

West Ham chants revive spectre of antisemitism

Days after a racist assault on Tottenham fans in Rome, a London football derby has been marred by anti-Jewish chants. How disturbed should we be by these antisemitic incidents?



PSHE
HISTORY
RELIGIOUS STUDIES

As Tottenham fans enjoyed a pre-match drink in Rome's Drunken Ship bar, 100 violent thugs suddenly crashed through the door bearing knives, baseball bats and knuckle dusters. The drinkers scattered in panic, but for Ashley Mills there was no escape: minutes later he was rushed to hospital with critical wounds in the head and groin.

The hooligans were from the notorious 'Ultras' linked to two local clubs, and their motive was antisemitism.

Tottenham Hotspur is based in an area of London that has traditionally been home to a large Jewish population. In days when football racism was commonplace, rival supporters often goaded Tottenham with ugly racist chants. Spurs fans responded by embracing their Jewish connection, controversially referring to themselves as 'Yiddos'.

But events this weekend have shown that the 'oldest racism' is still very much alive. Just three days after the Rome attack, Spurs hosted West Ham in a Lon-



Desecrated: A vandalised Jewish cemetery in not far from West Ham's ground © Getty Images

don derby fraught with local tensions. Sections of West Ham's support sang out the name of Lazio, while repellent references to Adolf Hitler and the Holocaust echoed around White Hart Lane.

As a widely dispersed ethnic group who for millennia were a minority wherever they lived, Jews have long suffered from vicious persecution. Medieval European leaders would often blame Jews for social and economic problems and expel them en masse from their kingdoms. In 1189-90, three hundred were executed by Edward I of England and thousands more driven to their death.

Antisemitism remained a powerful current in Western thought, infecting otherwise great minds from Immanuel Kant to T.S. Eliot. And anti-Jewish attitudes reached their nightmarish culmination during World War Two, when six million Jews were killed in Nazi death camps.

Since then, antisemitic opinions have become less acceptable in mainstream culture. But the old hatred is not extinct.

Jewish cemeteries are still regularly vandalised, and internet message boards have become a haven for antisemitic opinion.

Worryingly, a recent poll found that antisemitism is rising in Europe, with a shocking 72% of Spaniards expressing anti-Jewish opinions.

JUST A MINORITY?

There is no doubt that the chants were despicable. But we must remember, say many, that this was one small group of idiotic football fans motivated by a petty local rivalry. On the whole, Jewish people in Europe can live without fear of hatred or discrimination.

That is complacent, say others: just because bigots are more cautious about expressing their prejudices, that doesn't mean they are extinct. Racist stereotypes have deep and knotty roots, and events like this show that they quietly live on in people's minds. Antisemitism is not dead, they say: it is simply well-hidden.

Q & A

Q But if Spurs fans call themselves 'Yids', then why can't I?

A That's a very thorny subject. Many people object even when Spurs fans use the term, but they claim that they are 'reclaiming' a racist slur: that is, taking the abuse that is thrown

at them and using it as a badge of honour.

Q But it's okay to say the word now that the sting's been taken out of it, right?

A No: an offensive word has a very different meaning when it is used in defiance by the people who have historically been its targets. That's not an invitation for everybody else to use it with impunity. That goes for other 'reclaimed' words too,

such as the adoption of racist language in hip-hop culture or people in the gay community describing themselves as 'queer'.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'Saying something racist makes you a racist – fullstop.'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

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WORD WATCH

Ultras – Many Italian football clubs have among their followers small but tightly-organised bands of ‘Ultras’, who systematically commit acts of aggression towards rival fans. The Rome clubs Lazio and Roma have some particularly unpleasant associations, with some fans giving fascist salutes and shouting racist chants. There have even been accusations that they try to avoid buying black players.

Oldest racism – This is not, of course, a historical fact: racism has probably existed for as long as different races have intermingled.

Social and economic problems – Restrictions on the jobs that Jews could do meant that some – though by no means most – ended up in financial industry. That made them even more of a target in times of economic hardship. Even more irrationally, Jews were widely blamed for epidemics of

diseases like the Black Plague.

Immanuel Kant – This 18th Century German philosopher is regularly named among the greatest thinkers of all time. He also called the Jews ‘a nation of swindlers’, among other objectionable comments.

T.S. Eliot – Perhaps the most influential poet of the 20th Century, author of *The Waste Land*. Lines of his work have been interpreted as maliciously antisemitic, though some critics defend him.

YOU DECIDE

1. Are racist chants in football matches evidence of a broader racist culture?
2. When oppressed groups adopt an offensive label and use it to describe themselves, is that a helpful response to discrimination?

ACTIVITIES

1. Conduct a role play in pairs. One of you is a sports reporter, the other is the manager of West Ham FC. Conduct a post-match interview about the racist chants.
2. Make a timeline of the history of the Jewish people.

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 NOTES

