

# Anti-Semitism in the United States: Past – and Present?

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*Over the past years and months, and especially so after the reignition of the armed conflict in the Middle East in May 2021, Western countries including the United States have registered an alarming increase in anti-Semitic prejudice and verbal and physical assaults. This trend is particularly concerning in the context of the United States, where anti-Semitism had appeared to have largely subsided, as its resurgence threatens to harbinge radical changes in the society's value system. Including a discussion of both historical backgrounds and current events, and individual case studies, this article argues for the necessity to thematize anti-Semitism in the United States within the secondary- and tertiary-education EFL/American Studies classroom.*

*In den vergangenen Jahren und Monaten, insbesondere nach dem Wiederaufflammen des Nahostkonflikts im Mai 2021, ist in westlichen Ländern einschließlich der Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika eine alarmierende Zunahme antisemitischer Ressentiments und Übergriffe zu verzeichnen. Gerade im Kontext der USA, wo der Antisemitismus weitestgehend abgeebbt schien, ist diese Entwicklung bedenklich, da sie größere Umbrüche im Wertesystem der Gesellschaft anzukündigen droht. Anhand historischer Hintergründe, tagespolitischer Entwicklungen und individueller Fallbeispiele zeigt dieser Aufsatz die Notwendigkeit auf, Antisemitismus in den USA im USA-zentrierten Unterricht der Sekundarstufe II und des Tertiärbereichs zu thematisieren.*

## Introduction

The recent eruption of violence between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip, claiming numerous victims on both sides and resulting in enormous destruction, made daily headlines in early and mid-May 2021. As concerning as these headlines are, the ones that come in their wake are no less, if not more, alarming – headlines that report on manifest and violent anti-Semitism in Europe, involving not only anti-Semitic slogans but the burning of Israel's flag

as well as attacks on Jewish institutions, including synagogues. Likewise, the recently reignited conflict in the Middle East has triggered verbal and physical attacks on Jews and Jewish institutions in the United States, where “at least 26 instances of antisemitism have been reported across the United States, from Los Angeles to New York” (Harris & Shammass, 2021, para. 2) within only two weeks in May 2021.

Even prior to the latest armed conflicts between Israel and Palestinians, a rise in anti-Semitism has been observable over the past few years, with incidents such as the murders of Sarah Halimi and Mireille Knoll in Paris, France; the attack on the synagogue in Halle (Saale), Germany; as well as the Tree of Life synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh, USA, standing out as deplorable culminations of what appears to be a frighteningly widespread and broiling trend throughout the Western world. The exploration of manifestations of, consequences of, as well as potential reasons for resurfacing anti-Semitism in the United States, which is home to the world's largest Jewish population in total numbers and to the second-largest portion of the worldwide Jewry (Vital Statistics: Jewish Population of the World, 2021), is thus a topical issue in American Studies, and particularly so in Transnational American Studies, as these incidents are neither contained to one nation or continent nor unilaterally traceable in their historical roots. As such, they also deserve thematization in the EFL and American Studies classroom, where the discussion of rising anti-Semitism serves not only to sensitize students to the current political developments and their societal reverberations but also to enable them both to place anti-Semitic offenses in a historical and contemporary context and to cultivate informed opinions about such offenses and diverse responses to them.

The treatment of anti-Semitism is not explicitly mentioned in the curricula of German or Austrian secondary school English education,<sup>1</sup> pos-

sibly either because it is not a phenomenon specific to the English-speaking world or because it is not considered or recognized as a problem worth discussing with students in the EFL/American Studies classroom. This article therefore argues that despite its lack of exclusiveness to the English-speaking world, or the United States specifically, and even though anti-Semitism historically has not taken on the same virulence there it has taken on in other countries of the Western world, particularly Germany, anti-Semitism is a growing problem in Western, including American, society and therefore deserves thematization in the EFL/American Studies classroom. After briefly sketching historical dimensions of anti-Semitism in the United States, the article will present three case studies from 2017, 2018, and 2021 with the help of which secondary- and tertiary-education teachers and their learners can discuss anti-Semitism in the EFL/American Studies classroom.

