacteria in each host people.”³³ The Wandering Jew trope serves as the crux for this and other antisemitic arguments, making it a crucial element of Nazi propaganda.

²⁹ Hermann Esser, “The Jewish World Plague,” German Propaganda Archive, Calvin University, archived 2001, at <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/esser.htm>.

³⁰ G. G. Otto, “The Jew as World Parasite,” German Propaganda Archive, Calvin University, archived 2008, at <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/weltparasit.htm>. (Editorial insert omitted.)

³¹ Otto, “World Parasite.”

³² Otto, “World Parasite.”

³³ Otto, “World Parasite.”

It must be understood that the issue of landlessness is not the sole element of the trope—disconnect from language, alongside disconnect from land, has always provided the foundation for Jews’ supposed wandering nature. Composer Richard Wagner’s³⁴ essay “Judaism in Music” claims that “[t]he Jew converses in the tongue of the people amongst whom he dwells from age to age, but he does this invariably after the manner of a foreigner.”³⁵ He then writes that a “language is not the work of one man, but its mode of expression and its development are the joint emanation of an ancient community,”³⁶ which explains why Jews speak their nation’s languages as aliens: they wandered there from elsewhere and therefore were not part of the language’s historical development. Language similarly plays a part in the Nazis’ conception of the Wandering Jew—a pamphlet (printed by a Nazi-affiliated publisher) that defends the Nazi-implemented “Aryan Law”³⁷ describes Jewry as a people that “lacks its own territory and language.”³⁸ The issue of languagelessness is inextricably bound to the trope; thus proponents of the image misconstrue the Jewish people’s complex relationship to language as an inherently negative attribute. With this foundational understanding, one may go on to explore how Nazis’

³⁴ Wagner, while not directly associated with the Nazi Party, is widely considered an influential figure in the Nazi consciousness due to his fervent German nationalism, his antisemitic ideas, and Hitler’s admiration for his politics and music. See Gary McGath, “Wagner and Nazism,” The Reading Room, Online Library of Liberty, posted March 2, 2023, at <https://oll.libertyfund.org/publications/reading-room/2023-03-02-mcgath-wagner-and-nazism>.

³⁵ Richard Wagner and Edwin Evans, *Judaism In Music: (Das Judenthum In Der Musik) Being the Original Essay Together With the Later Supplement* (W. Reeves, 1910), 11, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uiuc.1926031>.

³⁶ Wagner and Evans, *Judaism in Music*, 12.

³⁷ This piece of legislation was implemented early during Hitler’s rule with the aim of driving Jews out of professions. See E. H. Schulz and R. Frercks, “Why the Aryan Law? A Contribution to the Jewish Question,” German Propaganda Archive, Calvin University, archived 1999, at <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/arier.htm>.

³⁸ Schulz and Frercks, “Why the Aryan Law?” This description of Jews as languageless, common among Nazi texts and arguments, willfully ignores Jews’ continuous connection to Hebrew and Aramaic. Given that Nazi texts occasionally reference Hebrew, it could hardly be said that Nazis had no knowledge of the language. Rather, the Nazis simply chose when to acknowledge Hebrew based on when it would serve their antisemitic agenda to reference it versus to ignore it.

language-based anti-Jewish rhetoric promotes antisemitism by reinforcing the Wandering Jew image.

“The Jew Speaks Every Language”

As aforementioned, Martina Lüdicke’s statement that “Jews speak ‘every language’”³⁹ refers to their historical tendency to adopt the languages of their host countries. This follows as a natural consequence of living in the Diaspora for several thousand years,⁴⁰ but some Nazi texts intentionally misrepresent the cause of this phenomenon in order to feed into antisemitic attitudes. In his manifesto *Mein Kampf*, Hitler writes: “As long as the Jew has not succeeded in mastering other peoples he is forced to speak their language whether he likes it or not. But the moment that the world would become the slave of the Jew it would have to learn some other language (Esperanto, for example⁴¹) so that by this means the Jew could dominate all the more easily.”⁴² In the Nazi imagination of Jews, they speak their countries’ languages not as part of a natural process of acculturation, but because they are *forced* to do so; and once Jews achieve some level of control over other peoples, they will abandon their languages and enforce a universal one. Hitler twists Jews’ linguistic assimilation to fit an antisemitic narrative of Jewish desire for world domination. Nazi texts further weaponize this tendency by alleging that it reveals something negative about the “Jewish character.” A pamphlet outlining Nazi racial theories asserts: “The parasitic nature of the Jews is clear in its ability to adjust to the host

³⁹ Lüdicke, “Do Jews have their own language?”

