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The importance of conspiracy theory in extremist ideology and propaganda

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Citation

Fink, A. H. (2020, April 16). *The importance of conspiracy theory in extremist ideology and propaganda*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/87359>

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Issue Date: 2020-04-16

Chapter 1: Introduction

This research deals with a highly influential idea which was born in the late 18th century and has been used widely in propaganda. This idea is a conspiracy theory, we might even describe it as the “main” conspiracy theory, which holds that an organization with nearly limitless powers of deception has secretly seized or is about to seize power. The phrase “Grand Conspiracy Theory” will often be used as a shorthand to describe this idea in this thesis. The original research question was “What is the importance of conspiracy theories in propaganda and extremist ideologies?” but upon further research it became apparent that there was a central idea, a certain kind of conspiracy theory, which played an outsized role. The phrase “The Grand Conspiracy Theory” is used in order to distinguish this more important conspiracy-theory tradition from other smaller scale ones. By focusing on this key conspiracy theory that research revealed to be the central one, this thesis may be able to tell us something about the larger phenomena of conspiracy theories in general. There are certainly many other kinds of conspiracy theory narratives that fall outside this tradition, and reference to them will be made from time to time as they influence the Grand Conspiracy Theory.

This thesis examines the importance of the Grand Conspiracy Theory idea in both propaganda and extremist ideology, and examines the relationship between this propaganda and the emergence of certain extremist ideologies. In the 230-odd years since the Grand Conspiracy Theory appeared it has changed to fit new contexts, spread to other continents and societies, and been a critical ingredient of a number of violent and revolutionary movements in Europe and the Middle East. This research makes two main arguments. First, that this idea was considered useful in propaganda, especially anti-liberal anti-republican propaganda, and that the needs and the context of various propagandists profoundly shaped the development and increased the spread of this idea. Second, that this idea, molded by these aforementioned propagandists, is a crucially important part of several strains of ideology which are violently anti-western and anti-democratic.

This thesis has two overlapping parts which make these two overlapping arguments. The first part describes the creation and spread of the idea of this massive threat, this non-existent enemy with incredible powers of deception. The narrative will start with the idea’s pre-modern precursors and some of the conspiracy theories formulated against the French Revolution. These conspiracy theories that we will examine claimed that the Revolution was at its core just a project of the Freemasons and/or the Bavarian Illuminati. They portrayed the French Revolution not as a revolt against a king and an attempt to create a republic, but as a project of usurpation accomplished via deception, with a Freemason/Illuminati conspiracy manipulating events to keep themselves secretly in power and extend their clandestine kingdom. This idea was further adapted by later propagandists as a useful argument against republican government and liberalism. The important contribution that propagandists made to the formation and spread of different variants of this idea in various times and places will be described over several chapters. The second part concerns the effects of this idea on politics, especially how the idea encourages small groups of true believers in this conspiracy to launch counter-conspiracy, subversion, and rebellion against the imaginary enemy that has deceptively usurped power. This thesis will clarify the structure of the Grand Conspiracy Theory and illustrate how a belief in it can lead to support for subversion and rebellion, even among types of

people who would otherwise not be ideologically inclined to engage in subversion and rebellion. This thesis does not present a comprehensive explanation for political violence, nor should it be read as a comprehensive history of conspiracy theories, though given the importance of the Grand Conspiracy Theory a casual reader of part of this text may get that impression.

These two parts overlap for two reasons: chronology and personality. This thesis was originally intended to be a series of case-studies of several examples of anti-western ideologies that feature conspiracy theories and also of propaganda campaigns that employed conspiracy theories. However, during the course of research enough connective tissue was found to form a single narrative about the development of the Grand Conspiracy Theory. In the interests of preserving this narrative the chapters are arranged more-or-less chronologically, instead of thematically. The earlier chapters are primarily, though not exclusively, concerned with the importance of anti-liberal/anti-republican propaganda campaigns in the birth, spread, and development of the Grand Conspiracy Theory. The latter chapters are mainly concerned with how a few influential believers in the Grand Conspiracy Theory attempted to fight this imagined conspiracy, and how this idea became an important part of the ideologies of several groups that have conducted violence on a massive scale, from the Nazis to Al Qaeda.