### Anti-Semitism in the United States: Past and Present

In the *Encyclopedia of American Studies* (2018), a useful resource for American Studies researchers and educators, the entry on “Anti-Semitism” is comparatively short, which may signify to some readers that anti-Jewish sentiments have not taken center stage in the United States, past and present. Evelyn Beck’s overview of American anti-Semitism recapitulates major stages in its historical development.<sup>2</sup> In nearly four centuries of Jewish presence in what is today the United States, institutionalized forms of anti-Semitism, such as quotas for college and university admission, ranged beside such tragic climaxes as the lynching of Leo Frank in 1915 and the attacks on Jews following Father Coughlin’s broadcasts of hate during the 1930s. The literary scholar Philip Joseph refers to the renowned historian John Higham when he states that

virulent anti-Semitism surfaced most powerfully in the American 1890s in three relatively marginal contexts: among patrician intellectuals like Henry Adams and Henry

Cabot Lodge, among the urban lower classes, and among certain segments of the agrarian protest movement [...]. For most reading Americans, however, anti-Semitism was best kept outside the public discourse, limited to the elite clubs, vacation resorts, and private schools where cultural homogeneity had always been a given. In the 1890s, the emergence of a Jewish middle class was making such homogeneity hard to maintain quietly. [...] [T]he American business classes continued to distinguish exclusive social practices from openly bigoted rhetorical formulations, and the de facto segregation of Jews and gentiles in civic society from anti-Semitic governmental legislation. (2002, p. 5)

The fact that the exclusion of Jews from certain areas of American public life and the anti-Semitic sentiment fueling such practices were “kept outside the public discourse,” however, does not mean they did not exist. In 1913, “a time when American Jews [...] were experiencing deep-seated bigotry,” the Anti-Defamation League was founded, a U.S.-based Jewish NGO dedicated to its mission “to stop the defamation of the Jewish people, and to secure justice and fair treatment to all” (Anti-Defamation League, 2021). It was not until the mid-twentieth century, when the full extent of the atrocities committed against Jews during the Third Reich became known to a large portion of the American public and general prosperity augmented, that anti-Semitism in the United States, while not disappearing, lessened (Beck, 2018).

Despite the obstacles Jews have faced since their arrival on American soil, the bottom line of Evelyn Beck’s encyclopedia entry is that, while anti-Semitism in the United States “flourished” in the past and “survived” well into the twentieth century, by the end of the twentieth century it was continuously abating (2018, para. 5). Similarly, in the early 2000s the literary historian Jules Chametzky looked back on the 1970s, noting the disappearance of institutionalized anti-Semitism and the decline of “isolated incidents of anti-Semitism” (2001, p. 979) in the United States in the wake of the civil rights movement.

Such observations seem to suggest a linear development from the 1890s to the present day that is marked by a gradual decrease in anti-Semitic bias and discrimination in the United States. Yet, recent attacks perpetrated against Jews and corresponding statistics on anti-Semitic incidents in the United States reveal how treacherous this assumption is. Anti-Semitic protests during the riots at Charlottesville, VA, in 2017 were followed by a fatal shooting at a synagogue in Pittsburgh, PA, in 2018. Since the Anti-Defamation League started keeping record of anti-Semitic assaults in 1979, the most incidents within one year occurred no earlier than 2019, amounting to “over 2,000 acts of assault, vandalism, and harassment” (Schumacher, 2021, para. 1). More recently, in May 2021, anti-Israel anger about the latest violent clashes in the Middle East translated into anti-Jewish aggression in the United States (Harris & Shammas, 2021). And still, whereas conflicts between Israel and Gaza have often unleashed anti-Semitic violence in the United States, experts “are worried that the recent attacks were evidence of a worrisome trend that has been accelerated” by the events in the Middle East (Harris & Shammas, 2021, para. 7). From this angle, the confrontational politics in the Middle East is not the sole reason for recent anti-Semitic harassment and assaults, but instead only the catalyst for tendencies that were already on the rise, but less conspicuous before. In this latter scenario, the contexts in which anti-Semitic sentiments and the increased readiness to translate them into hate crimes need to be placed exceed the focus on current affairs in the Middle East and require the consideration of the political climate in the United States prior to May 2021, particularly “the ascendancy of right-wing populism in the United States and its concomitant anti-Semitism” (Kaplan, 2020, p. 224).

