

HOW NEW YORK'S JEWS WERE TURNED AGAINST BLACK MEN: Exploding the Myth of Black Anti-Semitism

This is the story of a political lie, a New York political lie that clangs through the city like a false alarm in the night. It breeds hatred between two of the largest ethnic groups in the city—as it was meant to do. It allows the powerful to step on the powerless—as it was meant to do. It has made many men so frightened they are now willing to forego their own rights as citizens in order to prevent other citizens from enjoying the same rights. And this, most of all, it was meant to do. The lie has a name: it is "black anti-Semitism."

As will be seen, the above "incidents" pretty much sum up the case for black anti-Semitism now being made by interested parties. But the charge of black anti-Semitism does not rest on such incidents; it takes off from them and never looks back. We are told in January by a Special Committee on Race and Religious Prejudice, appointed by Mayor John Lindsay last November, that "an appalling amount of racial prejudice—black and white—surfaced in and about the school controversy. The anti-white prejudice has a dangerous component of anti-Semitism."

As late as October 22, a spokesman for the American Jewish Committee could publicly accuse Shanker of "using the Jewish community" for his own purposes. Today the Committee is clamoring harshly for Jewish self-defense against the threat of black anti-Semitism, which in late October it strongly suspected Shanker of whistling up.

Nothing, however, illustrates more graphically the abject surrender of the Jewish organizations than the record of the Anti-Defamation League, whose current stand on black anti-Semitism ("crisis-level") repudiates everything it has said before and does so with every cheap trick it can muster.

"legitimate protest" by black men for anti-Semitism and warned them further against "exaggerating the true dimensions" of any anti-Jewish sentiments that might arise in the future. To black criticism of Jewish merchants and ghetto landlords the Union of Hebrew Congregations replied on November 12, 1967, not with an attack on black anti-Semites, but with open criticism of certain Jews, urging "the exercise of moral pressure by the congregations and the rabbis upon those Jewish slumlords and ghetto profiteers."

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In addition to the leaflets, the bulk of ADL's "proof" of a dangerous effort to "drive" Jewish personnel out of the schools consists of seven remarks made in April, May, June, and September 1967, and again in September, 1968. As if that were not meager enough, it turns out that four of the remarks were made by one Robert "Sonny" Carson, and two by his sidekicks in a rump organization known as Brooklyn Independent Core.

The ADL's attempt to prove that some key black leaders are anti-Semitic is similarly a dismal failure, though this too is a crucial point, since if only "extremists" are anti-Semites (as all agree) they must be the leaders of something to constitute a danger. The League's one effort involves David Spencer, Chairman of the I.S. 201 Complex governing board (the I.S. 201 Complex is an experimental district like Ocean Hill-Brownsville). Spencer is slated for anti-Semitism because of a letter he wrote in October, 1968 which the dossier describes as follows: "After complimenting Jews who are working tirelessly behind the scenes for self-determination in Black and Puerto Rican communities—Spencer said, nevertheless, it is hard to keep from reacting against everyone Jewish when the full weight of the Jewish Establishment is not only beating our Black and Puerto Rican communities, but also accusing us of being the aggressor."

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Two-thirds of the way through the dossier we finally reach the "strike incidents" and learn that "anti-Semitism has also been clearly in evidence" during the whole two-and-a-half month period. Aside from the ever-usable pamphlets "recirculated" by the UFT at the time, the bulk of the evidence here consists of racial slurs hurled by black men at Jewish teachers standing on picket lines. Even Martin Mayer, who defended the UFT in a 23,000 word essay in The New York Times Magazine (February 2), was willing to admit that the teachers hurled as many insults at black onlookers as the onlookers hurled at them. So much for the "strike incidents," which seem to consist chiefly of street-slugging matches between bitter political opponents in a heated emotional state.

In truth, the ADL's efforts to demonstrate the menace of black anti-Semitism only proves the very opposite to be true. Consider that the black people of New York are provoked every day by vicious lies and slanders; consider that it finds itself baffled at every turn by a Jewish union chief, by Jewish organizations, by Jewish Board of Education members, by Jewish judges and Jewish legislators and then consider the paltry findings of the ADL report. Truly, as that organization once demonstrated, there is no people in America less anti-Semitic than black people.

How the Teachers' Union Started the "Menace" of Black Anti-Semitism

One agent and one agent alone initiated the campaign to conceal a fake threat of black anti-Semitism. That was the United Federation of Teachers. Its intentions are transparent enough: the black anti-Semitism lie was the best means at hand to break the alliance between the liberal Jewish middle class and the black people of the city and so destroy the chances of school decentralization.

As far back as 1966, Shanker had begun sounding off about "reverse racism," a term meant to imply that if New Yorkers ever gained a voice in running their schools, white teachers would fall victims to black bigotry. The specific charge of black prejudice against Jews Shanker did not at first make public, beyond calling Ocean Hill's transfer of Jewish teachers "Nazism."