⁴⁰ Gitelman, “Divergent Fates,” 418-19.

⁴¹ Esperanto was created by a Jewish man and championed with the hope that it would be universally adopted. See Steven G. Kellman, “The Secret Jewish History of Esperanto,” *Forward*, August 30, 2016, <https://forward.com/culture/348344/the-secret-jewish-history-of-esperanto/>.

⁴² Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. James Murphy (1939), 255, <https://greatwar.nl/books/meinkampf/meinkampf.pdf>.

peoples. A characteristic example is the relationship of the Jew to language: Even before our era the Jewish people had changed its language several times.”⁴³ According to this text (and contrary to Hitler’s claim), Jews’ linguistic assimilation was a deliberate effort, made in order to infiltrate non-Jewish societies. Even in clearly contradictory ways, Nazis used Jews’ adaptation of many languages to support various antisemitic arguments.

Consistent through all these texts is the consensus that Jews’ multilingualism does nothing to change their core Jewish identity. At the core of Nazi antisemitism is the definition of Jewishness as an immutable biological identity—and this conception of Jewishness arises constantly in Nazi discussions of Jews’ adoption of their host languages. Another of the *Stürmer* Publishing House’s books for children (titled *The Poodle-Pug-Dachshund-Pinscher*) illustrates this: “There are Jews in Germany, England and Italy, in Europe, Africa, Asia, Australia and America. But even if they...speak the various languages of the world, they are and remain Jews. They are and remain the poisonous snakes of humanity.”⁴⁴ After taking on the dominant culture’s language, Jews apparently remain inherently (and very negatively) different from the general populace. Hitler too expresses this sentiment in *Mein Kampf*: “[The Jew] may speak a thousand tongues and yet his Jewish nature will remain always one and the same.”⁴⁵ The pamphlet *The Jew as World Parasite* takes this one step further by extending this biological difference to Jews’ minds, explaining that “[a]lthough [the Jew] may speak German, French, or some other language, he thinks in a Jewish way.”⁴⁶ *Mein Kampf* argues this as well: “A man may acquire and

⁴³ “Racial Policy,” German Propaganda Archive, Calvin University, archived 1998, at <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/rassenpo.htm>.

⁴⁴ Ernst Heimer, “The Poodle-Pug-Dachshund-Pinscher,” German Propaganda Archive, Calvin University, archived 2001, at <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/pudel.htm>.

⁴⁵ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 259.

⁴⁶ Otto, “World Parasite.”

use a new language without much trouble; but it is only his old ideas that he expresses through the new language. His inner nature is not modified thereby.”⁴⁷ Since Nazi ideology views Jewishness as biological, it holds that Jews cannot be rid of their Jewishness. Accordingly, even if Jews assimilate by speaking other peoples’ languages, their thoughts and mental processes will remain distinct from all non-Jews’.

Nazi texts discussing Jew’s relationship to language frequently challenge notions of linguistic assimilation by referring to Jewish blood—and by claiming that Jews, just like Nazis, consider blood the defining element of Jewish identity. A text published in a Nazi bulletin quotes a novel by “the Jew Lord Beaconsfield (born Benjamin Disraeli)”: “Language and religion do not make a race—there is only one thing which makes a race, and that is blood.”⁴⁸ By citing the statement of a Jewish character written by a Jew, this Nazi author attempts to prove that Jews define themselves by blood rather than language. Hitler expounds this point: “It is not however by the tie of language, but exclusively by the tie of blood that the members of a race are bound together. And the Jew himself knows this better than any other, seeing that he attaches so little importance to the preservation of his own language while at the same time he strives his utmost to maintain his blood free from intermixture with that of other races.”⁴⁹ Hitler uses Jews’ perceived neglect of Hebrew and adoption of other languages (alongside the traditional religious opposition to intermarriage) as evidence that Jews, too, define Jewishness by blood rather than language. Thus, the Nazis’ concept of “Jewish blood” lends additional support to the notion that Jewish biological differences render language-based attempts to assimilate meaningless. In

⁴⁷ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 259.