Within the context of American Studies teaching, be it in the institutional framework of secondary or tertiary education, it is particularly notable and relevant for students that, according to the Anti-Defamation League’s recent data, “anti-Semitism continued to increase at schools and universities” and was founded on the school

children’s and university students’ actual or assumed links to Israel (Schumacher, 2020, para. 6). Students on this side of the Atlantic can be encouraged to ponder and discuss, not least from a comparative perspective, what it means that Jewish school children and university students are harassed and attacked in their learning environment merely based on the fact that they are Jews.

### **Contemporary Anti-Semitism in the EFL/ American Studies Classroom**

Rather than proposing a detailed lesson plan for how the topic could be taught in the classroom, this article aims to provide food for thought in the form of three examples of visual materials that could be used to broach the subject in the classroom and to unfold a discussion that involves the consideration of transnational historical developments, current affairs, and universal ethical principles, such as tolerance, (religious) freedom, and equality. In order to make this difficult topic more accessible, working with recent photographs is recommended, not least for motivational purposes.

The first<sup>3</sup> photograph (fig. 1) was taken during the demonstrations at Charlottesville on August 11 and 12, 2017, which were “suffused with anti-black racism, but also with anti-Semitism” (Green, 2017, para. 3).<sup>4</sup> During the so-called “Unite the Right” rally, White supremacists and related alt-right groups gathered not only to prevent the removal of a statue of the Confederate general Robert E. Lee but also to demonstrate for a unified White nationalist political agenda. The description and analysis of the photograph can serve as an entry into a discussion of what happened at Charlottesville, what its cultural reverberations were, and why the happenings were so significant with a view to anti-Semitism in the United States. Students asked to describe the photograph may quickly realize that the scene shows a demonstration, as they can see several men standing or marching together in the middle of a street in an urban setting. Vans and antennae in the background suggest that

the events are happening in a political context and on a larger scale and are therefore reported about and broadcast on the news. They may notice that the demonstrators are all white and male. The demonstrators are equipped with various kinds of flags, two of which may require explanation, according to the learners' previous knowledge about U.S. history and culture: three of the flags are Confederate flags, evoking the formerly slave-holding southern states' values wrapped up in the notion of the "Old South." The two yellow flags are Gadsden flags, inscribed with the words "Don't tread on me," making reference to the American Revolution and connoting the claim for gun rights and a limited federal government.

The flag at the very center of the image, however, will not require any explanation. The flag with the black swastika in a white circle surrounded by red unmistakably evokes Nazi Germany and with it the systematic persecution and murder of millions of Jews. Framed by two kinds of flags whose immediate context is American history, the swastika flag makes reference to an ideology that, while it is associated with Nazi German history, is readily adopted by American Nazis in the twenty-first century. The anti-Semitic symbolism of the flag was reinforced during the rally by chants that reiterated the slogan "Jews will not replace us" as well as by marchers wearing clothes that explicitly referenced Adolf Hitler (Green, 2017).

While the complexities of the interconnections between anti-Semitic imagery and paroles exhibited during the Charlottesville rally and historical anti-Semitism on both sides of the Atlantic may overtax lower-level students (for the lack of language skills and/or background knowledge), its exploration with the help of further material can offer intriguing perspectives to more advanced students.<sup>5</sup> But even if some students may not delve to the bottom of all the implications, the interpretation of the photograph, alongside background information provided by the teacher, will allow those students to uncover the tangible connection between a historically grown transnational anti-

Semitism and current trends in the United States. Starting from this point of departure, they can engage in discussions about the reasons for, the dangers of, and possible remedies for his trend.

