

A stylized, abstract illustration of a large eye. The eye is composed of various colored segments: red, yellow, and blue. The iris is a dark, textured circle, and the pupil is a smaller, lighter circle. The overall style is reminiscent of a stained-glass window or a mosaic.

Helmut Reinalter (Hg.)

Handbuch der Verschwörungs- theorien

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Petty conspiracy theories—the worry that someone in your tribe or office is organizing against you—has no history. But world conspiracy theories, the notion that some group is planning to take control of the world—trace back only to the Crusades and have grown over the next near-millennium. Strikingly, the alleged conspirators are chiefly two: Jews and members of secret societies. Other might-be world conspirators have a remarkably minor presence and role.

1. JEWS AND SECRET SOCIETIES

Jews. Although anti-Jewish arguments and tropes have taken many forms between the third century B.C. and the present—intellectual disdain by sophisticated atheists from the Hellenists onward, resentment among fervent Christians or Muslims, jealousy among peasants, social snobbery among aristocrats, political anger among defeated Arab leaders—underlying emotions remain fairly constant. The case against Jews has varied with the complaint. Early pagans resented Jews for their aloofness; Christians charged them with deicide; Enlightenment thinkers (and Germans longing for a pagan past) blamed them for Christianity; populists held them accountable for modernity; racists turned them into a font of all evil; and fundamentalist Muslims portrayed them as the spearhead of Western values.

Conspiratorial antisemitism is probably the most virulent form of Jew-hatred, for it turns Jews into everyone's foremost enemy. How else could it be when, in the words of one antisemite, "Jewry as a whole has a permanent policy which aims at establishing the individual Jew as a member of the 'chosen,' superior and dominant ruling class in every country and over the whole world."¹ While the origins of conspiratorial antisemitism go back to the Crusades and its legacy is felt even today, the fear flourished particularly for some eight decades up to the year 1953 (when the "Doctors' Plot", the accusation that Jewish physicians plotted against Soviet leaders, nearly devastated Soviet Jewry).

Anti-Zionism should have nothing in common with antisemitism: the former has no religious or racist content but condemns Jewish nationalists in the Middle East for ill behavior. Indeed, more than a few Jews renounce Israeli behavior and are anti-Zionist; conversely, some antisemites favor a Jewish state as a means of reducing the Jewish population in their midst. Wilhelm Marr, the activist who coined the term *antisemitism*, was just such a pro-Zionist antisemite: "The Jewish idea of colonizing Palestine could be wholesome for both sides [i.e., Jews and Germans]."² He even guaranteed that the anti-Semitic movement would win Palestine for the Jews. Most of the time, however, antisemites fear a Jewish state as a particularly worrisome ingathering of the most

capable and dangerous people in the world. As a Soviet writer puts it, "Zionism and Judaism have as their common purpose world supremacy."³ Most anti-Zionism is functionally identical with antisemitism.

Secret societies. The term *secret society* arose in the eighteenth century, when "secret" meant *non-state or private* (rather than *clandestine* or *covert*).⁴ In today's usage, it refers to an organization that makes confidentiality the very basis for its existence, such as fraternal groups at colleges and among adult men. A secret society can range from a social club with its own handshake to revolutionaries' intent on overthrowing the established order. Nearly all secret societies involve rituals that stress the need for discretion; in a typical initiation procedure, the adept swears to keep the group's secrets in confidence, upon threat of dire consequence. Members tend to be overwhelmingly male (except in radical political groups); they often talk of intense communion with other members, a spiritual rebirth, and a profound religious-like experience.

The *anti-secret society conspiracy theory* is a non-Jewish equivalent of antisemitism; it targets members of conspiratorial groups as enemies intent on gaining world hegemony through the destruction of the existing order. It permits the concentration on just one group (the Jesuits, the Anglo-American governments) or their linking into one "endless conspiracy" going back to the very dawn of history; occultists, for example, trace the original secret society to ancient Egypt. In perhaps the first listing, Charles Louis Cadet de Gassicourt (1769-1821), a French pharmacist with radical viewswriting at the height of the French Revolution, drew up a chain that began with the Assassins, a Muslim group dating from the Crusader era, then included the Templars, Jesuits, Freemasons, and Illuminati, and ended with the Jacobins.⁵ Other names often mentioned include the Knights of Malta, witches, the Prieuré de Sion, Rosicrucians, Philosophes, the Carbonari, the British and American governments, arms merchants, international bankers, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the Trilateral Commission. "One conspiracy theory overlaps with another, forming a giant web enclosing centuries and continents."⁶ Each group is believed to pass on its views and secrets to the next organization.

In modern times, the United Kingdom and United States have inherited the secret society legacies and are feared as the greatest agents of this tradition.

