

# Anti-Semitism in France: How the Post-Holocaust Era Informs French Attitudes Today

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### Abstract

Following the end of the Holocaust, approximately 160,000 native Jews and 20,000 displaced Jews arrived in France. France, which operated under the Vichy government during World War II, was a Nazi puppet regime complicit in the persecution of its Jewish population. When Vichy fell in 1944, the recently instated Provisional Government of the French Republic became responsible for Jewish restitution and reintegration services. However, the new government refused to recognize a Jewish problem; this denial resulted in inadequate services and protections for the Jewish population. Without providing Jews with proper legal protections, the French government created an environment which may have contributed to the persistent anti-Semitism that has plagued the nation since the 1940s.

### Synopsis

Following the return of the Jews to France, the Provisional Government of the French Republic was reluctant to address the concerns of the Jewish population. The Jews needed protection and restitution appropriate to the degree of suffering they experienced during the Holocaust; however, the government believed that doing so suggested compliance with Vichy and invalidated the basis of French citizenship. Therefore, it took decades before meaningful legislation passed.

Further separating Jews and the French Republic was the Holocaust's role in establishing Jews as outsiders. Jewishness became a global quality; it was not confined to a specific nation or territory. Therefore, the Jewish identity surpassed the national identity, something that conflicted with the French concept of citizenship. France based its nationality on the principle of *jus soli* (right of soil), meaning those who live in France and its territories are inherently French. This aspect promotes a sense of equality by relinquishing racial, ethnic, and religious affiliations in favor of the homogeneity the French identity provides. However, the Jews—now positioned as outsiders because of their globalism and extreme suffering—could no longer fit into the existing schema of French citizenship. The French government, unwilling to contradict the singularity of the French identity, decided to forgo restitution and reintegration solely based on Jewishness.

France's decision meant that the Jews would go without explicit legal protection, reintegration, and restitution. Still categorized as outsiders, French Jews became increasingly vulnerable to acts of anti-Semitism. It was not until 1972 that Jews would see some form of protection under the Pleven Act. The Pleven Act made hate speech (and writing) on the grounds of race or ethnicity illegal. Eighteen years later, the Gayssot Act made any form of Holocaust denial an offense punishable by law. It took forty-five years before legislation specific to Jews passed. Fifty years and five administrations since the occurrence of the Holocaust, President Jacques Chirac became France's first head executive to acknowledge the state's compliance in the Holocaust.

Despite the advancements France has made, Holocaust denial still occurs at some of the highest levels of the government. In 2015, Jean- Marie Le Pen, founder of France's National Front Party, was convicted of Holocaust denial under the Gayssot Act. In 2017, Le Pen's daughter and current National Front leader Marine argued that France was not responsible for the deportation of Jews to concentration camps. These sentiments not only represent the view of many subscribers to far-right French ideology, but also closely parallel the views of the provisional government in the aftermath of the Holocaust.

That being said, the French government has become more proactive in protecting its Jewish population from acts of anti-Semitism and xenophobia. The French National Assembly, the lower chamber of France's Parliament, began taking steps to adopt a more expansive definition of anti-Semitism in 2019. Doing so would make the process of protecting Jews against anti-Semitism easier. It would also ensure perpetrators of these acts meet appropriate prosecution and punishment. Legislative actions like this one are a step in the right direction for France and its efforts to combat persisting anti-Semitism.



"Jewish DPs wait on a street in Paris to board a convoy of buses that will transport them to Marseilles, on the first leg of their journey to new homes in South America and Australia," (1947). Displaced Persons/Return to Life Coll., United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (Photograph number 45084).

The image above depicts Jewish displaced persons preparing to depart from a Parisian shelter. Often times, such shelters operated under private Jewish organizations, not the French government. The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, which ran the shelter pictured above, was run by an agency abroad, exemplifying the French government's unwillingness to work with the Jewish population.



Olive Utne, "Yellow Star Juif," (2006). Wikimedia Commons.

The Ordinance of June 7, 1942 forced all Jews living in German-occupied France to wear the yellow Star of David on the outside of their clothing. Stars had the word Juif (French for Jew) inscribed in their center. In forcing the Jews to wear this badge, the Nazis stripped Jews of the assimilation they had enjoyed prior to the war; Jews were immediately identifiable, creating a division among them and the non-Jewish population. This tactic was just one of many used to characterize Jews as an inferior race.

### References

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