⁴⁸ “Our Battle Against Judah.”

⁴⁹ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 258-59.

Hitler's words, "He is always the same Jew,"⁵⁰ and so Nazis' racial antisemitism always applies, no matter what language Jews speak.

"The Jew Speaks Yiddish"

The Eastern European Jews who immigrated to Germany en masse in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries experienced an especially xenophobic type of antisemitism. Whereas most German Jews were assimilated and thus accepted (if tenuously so) into mainstream German society, Jews arriving from Eastern Europe brought with them customs, rituals, dress, and language that markedly differed from the German standard. A book issued by the Nazi Party, *Germany's National Awakening Seen by a Foreign Observer* (published 1934), describes how "[t]here are two sorts of Jews in Germany": the assimilated German Jews and the Eastern European Jewish immigrants, who "were of a far inferior racial quality than the West European Jews."⁵¹ The book notes that "[i]t is against this type of Jew that the anti-semitism of the national socialist program is primarily directed, thus...he is termed an 'undesirable alien.'"⁵² The perception of Eastern European Jews as foreign and primitive, now brought to the forefront of the German consciousness by their increased immigration to Germany, prompted yet greater anti-Jewish sentiment—often expressed in the form of anti-Yiddish rhetoric. As *Germany's National Awakening* explains, "Generally, this [Eastern European] type of Jew speaks Yiddish, a mixture of German and Hebrew"⁵³; Nazis perceived Yiddish as emblematic of these Jews'

⁵⁰ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 259.

⁵¹ English translation of *Germany's National Awakening Seen by a Foreign Observer*, 15 September 1934, FO 371/17730/31, code 18, file 75, National Archives, History Commons (hereafter cited as *Germany's National Awakening*, National Archives). <https://history-commons.net/artifacts/18002779/activities-of-london-branch-of-nazi-party/18902014/>.

⁵² *Germany's National Awakening*, National Archives.

⁵³ *Germany's National Awakening*, National Archives.

foreign nature, and thus it was on the basis of Yiddish that many Nazis marginalized and denigrated Jews.

One recurring form of Yiddish-based Nazi antisemitism was rejection of Yiddish as a proper or true language. Many early German Christian scholars viewed Yiddish “as a corrupted and lesser form of German.”⁵⁴ This perception persisted through the centuries: “In 1592, Elias Schadäus bemoaned the fact that Jews ‘mutilate’ the word *und* (and), omitting its final ‘d.’ In 1609, the grammarian Johann Buxtorf mentioned ‘corrupt versions’ of German written in Hebrew characters that developed among Jews, especially in Bohemia, Moravia and Poland. In 1750, Christian Just Chrysander provided a systematic list of linguistic patterns with which Jews ‘spoiled’ German.”⁵⁵ These attitudes toward Yiddish remained in the German *zeitgeist*, and Germans (as well as educated German Jews) in the nineteenth century continued “to qualify Yiddish as a jargon, a dialect...a sort of faulty German.”⁵⁶ Eventually, this debasement of Yiddish became solidified in Nazi ideology. One member of the Party, Karl Friedrich Euler, captures this sentiment in his essay “The Yiddish Language as Expression of the Jewish Mind”: “It is not even worthy of being described as a corrosive, denigrating dialect of the German language. It is a form of jargon, on a par with only one other, the thieves’ cant.”⁵⁷ By

⁵⁴ Alexander Beider, “No, Yiddish Is not a Corruption of German,” *Forward*, October 17, 2018, <https://forward.com/opinion/412210/no-yiddish-is-not-a-corruption-of-german/>. On the contrary, both Yiddish and modern German developed from an older form of German.