2. WHO IS INCLUDED

Why are conspirators limited to Jews, Israel, Freemasons, Britons, and Americans? Perhaps because they share two outstanding characteristics: modernity and idealism.

Modernity. In the early nineteenth century, the Jew—urban, urbane, and liberal—came to symbolize modernity itself. For example, in a July 1818 letter, a German military man ascribed the industrial revolution to "Jewish mischief."⁷ Late in the century, reactionaries described the liberal program of democracy, rule of law, freedom of speech, and even universal education as the "Judaization" of Europe. The predations of capitalism ("money is the true master of everything") were blamed squarely on the Jews. The famous names of antisemitism dwelled on this subject. Such luminaries as the composer Richard Wagner and the historian Heinrich von Treitschke associated Judaism with modernity.

Similar thinking existed outside Germany. In Great Britain, the distinguished novelist G. K. Chesterton dubbed Jews the agents of a “regrettable modernity.”⁸ In the United States, Ernest Elmhurst (real name: Hermann Fleischkopf) declared that “Democracy is Jewish. Democracy is nothing but the political system of the internationalist Jewish bankers. Baruch, Brandeis, Rabbi Wise, Lehman, Frankfurter—all Jews and all of them for Democracy. That proves Democracy is Jewish.”⁹ While Jews still fill this role, Israel now more often takes the blame; the Middle East’s only mature democracy has a European-level per capita income.

Like Jews, Freemasons tend to be among the most successful members of society. To he who hates modernity, they serve as its plausible motor engine. In the United States, Antimasons found that “Freemasonry embodied currents that were changing their country beyond recognition. . . . As an institution that served an emerging industrial society, Freemasonry understandably evoked suspicion among those not yet reconciled to the new system.”¹⁰ On a far more massive scale, the United Kingdom and United States fill the same role. In its time, each has been the world’s most powerful state and the symbol of capitalist wealth. Beyond symbolism, these states have had a highly disruptive impact on societies around the world.

More than any others, Jews, Freemasons, and Anglo-Saxons symbolize the achievements and hopes of modern life. Accordingly, their actions hold a strange fascination for those distressed by political ideologies, economic disruption, and cultural changes. In contrast, how can Muslims, Indians, and Africans make plausible conspirators? Those are the laggards of modern life, not its initiators.

Idealism. Ironically, high ideals seem to make a people or state into a special target of conspiracy. The profound impact of Jews on world history was achieved not by armies but by an array of moral precepts that, through Judaism’s daughter religions of Christianity and Islam, won the allegiance of fully half the world’s population. Focused as they are on the malign, conspiracy theorists insist on interpreting such wide influence as a lunge for power.

Consistent with this outlook, they look at a state based on ideas, not kinship, as the perpetrator of a conspiracy. The more seriously a state lives up to an ideal, the more it catches the attention of conspiracy theorists. Thus, do the United States, revolutionary France, and Israel make for more plausible conspirators than the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, Pakistan, or the Islamic Republic of Iran. So little are the latter associated with morality that their failures excite scant interest. The United Kingdom does not exactly fit the category of idea-based states, but its long evolution toward constitutional democracy makes it an honorary member of this small club.

3. WHO IS IGNORED

The intense focus on Jews, secret societies, and Anglo-Saxons means ignoring 94 percent of humanity. Of particular note among those left out are three of the great European powers that tried to dominate Europe between 1618 and 1991, the extreme Left and Right, universalist religions, and the entire non-Western world.

European Great Powers. Starting with the Thirty Years’ War (1618-48) and ending two and a half centuries later (with the Franco-Prussian War of 1870), French leaders such as Cardinal Richelieu,

Louis XIV, Napoleon, and Napoleon III repeatedly tried to establish France as the hegemonic power in Europe. In the course of this effort, they precipitated what might be called the first two world wars, those of the Spanish Succession (1702-13) and of Napoleon Bonaparte (1792-1815). Subsequent French history somewhat parallels that of Great Britain. In the nineteenth century, the two states built up the largest global empires, both were battered by the World Wars, and since 1945 they have similarly decolonized, built up nuclear arsenals, and enjoyed the prestige that goes with sitting as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. If anything, France has more wealth and military power than Great Britain, and it exercises a far more independent foreign policy. Yet France has a low to nonexistent profile among conspiracy theorists.

From Bismarck to Hitler, 1870-1945, Germans strenuously and increasingly challenged the world order, thereby precipitating World Wars I and II. Yet hardly any conspiracy theories discuss the Hohenzollern aspirations for a “place in the sun,” Ruhr region corporate efforts to gain market share, cultural imperialism in *Mitteleuropa*, much less Nazi ambitions at world conquest. The rare anti-Teutonic conspiracy theory finds Germans working in conjunction with either Jews or Anglo-Americans.