These two parts also overlap because many of the personalities discussed in this research are both believers and propagandists. Research revealed that many personalities like Klemens von Metternich and Vladimir Lenin appear to have simultaneously been major supporters of spreading propaganda about a grand conspiracy, propaganda that dovetailed with their own political needs, and also to have been real believers in a version of the Grand Conspiracy Theory. Many of these personalities were not above engaging in deception in order to convince others about the existence of a massive, deceptive, grand conspiracy. Therefore this thesis will often deal with historical personalities who may properly belong to both parts, both as propagandists and true believers. The true motives of many of the most influential men who developed different versions of the Grand Conspiracy Theory are clouded both by their obscurity (there is often very little biographic information available) and the fact that they themselves dealt in deception.

However, as many of the narratives and texts examined here were created for political propaganda, it is possible to recover some of the motivations behind creating and publicizing these narratives and texts based on the political context. One can often identify the likely political purpose of the propaganda - its persuasive goal. The most common political goal seen in this thesis is anti-liberalism/anti-republicanism, as mentioned before. This thesis will demonstrate how variants of the Grand Conspiracy Theory have repeatedly been found useful in attacks on liberalism and republicanism, because if such a massive conspiracy exists and has the powers ascribed to it, then a truly free government is impossible. Reducing censorship merely allows the conspiracy to manipulate the press. Switching to parliamentary democracy would allow the conspiracy to bribe legislators and manipulate politics through manipulating public opinion, etc. By linking liberalism and republicanism to supposed evil plots of the Freemasons/Jews/Jesuits etc. pro-authoritarian anti-liberal propagandists try to discredit the ideas of liberalism and the legitimacy of republican government.

This is not an abstract study. These phenomena cannot be understood at the purely theoretical level and without historical context. In the first part, the narrative and evidence, the "proofs" the idea relies on are largely bound up with the specific demands of politics in particular

times and places, combined with the visceral fear of deception and suspicion and even hatred towards exclusive groups. The second part of the thesis will show that many of the subversive, violent ideologues examined do not view this non-existent enemy as fictional and do not treat the conspiracy theories they espouse as metaphors or just propaganda props. They base their actions on their belief in a non-existent enemy, sometimes taking up arms against it. The rhetoric of “defensive” struggle and “liberation” used by many of the ideologies examined in this thesis is not camouflage or mimicry of “true” liberation movements but is instead a reflection of their belief that they are fighting a massive secret oppressor.¹ Most of the later chapters of this thesis will demonstrate that the Grand Conspiracy Theory plays or played a crucially important role in the ideologies of the Nazis, the USSR, radical Islamists (in this case, Sunnis) like Sayyed Qutb and his intellectual successors in Al Qaeda, and the Khomeinist regime in Iran, specifically by defining the “hidden” enemy that these movements believe they are fighting. The “liberation” they seek is a liberation from the puppet-strings pulled by a hidden enemy.

This research demonstrates that central texts written by major leaders of these ideologies posit the very real existence of a grand conspiracy that has deceived the world. Major tenets of their ideologies are based on this fiction. Unbeknownst to them, the enemy they fear was often the creation of earlier propaganda campaigns, sometimes in support of states or ideas that these leaders would despise. This research suggests that there is a relationship between conspiracy theory propaganda and some variants of political violence, made evident through the intellectual history of the Grand Conspiracy Theory. It should be emphasized that this thesis does not argue that the creation of these violent groups was a deliberate result of the activities of propagandists. Unlike in the conspiracy theories featured in the propaganda discussed herein, there is no massive non-state multi-generational clandestine group spreading lies, manipulating politics, and reaping the benefits. This arc of this thesis argues that the idea of the Grand Conspiracy Theory, while spread and modified by propagandists over the centuries, has “escaped into the wild” and now has a self-sustaining momentum of its own. The political results of these kinds of ideas have at times worked against the interests of the state propagandists who spread them, on a few occasions disastrously so. There was no single plot to spread the idea of the Grand Conspiracy Theory, but instead a series of small plots. These plots often hardly merit the name “plot” as they occurred in broad daylight, with state sponsored propagandists placing conspiracy theories on official broadsheets or belting them out on radio broadcasts.