⁵⁵ Beider, “Yiddish Is not a Corruption.”

⁵⁶ European Parliament, *Yiddish Language and Culture and Its Post-Holocaust Fate in Europe*.

⁵⁷ Karl Friedrich Euler, “The Yiddish Language as Expression of the Jewish Mind,” in *The Third Reich Sourcebook*, ed. Anson Rabinbach and Sander L. Gilman (University of California Press, 2013), 227. The notion of Yiddish’s association with criminality appears periodically in Nazi media: the Nazi propagandist film *The Eternal Jew*, supposedly a documentary about European Jewry, alleges that “[t]he most common expressions in the jargon of international gangsters and criminals stem from Hebrew and Yiddish words.” See Fritz Hippler, “The Eternal Jew,” propaganda film, November 28, 1940, posted October 8, 2024, by The Warning and More, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qDE7MGjUVJI>.

delegitimizing the language of European Jews, Nazis emphasized Jews' languagelessness and further disparaged them as a people.

Nazis also used anti-Yiddish rhetoric to support popular antisemitic tropes. Euler's essay reveals three antisemitic tropes propagated in this way; the first is that of the shyster Jew, supported by the notion that Judaism prescribes unsavory business practices. Euler notes the frequency of Hebrew words in Yiddish vocabulary and claims that "to assume that the appearance of Hebrew words was merely the result of religious influences would be to render the phenomenon more innocuous than it is."⁵⁸ Rather, the question of why these holy words would be used for everyday, profane matters is answered in "the very fact that the words are spoken by a Jew...for whom the Hebrew language is the language of his religion, and any Hebrew word, whatever it may be, always represents some form of religious expression."⁵⁹ Thus Euler concludes that "*the Yiddish language is a singular testament to the notion that the Judaic religion engulfs without any exception all provinces of life.*"⁶⁰ This argument hints at the common Nazi claim that Judaism designates business as holy and religiously obligatory: in the Nazi propaganda film *The Eternal Jew*, the narrator asserts that "Jewish morality...proclaims the unrestrained egoism of every Jew to be divine law. His religion makes cheating and usury a duty."⁶¹ By claiming that Hebrew words' presence in Yiddish represent this extension of religion to all areas of life, Euler confirms this notion—since Jews' use of Yiddish while conducting business would then prove that business is a holy element of Judaism. Euler thereby creates a

⁵⁸ Euler, "Yiddish Language," 227.

⁵⁹ Euler, "Yiddish Language," 227.

⁶⁰ Euler, "Yiddish Language," 227. (Emphasis in original text.)

⁶¹ Hippler, "Eternal Jew."

linguistic proof for the antisemitic stereotype that Jewish religion promotes greed and unsavory business practices.

Moreover, Euler takes Hebrew words' presence in Yiddish to have a second negative connotation: that "*the flamboyant application of suggestive and ambiguous Hebrew words turns the Yiddish language into a secret language of the Jews*"⁶²—*a language understood only by those who are intimately familiar with the Jewish strain of thought—that is, only to the Jew himself.*"⁶³ Euler finds his support for this claim in the notion that "[w]hatever language is at issue, once the Jew has appropriated it, it loses its specific clarity, its concepts forfeit their stability and [reaches] a perpetual state of multivalent ambiguity."⁶⁴ Yiddish is the ultimate proof of this, as "[t]he words of the Yiddish language are—from the very onset—flamboyantly suggestive and ambiguous."⁶⁵ Euler again finds a linguistic basis for a common antisemitic trope—in this case, of the sneaky Jew. Nazis frequently depict Jews as compulsive liars and cheaters; the children's book *Trust No Fox on His Green Heath and No Jew on His Oath* illustrates this in its recurring lines: "Don't trust a fox on the greensward, / And never a Jew on his plighted word!"⁶⁶ By portraying Yiddish as a secret code of intentionally ambiguous terms used only between Jews, Euler implies that inherent in the "Jewish strain of thought" is a devious and secretive exchange of Jewish ideas—thereby finding linguistic "proof" that Jews are deceptive by nature.