As the strikes began in early September, not only were teachers convinced of the anti-Semitism menace, but in an urgent effort to justify themselves they were carrying what the ADL describes as "the virus of anti-Semitism" from Jew to Jew, namely their families, relatives and friends, which itself made up a sizeable number.

The seed once planted grew fast. To charges of anti-Semitism many Jews are highly susceptible. There are Jews, especially older people, who think of nothing else when they think of public affairs at all. To such people a single racist leaflet looks like the high road to Auschwitz. All sense of reality flies. That a few nameless impotent bigots scarcely constitutes a city-wide menace is not a convincing argument to people whose first retort would likely be that Hitler was once powerless too.

As the strikes grew more bitter and the union's success in crushing Ocean Hill looked less and less assured, it took a drastic step: the union now made black anti-Semitism a public issue in order to raise Jewish people en masse against black men. The ever-useful leaflets, so carefully culled for so long, were now unleashed in Jewish neighborhoods while organized UFT hecklers invaded numerous public meetings to cry up charges of anti-Semitism whenever a proponent of decentralization began addressing a Jewish audience.

The decisive moment occurred when this tide of Jewish fears and hatred began exerting its inevitable pressure on the most illustrious Jewish organizations. These groups may make flossy pronouncements about national policies, but for all their political pretensions they are no more nor less than Jewish protective societies, mere ethnic mouthpieces. They had no means to resist the pressure. If their members wanted their fears confirmed, the menace certified, the villains denounced, then that is what the membership would get. One by one the Jewish organizations broke and accepted the lie of black anti-Semitism. When they did they confirmed its existence for thousands upon thousands of Jews previously untouched by Shanker's propaganda.

By turning his allegations into a truth, Shanker has now come in sight of his goal: the political isolation of the black people of the city and the consequent defeat of any real school decentralization plan.

Shanker, of course, could not accomplish this feat alone. It required the active cooperation and complicity of the trade union movement, their peribund "liberal" supporters and, most of all, the Democratic city machine and its minions, men like Judge Bloustein who termed Shanker's circulation of the leaflets "extremely unwise," as if it were merely a matter of poor judgment. Nor did Shanker win their cooperation because these leaders give a damn about school teachers. There was more to the defeat of decentralization than protecting the right of New York teachers never to be accountable to the public.

Decentralization means the establishment of locally elected school boards. It means the coming into municipal politics of locally elected officials who just might represent the citizens who elected them instead of the city rulers. It means, in other words, the exposure and destruction of the Democratic machine and with it the trade union leadership's loss of power over their workers, for that power depends on their workers being politically impotent and so incapable of being citizens. It means the seed of local democracy in New York and now we know who benefits from the lie of black anti-Semitism. Not only Albert Shanker, but every other petty tyrant protecting his power to lord it over somebody else. —Walter Karp, H. R. Shapiro

How Black Anti-Semitism Rose to the "Surface" Just in the Nick of Time

One interesting feature of black anti-Semitism is its extraordinary timeliness from the viewpoint of the teachers' union and others opposing school decentralization. It "surfaced" so the story goes, during the UFT's bitter strikes last fall and has been publicized with ever increasing intensity during the past two months, just when the Mayor's decentralization plan nears the New York State legislature for approval next month.

The plan would give New York's citizens the wholly novel (for New York) opportunity to elect their own, partly independent, local school boards, but the sudden upsurge of black anti-Semitism has tarnished the plan considerably. It is "proving" to many that decentralization will pave the way for vicious vendettas against the Jewish school teachers of the city, a point the head of the UFT, Albert Shanker, has made from the start. Local control of the schools, he has frequently charged, "would open up a field day for bigots." Now men of good will are coming around to his farsighted view. Mrs. Shapiro, who as president of the Board of Education, opposed school decentralization before there was a hint of racial strife, now suavely votes against it on the grounds that "there must be a respite for the schools until the community can recover its sanity."

How convenient the black anti-Semitism charge is. Indeed, it is difficult to see what the opponents of decentralization—the UFT, the school bureaucracy, the trade union movement, the Democratic city machine—would have done without it. A recent Louis Harris poll (which stacked the deck against decentralization by terming it "community influence," a veritable pejorative) showed, nevertheless, that the majority of Jews still favors decentralization, that the large majority of black men favor decentralization, that three out of four New Yorkers think it would do some good in improving education.

Black anti-Semitism has had a lot of work to do and now, in the nick of time, it is doing it.

