Religious Intolerance 101: Taught by Otto von Bismarck

“Teaching *prejudice to a child is itself a form of bullying. You've got to be taught to hate.”*

-Roger Ebert

Otto von Bismarck, the first Chancellor of Germany, exemplifies Roger Ebert’s belief

that prejudice is taught, when he brainwashed the newly unified and childlike nation to coincide

with his own religious bigotry. The German Chancellor from 1815 to 1898, was best known for

his ability to defeat his opponents by using manipulation and discrimination (Biesinger,

“Bismarck, Otto Von”). Bismarck was praised for his nationalistic prosperity but was intolerant to anyone who opposed his agenda (Ross). His success derived from employing prejudice,

particularly against Catholics because he felt Catholicism endangered Germany’s unity, and he advocated for citizens and the Reich to oppress Catholics (Wehler). During his chancellorship,

Bismarck utilized propaganda to institutionalize the prejudice of Catholicism, ultimately fostering extreme religious intolerance of the populous against German Catholics.

After Bismarck became Chancellor, he immediately launched an anti-Catholic

propaganda campaign for unity, which integrated religiously discriminatory sentiments into the

Germans. Bismarck contributed to Germany’s constitution, which contained six articles on

liberties, including freedom of religion and the autonomy of religious institutions ("Otto Von

Bismarck"). However, he contradicted those constitutional rights by publicizing Catholic bigotry

in Germany (Steinberg 329). German Catholics were seen as enemies to Bismarck, which fueled

his prejudice against the religion (Biesinger, “Kulturkampf”). His propaganda negatively

classified Catholics and stimulated German hostility towards Catholicism by labeling them as

allies of “...rising socialist, communist, and social democratic movements” which contradicted

the ideologies of Bismarck's Germany, thus implying that the sabotage of nationalism would be

at the mercy of the Catholics (Sheldon). The Catholics, however, favored nationalism yet feared

the Chancellor’s ability to turn them into Germany’s enemy (“Germany Center Party”). The

Catholics’ concerns became a reality when Bismarck branded them as “Reichsfeinde”, or

enemies of Germany, ultimately indoctrinating the public to disregard the religion (Taylor 150).

The combination of Bismarck’s name-calling and the apprehensive view of Catholicism led to

Germany adopting religious bigotry by declaring that Catholics were not God’s chosen people

(Landry). The Chancellor’s anti-Catholic vendetta led Germans to acquire religiously intolerant

values against Catholics instead of accepting the religion (Biesinger, “Kulturkampf”).

Bismarck not only condemned Catholics as Reichsfeinde but also urged Germany to

fight against Catholics in his propaganda. In countless speeches he advocated for war to defend

German nationalism: “The bond which holds us inseparably together was formed from a mixture

of blood, wounds, and death on the battlefield, ... The attack on the hereditary foe who threatened

our nationality and had the need to destroy our unity” (Pflanze). Bismarck’s glittering generality

of Catholics along with his diction of “attack” and “foe” projected his religious loathing onto the

public by assigning Catholics as the primary assailants of German nationalism. The populous

interpreted from Bismarck’s propaganda that Germany’s unity was on the brink of termination,

therefore fostering intense discrimination against Catholics in honor of protecting nationalistic

pride (Flinn). German citizens embraced the Chancellor’s religious prejudice in hopes of

suppressing Catholics (Holborn). Bismarck catalyzed the religious intolerance in Germany where

the obsession with Catholic oppression increased among citizens.

Bismarck’s animosity influenced Germany’s religious intolerance of Catholicism, which

enacted the Kulturkampf to protect nationalism and ultimately diminished the rights of German

Catholics. The cultural war of the Kulturkampf lowered clerical authority in exchange for

enhanced secular power (Biesinger, “Kulturkampf”). The Chancellor’s religiously intolerant

propaganda aroused Germans to violate the rights of Catholics with the “School Supervisory

Law”, which was written by the liberal lawyer, Adalbert Falk (Ross). Falk’s objective was to

replace the clergy with state-appointed secular laymen at religious teaching institutions

(Steinberg 321). The desire was to “…. compel the integration of Catholics into normative

(protestant) German society and culture” (Landry). Bismarck’s prejudice resulted in a religiously

intolerant population that endorsed the suffering of Catholics by arresting and exiling clerical

members (Ross). Germans shattered the liberties of Catholics by abolishing the Catholics’

authority in their own churches (Landry). The deterioration of rights derived from the public’s

intention to enforce homogeneous principles to strengthen the unity of Germany, but also

supplemented an increased acceptance of religious intolerance in the nation (Landry).

Along with the School Supervisory Law, the development of the May-Laws strengthened

the prejudice of Catholics during the Kulturkampf (Ross). The plan was to secularize the

Catholic Church by prohibiting separate religious entities from state authority (Flinn). The

May-Laws granted only German leaders jurisdiction over the clergy and “...the training and even

the licensing of priests required state approval” (Taylor 152). The public’s prejudice

marginalized Catholics in Germany to avert threats of nationalism when they depicted Catholics

as “internal foreigners” who were undeserving of rights, especially in their own churches

 (Landry). Bismarck’s optimism over the defense of nationalism acted as Germany's justification

for harsh religious intolerance that destroyed the constitutional rights of Catholics (Taylor 153).

Bismarck’s religious prejudice resulted in the population’s severe bigotry of Catholicism,

ultimately propagating the intense Catholic intolerance in Germany. The Chancellor required his

own men to publish propaganda criticizing Catholics (Taylor 174). Citizens mirrored Bismarck’s

actions by also attacking Catholics in their own newspapers (Steinberg 319). Father Kan Jentsch,

a German priest, recounted the prejudice: “‘Everyday the Catholics had to read in the

Kaseblattechen [low level newspapers] as well in the great newspaper[s] that he was enemy of

the Fatherland, a little papist, a block-head and that his clergy [was] the scum of humanity’”

(Steinberg 319). Civilians upheld Bismarck's notion that Catholicism impaired Germany’s

excellence, and used discrimination to combat that idea by denouncing Catholics as worthless

and rejecting them from the nation (Holborn). The practice of religious intolerance over

acceptance stemmed from Bismarck’s propaganda, which created a nation of citizens with

prejudice against Catholics (Taylor 150).

Bismarck’s name-calling pinned Germans against Catholics and manifested a battle of

allies vs enemies (Wehler). German Catholics lived in an unbearable environment with prejudice

all around them and they were forced to” withdr[aw] into confessionally segregated

milieux-devotional societies...” (Landry). The separate Catholic society supplemented extreme

religious intolerance because the public continued to view Catholics as outsiders who were

superfluous to Germany (Wehler). German citizens grew accustomed to only a discriminatory

perspective of Catholics, reinforcing their inability to acknowledge the intense religious intolerance (Biesinger, “Kulturkampf”). Bismarck’s continuous propaganda opened the door for

immense hatred, which hindered Germany from reverting from their prejudicial mindset.

Propaganda during Otto von Bismarck’s chancellorship constantly discriminated

Catholics, inspiring intense anti-Catholic prejudice, thus producing a fixed religious intolerant

mentality in the Germans. Bismarck’s nationalistic propaganda encouraged the elimination of

Catholics, who were considered threats to Germany. The nation-wide acceptance of bigotry

during the Kulturkampf impaired the rights of Catholics. Roger Ebert believed that prejudice is

taught and Bismarck represents that notion, particularly when he instructed Germany, the

childlike country, to normalized discrimination of Catholics, ultimately converting it into a

Nation immersed in great intolerance and hatred for Catholics.

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