⁶² There did exist a particular register of Western Yiddish that incorporated Hebraisms, initially for the purpose of "disguis[ing] certain concepts from those who did not know Hebrew." This register was used particularly in contexts of markets and trade and was not, as Euler implies, the dominant variety of Yiddish for everyday speech. See Fleischer, "Western Yiddish and Judeo-German," 253.

⁶³ Euler, "Yiddish Language," 227. (Emphasis in original text.)

⁶⁴ Euler, "Yiddish Language," 226-27.

⁶⁵ Euler, "Yiddish Language," 226-27.

⁶⁶ Bauer, "Trust No Fox."

The most prominent and pervasive antisemitic trope expressed in Euler's writing is that of the Wandering Jew. He writes, "The fact that the Jew can learn foreign languages quickly and easily is not a sign of talent but rather of his lack of any binding sense of language,"⁶⁷ and illustrates how this manifests in Yiddish: "Whoever concerns himself more closely with the Yiddish language is confronted with the observation that the native speaker of Yiddish is completely devoid of any tangible, firmly established sense of language."⁶⁸ As evidence for these statements, Euler cites Yiddish's "haphazardly thrown together vocabulary."⁶⁹ He affirms these conclusions' implications for Jewish character: "The deep-seated desire for world citizenship and world domination that is anchored in the linguistic hodgepodge of Yiddish assaults the listener from afar."⁷⁰ Finally, Euler concludes that "Yiddish is the language of Ahasver—the language of the eternal Wandering Jew."⁷¹ This label of linguistic nomadism promotes not only the antisemitic accusation of a "parasitic instinct," but also the harmful view of Jews as a foreign race that appropriates the language of the non-Jewish populace. Euler's essay demonstrates that anti-Yiddish rhetoric served the Nazis primarily by facilitating the further propagation of anti-Jewish hostility through preexisting antisemitic tropes and arguments: in this case, those of the shyster Jew, the sneaky Jew, and the Wandering Jew.

"The Jew Speaks German"

The Nazis' conception of Jewishness as a biological identity has the consequence of rendering assimilation impossible. In the Nazi imagination, even German Jews who have totally

⁶⁷ Euler, "Yiddish Language," 226.

⁶⁸ Euler, "Yiddish Language," 226.

⁶⁹ Euler, "Yiddish Language," 226.

⁷⁰ Euler, "Yiddish Language," 227.

⁷¹ Euler, "Yiddish Language," 227.

assimilated into German society remain distinctly and threateningly Jewish, and their assimilation is seen as a devious disguise. A Nazi newsletter printed for girls' youth groups claims that "Eastern Jews first crossed the border with caftan, hair locks, and a black cap, intending to slowly but surely to transform themselves into what they thought were ordinary Europeans."⁷² Similarly, the film *The Eternal Jew* alleges that "[a]n essential trait of the Jew is that he always tries to hide his origin when among non-Jews....A bunch of Polish Jews, still wearing caftans—now in Western European clothes, prepare to infiltrate Western civilization."⁷³ The film also purports to depict "Jews as they really look before concealing themselves behind the mask of civilized Europeans."⁷⁴ These two Nazi texts depict Jews as craftily concealing their Jewishness when among the general German population by changing their physical appearance so that they may invade non-Jewish society.

These texts continue by expressing why this is dangerous to German society—namely, because assimilation makes them more difficult to distinguish from "true" Germans. The newsletter claims, "Over time, many learned to conceal themselves more cleverly...becoming even more dangerous for us."⁷⁵ *The Eternal Jew* echoes this sentiment: "Outwardly, [Berlin Jews] try to act just like the host peoples. People without good instincts let themselves be deceived by this mimicry and consider Jews the same as they are. Therein lies the enormous danger: these assimilated Jews remain forever foreign bodies in the organisms of their host peoples, regardless of appearances."⁷⁶ Nazi ideology presents acculturation as Jews' deliberate

⁷² "Germany Overcomes Jewry," German Propaganda Archive, Calvin University, archived 2013, at <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/mainfranken-1944.htm>.

