

Jewry in Eastern and Western Europe

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

By the seventeenth century the Polish Jewish community had grown to over 150,000. During this period the nobility employed Jews on their estates where they collected taxes from the serfs. In addition, noblemen established private cities where they welcomed Jews as employees. As a result of such liberal attitudes, Poland became a centre of Jewish scholarship. Nevertheless, growing resentment against the Polish nobility and the Jewish community led to a Cossack uprising under the command of Bogdan Chmielnicki, and in 1648 Jews were massacred in these revolts. As the century progressed Jews became increasingly insecure, but in the next century the Jewish population increased in size. Again, in the 1730s and 1740s Cossacks known as *Haidemaks* invaded the Ukraine, robbing and murdering Jewish inhabitants. In Lithuania, on the other hand, Jewish life flourished and Vilna became a major focus of Jewish religious life.

In Western Europe humanistic ideals revitalized Jewish life, yet nonetheless, Christian antipathy toward Jewry was widespread. In Italy the *Talmud* was burned in 1553 and two years later Pope Paul IV reinstated the segregationist edict of the Fourth Lateran Council. In addition, *Marranos* who practised Judaism were burned at the stake and Jewish communities were frequently expelled from the lands where they resided. In Germany Martin Luther composed a venomous attack on the Jews in which he criticised their moral character as well as the Jewish faith. It might have been expected that during the early modern period, medieval prejudice against Jewry would have been eclipsed by a more tolerant outlook. This was not the case. As we have seen, the Jewish population did not benefit from the desire to return the Church to its Biblical foundation. Nor did

humanists embrace principles of liberation and tolerance. Because society was inherently Christian, the Jews continued to be perceived as a threat. You should ask yourself why such anti-Semitic attitudes were so deeply embedded in Western society. Why was it that the Reformation made no impact on Christian attitudes toward the Jews? What prevented humanists from directing their campaign toward the Jewish population?

THINGS TO DO

- Go to Google. Search for material dealing with Jewish life in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Western and Eastern Europe, such as www.pbs.org/wnet/heritage/episode4/atlas. You should also look up information about life in Lithuania in the eighteenth century.
- Stay in Google. Click on images. Search for illustrations of Jewish life during these centuries.
- Imagine that you are a Christian humanist. Write a short tract based on humanistic principles explaining why there should be a more tolerant attitude toward Jews.

TIPS FOR TEACHERS

- Invite a Lutheran minister to speak to your class about Martin Luther. He should focus on Luther's attitudes toward the Jews as well as the views of modern Lutherans.

- Have a debate about Christian anti-Semitism. One side should argue that Christianity is inherently anti-Semitic; the other side should maintain that Christian anti-Semitism is a distortion of the Christian faith.
- Ask your class to look up information about the Chmielnicki onslaught against the Jews. Divide the class into small groups. Tell them to discuss this revolt in psychological terms. Why did the Cossacks feel so hostile to Jewish employees of the nobility? What were the economic factors which led to such animosity?