Russia seems to be accepted as geographically the world’s largest country, as though that were a given and not the result of many centuries of territorial aggrandizement. Or, if questioned, this size is explained in defensive terms, as though invasions by the Mongols, Napoleon, and Hitler account for the need for a glacis. (If this were truly the case, Belgium would outsize Russia.) In the post-Soviet era, Russian invasions of Georgia and Ukraine arouse few concerns internationally and no conspiracy theories.

Leninism and Nazism. The Communist and Nazi movements amounted to the two greatest world conspiracies of the human experience. Lenin saw “our revolution” not as something limited merely to Russia but as “a *prologue* to the worldwide socialist revolution, a *step* toward it.”¹¹ For him the events of 1917 did not constitute the “Russian Revolution” but a worldwide revolution. His was truly a world conspiracy. So was Stalin’s. The Soviet propaganda machine articulated his dream of an “All-European Union of Soviet Socialist Republics,” to be followed by what a poet called “only one Soviet nation.” The Soviet Union subsequently acted on these dreams by meddling in countries as far away as Cuba, Angola, and Vietnam.

Hitler also had world domination in mind, as he repeatedly indicated. For example, on declaring war against the United States, he spoke of the “historic struggle” that would be “decisive not only for the history of Germany but for the whole of Europe and indeed for the world.”¹²

Conspiracy theorists barely notice these developments. Even Stalin failed to see a Nazi conspiracy staring him in the face; as millions of German troops gathered on his border, he found ways to explain away this very real threat. Quite the contrary, the cognoscenti pooh-pooh allegations about these global ambitions: Winston Churchill met with much disdain in the 1930s when he talked of the “jackboots,” as did Ronald Reagan in the 1980s with his one-time reference to the “evil empire.”

Yet more bizarre was how each totalitarian movement insisted that Jews stood behind it. The Nazis concocted “Jewish Bolshevism,” charging that the Soviet Union was a tool of i



Jewry. The Kremlin later (after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war) responded with the obnoxious specter of “Jewish Nazism.”

Universalist Religions. Universalist religions—and militant ones most of all—logically should be more suspect than an exclusivist one like Judaism. Buddhists and Hindus, numbering in the hundreds of millions, would seem to make for a more likely conspirator than do Jews, who number a fraction as many. But this is not the case, for (unlike Jews) they neither lived cheek-by-jowl with Europeans nor did they symbolize the cutting edge of modernity.

It is noteworthy how little attention Protestants pay anymore to Catholicism, given the religious wars of previous centuries, the centralized nature of the Church, and the hundreds of millions of Catholics. To be sure, a fanatical sort of anti-Catholicism does remain alive in tiny circles, but it lacks wide appeal. Catholic fears of Protestant conspiracies are even less apparent.

Islam ranks a bit higher as conspirator, not a surprise given the long history of Christian-Muslim hostility, Islam’s reputation for aggressiveness, and the extreme volatility of Middle Eastern politics. Here, however, Westerners fear a Muslim conspiracy less than they do two other forms of hostility: *Jihad* (sacred war) and demographics. *Jihad* involves all-out bellicosity, not a conspiracy. In this spirit, two British authors write that “Islam is on the move again. It could prove as frightening to the West, and perhaps as economically disruptive, as the stolid Soviet empire ever was.”¹³ Nor is the demographic concern conspiratorial. Muslims number nearly one billion and enjoy a huge demographic growth rate; millions have immigrated to Western Europe and North America, where, in contrast to the small and diminishing numbers of Jews, their numbers are starkly growing. But Muslims have little prospect as arch-conspirator. Who can blame the French Revolution on them, much less modern capitalism?

Non-Western World. With rare exceptions, the rest of the world is seen as not having the means or imagination to stage an assault on Europe and North America. Japan and China inspired the “Yellow Peril” scare initiated by Kaiser Wilhelm in 1895, but this conjured up hordes of immigrants, not an insider’s plot. The notion of Japan, Inc., a hierarchical Japanese entity that is undermining the West’s industrial base, hints at a conspiracy, but it lacks Western agents and dupes, and as Japan’s recession continues, this bogey appears to have lost its punch. Otherwise, whole populations are simply ignored, including the Indian, the African, and the Latin American.

When a non-Western party does get into the act, it does so affiliated to Jews or a secret society. The Nazis saw hundreds of millions of Chinese as mere accessories to Jewish efforts to strengthen the Red Army. A Japanese author explains how Taiwan and South Africa become conspirators by joining Israel’s effort at world hegemony through economic domination, arms sales, and atomic weaponry.

As a rule, then, the excluded 94 percent can become a serious conspirator only by joining with one of the 6 percent, and preferably with Jews.

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