⁷³ Hippler, "Eternal Jew."

⁷⁴ Hippler, "Eternal Jew."

⁷⁵ "Germany Overcomes Jewry."

⁷⁶ Hippler, "Eternal Jew."

attempt to conceal their racial distinctiveness (thereby reinforcing the stereotype of the deceptive Jew) and emphasizes the threat this poses to German society.

Likely due to this perceived threat, numerous Nazi texts focus particularly on German-speaking Jews and how their linguistic assimilation represents a plot to infiltrate the racially pure German society. This notion originated before the Nazi Party rose to power; in the 1893 novel *The Operated Jew*, a Jewish medical student named Itzig Faitel Stern wishes (in his words) “to become such a fine gentleman just like a goymenra and to geeve up all fixonomic of Jewishness.”⁷⁷ As part of this process, under the instruction of a private language tutor, Faitel gives up his Yiddish and “learn[s] high German like a totally new, foreign language.”⁷⁸ The story places significant emphasis on the importance of learning proper German in becoming a “true” (and therefore non-Jewish) German citizen. This emphasis fed into Nazi ideology and its antisemitic notions of the German language’s role in Jewish infiltration of German society—in *Mein Kampf*, Hitler argues that Jews disguise themselves as Germans exclusively through language:

In the course of more than a thousand years the Jew had learned to master the language of his hosts so thoroughly that he considered he might now lay stress on his Jewish character and emphasize the 'Germanism' a bit more....The Jew did not possess the slightest traces of the German character. He had only acquired the art of twisting the German language to his own uses, and that in a disgusting way, without having assimilated any other feature of the German character. Therefore his command of the language was the sole ground on which he could pretend to be a German.⁷⁹

To Hitler, Jews who speak German necessarily abuse and corrupt the language in a “disgusting way,” since they apparently only speak it in order to disguise themselves as Germans. Further, the fact that Jews’ fluency in German was supposedly the only means by which they could

⁷⁷ Panizza and Zipes, *The Operated Jew*, 55.

⁷⁸ Panizza and Zipes, *The Operated Jew*, 56.

⁷⁹ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 258.

pretend to be German demonstrates the significance that Nazis assigned to Jews' use of the language in their accusations of Jews' societal infiltration.

Naz ideology saw Jews' adoption of the German language not only as deception of outward appearance, but also as deception of thought. *Mein Kampf* expresses this view: "For [the Jew] language is not an instrument for the expression of his inner thoughts but rather a means of cloaking them...when writing German rhymes he only gives expression to the character of his own race."⁸⁰ First, Hitler makes a generalization about Jews' use of language by asserting that Jews use language in such a way so as to obscure their thoughts. He then focuses on German specifically, claiming that Jews demonstrate their deceptive nature as they write in the German language by hiding their Jewish ideas in German words. This facet of Nazi ideology appears yet more explicitly in the texts of the groups it influenced: in their collection of works meant to illustrate Nazi ideology and influence during the Third Reich, Anson Rabinbach and Sander Gilman cite a poster created by the German Student Association that proclaims, "The Jew can think only in Jewish terms. When he writes in German, he tells lies."⁸¹ In the Nazi imagination, Jews writing in German necessarily constitutes deceit, since Jews can only think "Jewish thoughts" but—by expressing them in German—trick their readers into believing that they are instead "German thoughts." This poster's argument, which exemplifies Nazis' reach into and sway over general society, testifies that Nazis portrayed Jews' use of the German language as linguistic deception. This portrayal served both to support the deceptive Jew stereotype and to

⁸⁰ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 255.

⁸¹ "Down with the Un-German Spirit!" in *The Third Reich Sourcebook*, ed. Anson Rabinbach and Sander L. Gilman (University of California Press, 2013), 449. Anson Rabinbach and Sander Gilman also cite an anonymous response to the German Student Association, which defends Jews' historical use of German: "Back when the embryos of the current generation still closely resembled those of a pig, we were at war. At that time, we were able to ascertain that the Jews of Galicia and Russia were the standard-bearers for the Old High German language. If this generation of embryos had reached the human stage of human development, they would know this! This is how things are when they don't make it past the pig stage." See "All Anti-Semitic Students Are Assholes!" in *The Third Reich Sourcebook*, ed. Anson Rabinbach and Sander L. Gilman (University of California Press, 2013), 450-51.

supply yet another “proof” of how Jews perverted and corrupted German culture and language—thus fueling antisemitism in Germany.