While this thesis does point to a relationship between conspiracy theory propaganda and some kinds of political violence, it does not claim that a turn to violent extremism is inevitable or even common for believers in variants of the Grand Conspiracy Theory. Some of the groups of true believers examined in this thesis did manage to seize power and control the destinies of millions, but they began as small groups of plotters, a miniscule subset of all those who heard and believed in the Grand Conspiracy Theory. This thesis merely emphasizes the importance of

¹ This is in disagreement with the excellent work of Dr. David Suurland, whose PhD thesis, also completed at Leiden under Professor Dr. Afshin Ellian, was an important inspiration and resource for understanding radical Islamism. For the section where he accuses radical Islamists of using such rhetoric as camouflage see Dr. David Suurland “Secular Totalitarian and Islamist Legal-political Philosophy: A Study Into the Applicability of the Totalitarianism Paradigm to Islamist Ideologies and Movements,” Part 1, Phd Dissertation, University of Leiden, 2012 p. 18 vol 1.

conspiracy theory in the beliefs of these groups. Later research, aided by sociology and psychology, might be able to elucidate the strength of the link between a belief in conspiracies and a turn to revolutionary violence in individuals, but this interesting question lies outside the scope of the research presented here.

Methodology

This thesis will use the hermeneutic methodology to analyze some of the texts and behaviors of the subjects of this research. In the last two centuries, hermeneutics, the practice of interpretation, has been mainly connected with interpreting great works of art and literature, history as a whole, and Christian scripture.² Paradoxically, the birth of modern hermeneutics involved a much humbler task: detecting a forgery. In 1440 the scholar and priest Lorenzo Valla penned a devastating attack on the *Constitutum Constantini*, a.k.a. the *Donation of Constantine*, a document purporting to be a grant by the Emperor Constantine of lands and authority in Italy during the 4th century AD. The *Donation of Constantine* was probably forged in the Papal chancery in the 8th century AD. It was based on an apocryphal story about the conversion and baptism of the emperor Constantine. The *Donation of Constantine* had been used to justify the temporal political authority of popes in parts of Italy in the 12th and 13th century and even sometimes used to claim that the Pope was superior to the Emperor.³ Earlier writers had challenged the validity of the *Donation of Constantine* on legal grounds, but Valla attacked it as a fabrication by using historical and philological evidence. The writer or writers of the forgery had used Latin words that were common in the 8th century AD but not used in the 4th century AD, such as the word “satrap” (a Persian governor) and had also made a historical mistake by describing the whole Roman Senate as Christian, when even according to the apocryphal history that the *Donation* is based on Roman senators remained as pagans for a long time after Constantine converted.⁴

By analyzing the text of the *Donation of Constantine* and demonstrating that it was a forgery Valla revealed the real meaning, the real purpose, of the *Donation*. Valla made his attack in support of his patron Alphonso of Aragon, who was at war with Pope Eugene IV. Valla's critical re-interpretation of the *Donation* struck a blow against the Pope's claim to have the authority to possess territory and rule it like a king and harmed the reputation of the Papacy, painting it as a purveyor of a lie. As the Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg put it: “By exposing a well-known piece of papal propaganda as a forgery, Valla created a most effective piece of antipapal propaganda.”⁵

The first part of this research attempts to do something similar, but not by showing that a single document is a fabrication, but by demonstrating that a whole range of documents and narratives are associated with a particular tradition of lies. Some of these documents are

² See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, (Bloomsbury Academic; Reprint edition, 2004) Kindle Edition, especially pp. 181 – 182.