The second photograph that this article proposes as material to thematize anti-Semitism in the EFL/American Studies classroom was taken in the aftermath of the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting in late October 2018, "the deadliest act of anti-Jewish violence in American history" (Rosenfeld, 2019, para. 1). On October 27, 2018, Robert D. Bowers, in an act of anti-Semitic rage, killed eleven people at the Tree of Life synagogue in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood at Pittsburgh. The 29 charges brought up against Bowers thereafter include "eleven counts of obstruction of exercise of religious beliefs resulting in death and eleven counts of use of a firearm to commit murder during and in relation to a crime of violence"; the charges as well as his anti-Semitic posts on social media prior to the attack made hate and conspiracy paranoia as his motive unambiguous ("Pittsburgh synagogue gunman suspect," 2018).

Rather than providing students with these and many other facts about the happenings of that day, the teacher could present the learners with the press photograph discussed in the following first (fig. 2).<sup>6</sup> After describing what they see in the picture, students can be asked to draw conclusions and formulate hypotheses about the context in which the picture was taken. The cues in the picture that help lead students in the right direction can be expected to be universally comprehensible: the yellow barricade tape makes clear that what is pictured is a crime scene; the numerous bouquets of flowers and the many lit candles indicate that several people lost their lives in this incident; students with an eye for detail will also notice the ambulance parked on the curbside on the right margin of the photograph, on which the words "Pittsburgh – Emergency Medical Service – Ambulance" are discernible; the height of the building in the background as well as its stained windows may

make it recognizable as a house of worship; finally, the man who is lighting the candle can be identified as a man who is mourning and based on his clothes as a Jew. As this connection between clothing and religious affiliation may not be immediately clear to students,<sup>7</sup> zooming in on the building to enlarge the Hebrew letters written on the building, alongside their English transcription “Tree of Life,” can help them reach this insight.

In a second step, depending on the learners’ level of proficiency and age, the photograph’s aesthetic composition and its effects can be examined. Students may identify the bright yellow police tape that splits the image horizontally into two halves as the salient element that not only directs the viewers’ attention toward the aspect of crime, violence, and the gravity of the events, but also draws attention to the aspect of “splitting/separating/dividing” itself: to the ultimate dividing line between light and dark, survivors and victims, life and death, the worldly and the otherworldly, life’s tumults and pain and the afterlife’s peace and quiet, but also to the deep chasm that runs through the contemporary United States. The blue and black nighttime skies symbolize the darkness of the events and the gloom and dejection that set in once the business and brightness of the day are gone.<sup>8</sup> The angle and shot size with which the photograph is taken makes the synagogue, steeped in darkness, appear to be ominously towering over humans and the mementos of those violently taken from their side.

From the observations made during the first step, students can deduce that the photograph was taken after a crime, that this crime claimed several lives, that it happened in or just outside a synagogue and triggered mourning among Jews in particular, and that it was thus targeted at Jews and motivated by anti-Semitism. After the students’ hypotheses are gathered, compared, and checked for their validity, facts about the happening can be provided, for instance in the form of a newspaper article. Alternatively, students can be given the task to

research online and gather information themselves. As shootings, especially those in which people are killed, are an emotionally taxing topic, it is vital that educators treat this photograph and the circumstances from which it emerged sensitively, allowing students space and time to process the troubling information, to ask questions, and to formulate and utter their individual responses.

The third photograph that can be used to take on contemporary anti-Semitism in the EFL/American Studies classroom was taken during the attacks on the U.S. Capitol following then President Trump’s speech to his supporters in Washington, D.C., on January 6, 2021. Trump followers had forced their way into the building, threatening staff and delegates, and leaving a trail of destruction in their wake. In contrast to fig. 2, fig. 3<sup>9</sup> is not a press photograph but a snapshot that was taken during the insurrection inside the Capitol and that circulated widely throughout social media. The photograph shows a group of rioters posing to have their picture taken by a fellow Trump supporter. When asked to describe what they see, students will talk about the people’s outer appearance, their facial expressions and clothing, and will at some point mention the bearded man to the left, who wears a black hoodie on which a white skull is surrounded by the words “Camp Auschwitz” and “Work brings freedom.”