In all their discussions of how Jews twist and warp the German language, Nazis repeatedly reinforce one particular point: speaking German does not make a Jew German. Rather, the racialization of Jews that defines Nazis’ ideological antisemitism dictates that (in the words of author and associate professor Dr. Paul Nahme) Jews “would never be able to shed their ‘Oriental’ essence, even when presenting themselves in doppelgänger form, mimicking Germans....”⁸² The notion of Jewish racial identity remaining intact despite German linguistic assimilation appears frequently in Nazi texts; for instance, the pamphlet “The Jew as World Parasite” claims that “[the Jew] may spout German poetry, but he remains a member of his race.”⁸³ In *The Operated Jew* (which informed and influenced organized Nazi antisemitism), as part of his transformation into a “true” German, Faitel manages to learn how to speak the German language properly—but as his later reversion to his Jewish self attests, this is not enough to make a Jew into a German. Hitler also emphasizes this point in the “Gemlich letter,” the first known instance in which he expresses his antisemitic ideas in writing:⁸⁴ “A German who is forced to avail himself of the French language in France, Italian in Italy, Chinese in China does not thereby become a Frenchman, Italian, or Chinaman anymore than the Jew who lives among us and is forced to avail himself of the German language becomes a German.”⁸⁵ Nazi ideology

⁸² Paul E. Nahme, “Ghosted: Jewishness and the Haunted Hegemony of Racial Modernity,” *The Journal of Religion* 102, no. 2 (2022): 231, <https://doi.org/10.1086/718419>.

⁸³ Otto, “World Parasite.”

⁸⁴ “Adolf Hitler’s First Written Statement on the ‘Jewish Question’,” Holocaust Encyclopedia, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/timeline-event/holocaust/before-1933/adolf-hitler-issues-comment-on-the-jewish-question>.

⁸⁵ Adolf Hitler, “Letter to Adolf Gemlich,” in *The Third Reich Sourcebook*, ed. Anson Rabinbach and Sander L. Gilman (University of California Press, 2013), 6.

highlights Jews' racial distinctiveness from Germans where the German language is concerned, underscoring Jews' difference and foreignness among the greater non-Jewish populace. By doing so, it incites antisemitism by further alienating Jews from racially superior Germans on the basis of their shared language.

How Nazis Used Jews' Relationship to Language

Jews' relationship to language is a nuanced, multifaceted issue that requires significant historical context in order for one to understand it fully. Nazis took advantage of the issue's complexity and twisted the narrative in order to propagate anti-Jewish sentiment. They used Jews' relationship to language to promote myriad antisemitic tropes: that Jews are foreign; Jews are primitive; Jews are shysters; Jews are tricksters; Jews are liars; Jews are criminals; Jews are Christ-killers and wanderers; Jews seek world domination; and many more. Further, when surveying the wide range of Nazis' linguistic antisemitic arguments, it becomes clear that there is no case in which Jews were safe from this language-based hostility. If Jews spoke German, Nazis decried this as the ultimate deception, claiming that Jews were concealing their racial character (instigating xenophobic animosity) and/or their "Jewish thoughts" (evoking the deceptive Jew stereotype); if Jews spoke Yiddish, Nazis repudiated the language's legitimacy and maliciously misrepresented the language's origins and composition for the sake of supporting anti-Jewish canards; if Jews all around the globe naturally adopted the common language of wherever they lived, Nazis hailed this as incontrovertible evidence of the truth and accuracy of the Wandering Jew image—promulgating the perception of Jews as parasites and undermining the social acceptance of Jewish populations in various countries. In the Nazis' great anti-Jewish arsenal, Jews' relationship to language was one of the most versatile and frequently wielded weapons.

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