It is time, now too, to unmask the lie and in doing so a fundamental point about charges of anti-Semitism must be made clear. The extent, the intensity, and the danger of anti-Semitism in any community is a direct function of whether or not Jewish leaders and powerful political figures choose to minimize or maximize its significance. Some anti-Semitic incidents occur in every community. The question is how will they be assessed. One example from the January 1969 Anti-Defamation League report on black anti-Semitism illustrates the point. In its dossier it slates a black man for saying that his group is "demanding teacher responsibility. If they can't produce, go elsewhere. If they can't get these black kids up to grade level—teach elsewhere." This can be considered a perfectly reasonable remark, or it can be viewed as the ADL now insists it be viewed, as an example of "attempts to drive Jewish teachers and principals out of the schools." The decision is entirely a political one.

Practically speaking, two conditions are required to make anti-Semitism a political issue. First, it can only be attributed to people who are politically powerless like black people, for the powerless can be portrayed as being anything those with power wish to describe them as being. Secondly, it requires the active complicity of powerful political elements, for the Jewish organizations have neither the power, nor, being for the most part liberal-minded, the desire to exaggerate charges of anti-Semitism—especially against black people. The political decision to do so lies in other hands and in the present case the Jewish organizations were pressured to follow suit.

Jewish Groups Swing From Minimizing Black Bigotry to Exaggerating It

From 1966 to the fall of 1968, it was the consistent policy of almost every major Jewish organization to minimize the significance of occasional reports of black anti-Semitism. Again and again, Jewish organizations warn their membership (source for the following is The New York Times) that such tales are "exaggerated" and misrepresented. What they feared was not black prejudice against Jews, but Jewish prejudice against black men. They warn time and again that too many Jews were using a few statements by unrepresentative "extremists" (the same unrepresentative extremists are now held to be powerful enough to tear apart New York) as an excuse for their own bigotry. On April 28, 1966, for example, an American Jewish Congress spokesman coined the term "Jewish backlash" and denounced stories of black anti-Semitism as "overblown," emphasizing instead "the strong identification Negroes have with Jews."

On October 13, 1967, the National Community Relations Council, representing many Jewish organizations, issued a guide which warned Jews against mistaking

Now let us look at the dossier on black anti-Semitism in the city schools this same organization has compiled for its January report. We are, to put it mildly, in another world. From minimizing anti-Semitism, the League has turned with a vengeance to the task of blowing it up to "crisis" proportions. It does even more than this. Forgetful of the fact that until the end of October it had reported no dangerous evidence of black anti-Semitism, the League now tries to prove that in the two years prior to October, 1968 black anti-Semitism was steadily "building up" in the schools. The strategic significance of this is obvious: if black anti-Semitism merely "surfaced" during the strike, people might attribute it to the heat of battle, a battle in which the UFT defamed black men every time it took out a full-page ad warning against "mob-rule," a racist code word if ever there was one.

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In addition to the leaflets, the bulk of ADL's "proof" of a dangerous effort to "drive" Jewish personnel out of the schools consists of seven remarks made in April, May, June, and September 1967, and again in September, 1968. As if that were not meager enough, it turns out that four of the remarks were made by one Robert "Sonny" Carson, and two by his sidekicks in a rump organization known as Brooklyn Independent Core. The expulsion of the Jews—surely a pivotal point in demonstrating the danger of black anti-Semitism—turns out to be the theme song of a one-man band.

The ADL's attempt to prove that some key black leaders are anti-Semitic is similarly a dismal failure, though this too is a crucial point, since if only "extremists" are anti-Semites (as all agree) they must be the leaders of something to constitute a danger. The League's one effort involves David Spencer, Chairman of the I.S. 201 Complex governing board (the I.S. 201 Complex is an experimental district like Ocean Hill-Brownsville). Spencer is slated for anti-Semitism because of a letter he wrote in October, 1968 which the dossier describes as follows: "After complimenting Jews who are working tirelessly behind the scenes for self-determination in Black and Puerto Rican communities—Spencer said, nevertheless, it is hard to keep from reacting against everyone Jewish when the full weight of the Jewish Establishment is not only beating our Black and Puerto Rican communities, but also accusing us of being the aggressor."

Any honest man would call this the plaintive cry of an ill-used man, and it is worth stopping a moment to consider the mind-torturing nastiness of this ADL citation. Here is a man openly and manfully complaining about organized Jewish efforts to use anti-Semitism as a weapon against him and for that he is charged with anti-Semitism. If you want to create anti-Semites that is as good a way as any to start.

So much, too, for the ADL report whose general drift can be judged first by noting that the following statement made by a black man appears in the dossier as evidence of anti-Semitism: "The Jewish people have been in control of the public schools in this city and have done nothing to improve the education of Negro and Puerto Rican children." We are to take it that any black failure to compliment Jewish teachers is bigotry. It can be judged second by noting that the bulk of its evidence comes from statements by anonymous UFT members.

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