While the photograph offers little in terms of aesthetic composition, it opens up at least two significant points of departure for class discussions. Firstly, since students will have heard both of Auschwitz concentration camp, liberated by Soviet troops on January 27, 1945, and of the Nazis’ slogan “Arbeit macht frei,” connections can be established between historical and present-day anti-Semitism on both sides of the Atlantic. Students can be encouraged to ponder questions like the following: What ideas, convictions, and aims motivate a person to wear such a sweater? What does it signify in its historical and cultural context when an American man in the twenty-first century wears a sweater ostensibly propagating Third Reich



ideology while storming the U.S. Capitol? How do history and the present interact when such choices are made and are made for people to see? Do students see this as an instance of an individual's poor judgement, "just" an offensive sweater, or is this representative of a collective set of choices, the product of White supremacist ideology, fueled by the then president and scapegoating Jews? Secondly, as the photograph of "the man in the Camp Auschwitz hoodie" circulated widely in a broad range of media, students can be stimulated to reflect on the influence that modern media, and social media in particular, have on the dissemination of such pictures, on the frameworks within which they can be placed, as well as on people's reception of and responses to them (Jacobo et al., 2021). Digital literacy and the competence to passively consume and actively use social media with responsibility and discernment are educational goals, ever more pressing since the 2020/2021 school lockdowns, that need to be tied up with the larger ethical questions connected to the treatment of anti-Semitism in class. Seeing how easily prejudice, intolerance, and hate, which lie at the bottom of reinvigorated anti-Semitic sentiments, are spread through certain channels, it is crucial that students gain an awareness of the interconnectedness between rising anti-Semitism and the increase of social media usage.<sup>10</sup>

The three photographs presented here can be used as alternative or complementary materials. They serve to bring learners in touch with concrete examples of the forms in which anti-Semitism surfaces in the contemporary United States. To prevent learners from developing a reduced or false image of Jewish life in the United States, examples of how Jewish culture flourishes in the United States should also be taken into consideration, without, however, suggesting that the examples discussed here were merely isolated incidents of bigotry. Referring to the January 6, 2021, insurrection, the latest of numerous manifestations of a partly violent anti-Jewish mindset, Oren Segal, the vice president of the Anti-Defamation League's Center on Extremism, concluded that

the riots were "not so much a tipping point" for anti-Semitism but "the latest explicit example of how [it] is part of what animates the narratives of extremists in this country" (qtd. in "Anti-Semitism Seen in Capitol insurrection," 2021, para. 4).

### Concluding Remarks

This article has tried to demonstrate that the recent resurgence of anti-Semitism in the United States and elsewhere in the world signals the need for American Studies educators to openly address this development in their classrooms. In order for students to be able to contextualize current events and trends, it is vital they know about backgrounds both in United States and world history. Students can be confronted with historical discourses that questioned Jews' status as "marginal white populations" and proposed that "Jewishness like blackness constituted a racial and cultural exception" (Joseph, 2002, p. 5), and they can be encouraged to uncover connections between these historical attitudes and present-day anti-Semitism, which rose simultaneously with the surge of White nationalism during Trump's candidacy and administration. Drawing on students' knowledge about the Shoah and detailing the circumstances under which the state of Israel was founded, teachers can support students in their efforts to grasp transnational trajectories.

What some might consider arguments against the inclusion of the topic into American Studies education – its non-specificity to the United States as well as its (presumed) marginality in comparison to other societal problems – are in fact reasons why the treatment of anti-Semitism has a rightful place in the EFL/American Studies classroom: The very fact that it is so widespread makes it an apt topic for an interdisciplinary approach, which is both a key feature of American Studies as a scholarly discipline and an explicit desideratum of numerous school curricula. Synergies aiming to explore the roots and spread of, reasons for, and activism against anti-Semitism could be created among diverse

school subjects such as English, French, German, History, Geography, Religious Education, and Social Sciences. Moreover, discussing anti-Semitism as a smoldering rather than a fullblown problem of our day allows educators to help learners become historically as well as culturally (more) sensitive, equipping them both with the knowledge necessary to recognize dangerous tendencies early on and with a sense of civic responsibility in the face of budding discrimination, bigotry, or violence.