³ Dabney G. Park, “Dante and the Donation of Constantine,” *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, No. 130, 2012, pp. 68-70.

⁴ Carlo Ginzburg, *History, Rhetoric, and Proof* (Brandeis University Press/Historical Society of Israel, 1999), pp. 56-57.

⁵ Ginzburg, p. 54.

fabrications like the *Donation*, such as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* or the *Polish Catechism*. These documents are mostly pieces of political propaganda warning against a massive conspiracy of deception that does not exist. Dealing with documents about a massive deception that are themselves deceptive presents an interesting research challenge. However, the goals of these documents are often evident once one examines the political contexts that the propaganda was produced in, and read the texts in question along with contemporary commentaries about the texts with an aim to discern the message the texts are trying to send. This often involved a method of informing one's original understanding of important conspiracy theory texts by searching through contemporaneous literature: books, newspaper reports and opinion pieces, pamphlets and political speeches, or even (in one case) a sermon. One of the most fruitful methods for discovering texts that greatly aided in contextualizing several important conspiracy-theory documents was examining the earlier writings of the likely authors, especially if they had contributed to newspapers, in order to get a better idea of the kinds of debates they were contributing to, the sources they were likely using, and who they believed their enemies were. Often, these authors had been involved in political debates for some time and their texts served a propagandistic, i.e. politically persuasive, purpose.

This approach was not only useful for understanding the world of individual authors. By approaching the creation and evolution of this important strain of conspiracy theory from the standpoint of propaganda we can get a glimpse at the purpose of many of these texts and narratives. In this sense this research is "getting back to the roots" of hermeneutics by dealing with forgeries and lies. The "deep" meaning of the *Donation of Constantine* was not a tale about the generosity of a Roman emperor but instead a justification for the papacy's control of central Italy. *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, for example, may at first pass seem like a warning about a massive international Judeo-Masonic conspiracy, but after one recognizes it is a fabrication it appears as an evident attempt to stir up fear and hatred of the Jews. As will be demonstrated in chapter 7, it should also be seen as a piece of political propaganda, designed to stir up and harness fear and hatred of the Jews, certainly, but more importantly (from the point of view of its likely authors) to direct that fear and hatred against liberalism, representative government, and the gold standard.

In the ensuing research dealing with *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and other documents used to persuade people of the existence of the Grand Conspiracy, this thesis will show that the Grand Conspiracy Theory is a tradition, a recurring story that has been taken up, modified, and spun to suit the needs of propagandists in various times and places. The concept of a massive deception emerges as a central part of successive generations of conspiracy theory propaganda. This is one of the reasons the idea of a grand conspiracy has been seen as useful to successive generations of propagandists, it allows them to argue that any evidence contrary to their messaging is manufactured.

This emphasis on deception also carries over into how this thesis analyzes the beliefs of the true believers in the Grand Conspiracy Theory. Their belief in a massive deception allows them to interpret events and institutions in highly paranoid ways. This is especially true when it comes to many of their views of western liberal republicanism. They see the idea of freedom of the press as a form of unilateral disarmament against a massive power that would manipulate the press. They can interpret compromise and attempts at moderation as being tactics of a

super-deceptive enemy. When analyzing history in the place of accidents and contingency they see purpose and motive and the work of generations of evil conspirators.

It is acknowledged that this research methodology does invite the possibility of over-interpreting rhetoric – statements made for effect – as true beliefs that motivate behavior. This is especially a danger in the second part of the thesis and the latter chapters, when apparent believers in the Grand Conspiracy Theory head clandestine subversive organizations and at times manage to seize power. In these cases, research was especially focused on the core documents of their ideology in addition to their public statements. This involved reading ideological works such as Khomeini's *Islamic Government* or Lenin's *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, works that were or are still regarded as authoritative explications of the core ideologies of the regimes/subversive groups, documents meant to inform the elite cadres of the movement, not rhetoric perhaps designed just to rile the masses.

