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AHA Council Issues Policy Resolution about Jews and the Slave Trade

**VIEWPOINTS**

# AHA COUNCIL ISSUES POLICY RESOLUTION ABOUT JEWS AND THE SLAVE TRADE

*AHA Staff | Mar 1, 1995*



In January 5, 1995, during the AHA's annual meeting in Chicago, the Council of the Association passed the following policy resolution relating to the alleged role of Jews in the slave trade:

The AHA deploras any misuse of history that distorts the historical record to demonize or demean a particular racial, ethnic, religious, or cultural group. The Association therefore condemns as false any statement alleging that Jews played a disproportionate role in the exploitation of slave labor or in the Atlantic slave trade.

The AHA Council's action was taken in response to a statement on this issue submitted to the Council by historians David Brion Davis (Yale Univ.) and Seymour Drescher (Univ. of Pittsburgh), noted experts on the history of slavery and antislavery movements. The Council decided to publish the Davis-Drescher statement, along with its own policy resolution, in the March 1995 issue of *Perspectives*. In addition, the Council's policy resolution and the Davis-Drescher statement were released to the press on February 8, 1995. The Davis-Drescher statement follows:

During the past few years there have been a number of egregious assaults on the historical record in institutions of higher learning and at educational conferences. These assaults implicate Jews as a dominant group in the Atlantic slave trade and the enslavement of Africans in the New World. The claims so misrepresent the historical record, however, that we believe them only to be part of a long anti-Semitic tradition that presents Jews as negative central actors in human history. In such scenarios, Jews are the secret force behind every major social development from capitalism to democracy, every major cataclysm from the Medieval Pandemic of the plague through the French and Russian Revolutions to the collapse of Communism, and now, incredibly, appear for the first time, as the secret force behind slavery. Unfortunately, the media have given the latest charges wide currency, while failing to dismiss them as spurious. As professional historians, who have closely examined and assessed the empirical evidence, we cannot remain silent while the historical record is so grossly violated.

Atlantic slavery was an intercontinental enterprise extending over nearly four

centuries. Ethnically, the participants included Arabs, Berbers, scores of African ethnic groups, Italians, Portuguese, Spaniards, Dutch, Jews, Germans, Swedes, French, English, Danes, white Americans, Native Americans, and even thousands of New World people of African descent who became slaveholding farmers or planters themselves. Since Portugal and Spain barred Jews from their empires, and since, by the 16th century most of the Jews who weren't either killed or converted in Western Europe had fled eastward, it was impossible for Jews to play more than a marginal role in a vast system that attracted tens of thousands of pagans, Muslims, Catholics, and Protestants. Even in Holland and the Dutch colonies, where Jews were allowed to make their main "contribution" to New World slavery as merchants and planters, they always formed a minority. Similarly, Jews played only a nominal role in the slave system in the American South. Never more than a tiny fraction of the white population, they never formed more than a minuscule proportion of slaveholders.

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