Rabbi Zsolt Balla, the recently appointed first official Jewish military chaplain to the German Bundeswehr, stated in an interview following his historic appointment that anti-Semitism will never be eliminated completely from society (Balla: "Können Antisemitismus nie komplett eliminieren," 2021, para. 1). If we share Balla's grim but probably realistic outlook, it becomes all the more evident that this is a topic learners should be educated about and that this task is not restricted to the History classroom, just like the phenomenon is not restricted to history. This contribution has explicated and emphasized this desideratum. Exploring photographs taken in different contexts of present-day anti-Semitism in the United States, it has proposed ways in which these and/or comparable photographs could be employed in the EFL/American Studies classroom so that, after decades of de-thematization, the discussion of anti-Semitism more palpably enters the EFL/American Studies classroom.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Point of reference is the Bavarian "Lehrplan Plus." A discussion of anti-Semitism could be well placed within the following areas prescribed for grades 10, 11, and 12: "current events and developments" ("aktuelle Ereignisse und Entwicklungen"); "living together of ethnic groups in the UK and the U.S. [...], life in a multicultural society" ("Zusammenleben ethnischer Gruppen im UK und in den USA [...], Leben in der multikulturellen Gesellschaft"); "religion, values, and norms" ("Religion, Werte und Normen"). Cf. <https://www.lehrplanplus.bayern.de/schulart/gymnasium/>

[inhalt/fachlehrplaene?w\\_schulart=gymnasium&wt\\_1=schulart&w\\_fach=englisch&wt\\_2=fach](https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/GeltendeFassung.wxe?Abfrage=Bundesnormen&Gesetzesnummer=10008568)

The Austrian "Lehrplan der allgemeinbildenden höheren Schulen" is very open when it comes to contents and topics to be discussed in the EFL classroom. Yet, its guiding parameters in the realm of general educational objectives include, among others, such desiderata as "unbiased cultural encounters" ("vorurteilsfreie Begegnung der Kulturen"), "enabling students to develop informed opinions" ("Befähigung zur sach- und wertbezogenen Urteilsbildung"), and "the assumption of social responsibility" ("Übernahme sozialer Verantwortung"), which allows for or even encourages the thematization of anti-Semitism in the EFL/American Studies classroom. Cf. <https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/GeltendeFassung.wxe?Abfrage=Bundesnormen&Gesetzesnummer=10008568>

<sup>2</sup> More extensive useful sources on the history of anti-Semitism in the United States include, among many others: Dinnerstein, 1994; Perry, 2007; Lipstadt, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> The three photographs are treated in the chronological order of the events that they represent.

<sup>4</sup> Fig. 1: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unite\\_the\\_Right\\_rally#/media/File:Charlottesville\\_'Unite\\_the\\_Right'\\_Rally\\_\(35780274914\)\\_crop.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unite_the_Right_rally#/media/File:Charlottesville_'Unite_the_Right'_Rally_(35780274914)_crop.jpg); 17 June 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Emma Green's article in *The Atlantic* offers a very readable and informative take on the events and their backgrounds.

<sup>6</sup> Fig. 2: <https://www.oregister.com/2018/10/28/authorities-name-the-11-killed-in-the-pittsburgh-synagogue-shooting/>; 17 June 2021.

<sup>7</sup> One of the reasons why this connection may not be immediately graspable to many students is certainly the relative invisibility of Jews in German society. Traditionally clad (orthodox) Jews are not a very common sight in Germany and students, especially younger ones, may therefore not be familiar with it. Why this is may be related to an official statement that Felix Klein, Germany's Federal Government Commissioner for Jewish Life in Germany and the Fight against Anti-Semitism, made in May 2019 and that drew much public attention. In this statement,

Klein said he could not recommend that Jews in Germany wear a kippah at any time or place, implying that it is unsafe for Jews to make their Jewishness openly visible ("Antisemitismus-Beauftragter").

<sup>8</sup> Advanced students may establish an association with Elie Wiesel's novel *Night*.

<sup>9</sup> Fig. 3: <https://nypost.com/2021/01/08/camp-auschwitz-sweatshirt-seen-at-capitol-riot-sold-by-nyc-site/>; 17 June 2021.

<sup>10</sup> See also Gavriel Rosenfeld on the exploitation of allegedly humoristic anti-Semitic posts and memes pervading the Internet for neo-Nazi propaganda.

## Literature

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