On occasion this thesis will speak about “paranoia” or use other similar terms to describe the mental states of individuals discussed herein or to describe aspects of their beliefs or ideologies. While this thesis does indulge at times in speculation about the origins of the motivations and the beliefs of certain key individuals who had an impact on the evolution of the Grand Conspiracy Theory, this research avoids blaming the acceptance of conspiracy theories by people on some defective mental state. It eschews the progression: “This idea is crazy, therefore the believers in it must be insane.” This is not to deny that mental states, heritable traits, diseases, etc. might contribute to an individual's likelihood to believe in conspiracy theories. There is a stream of new useful research from psychologists on conspiracy theories, such as Rob Brotherton's 2015 book *Suspicious Minds*. Brotherton concludes that “Conspiracy theories resonate with some of our brain's built-in biases and shortcuts, and tap into some of our deepest desires, fears, and assumptions about the world and the people in it.”⁶ The author of this thesis certainly agrees with this statement. The regular use of conspiracy theories in propaganda, which this thesis will make evident, probably does tell us something about human nature similar to what Brotherton describes, however this research does not intend to engage this question. To use an analogy: a propensity to violence is similarly based on heritable, biological, and psychological factors. However, it would probably not be useful to describe the outbreak of most wars as the consequence of groups of young men with a propensity to violence happening to meet on battlefields. To understand warfare and mass violence one needs above all to understand politics and history. This thesis is less concerned with why one or another conspiracy theory is found to be persuasive by a particular sub-population, though mentions of times where this happens will occur. Instead it treats conspiracy theories as political phenomena. By examining the history of the Grand Conspiracy Theory, especially its use in propaganda, and comparing the various ideologies that have absorbed and incorporated it into whole political worldviews this thesis attempts to uncover new insights into the important role conspiracy theories can play in propaganda and extremist ideology, and the author hopes that other researchers, especially those in other disciplines like psychology and sociology, might make use of this work of political theory and history to generate new insights in their fields.

⁶ Rob Brotherton, *Suspicious Minds: Why We Believe Conspiracy Theories*, (Bloomsbury Sigma, 2015) Kindle Edition, Location 160.

Selection of sources

The main sources initially selected for this research were the most well-known conspiracy-theory mongering documents in modern history, such as the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the *Kniga Kagala*, Barruel's *Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism* and others. There is already a rich scholarship around these texts that links them together and points to their importance in several 20th century illiberal ideologies such as Nazism and strains of radical Islamism, such as Norman Cohn's classic *Warrant for Genocide*. These texts and the biographies and milieu of the authors or likely authors were researched in an attempt to discover their context, their sources, and their inspirations, drawing on a rich secondary literature. Of course this thesis could not complete an exhaustive examination of every source and eddy in the evolution of conspiracy theories. Instead it focuses on a strain of thought, the Grand Conspiracy Theory, and even within this strain on the events and texts which had the largest impact in changing or spreading the idea. Special attention is paid to the development of the Judeo-Masonic conspiracy theory. As such, most of the historical material examined herein is European or from the Middle East. The Grand Conspiracy Theory was born in Europe, and today its most evident influence is among Islamist radicals in the Middle East.

Newspapers contemporaneously record news, opinions, propaganda, and official pronouncements, and therefore along with pamphlets are one of the main sources for studying propaganda before the advent of radio and television. This thesis attempts to delve deeper into influential conspiracy theory material from many newspapers in the late 18th to the early 20th centuries and also the documents and books heavily referenced in secondary sources about conspiracy theories. Digitization has greatly assisted in identifying items that are relevant from many historical newspapers, making it possible for a lone researcher to cover a great deal of historical ground. Newspapers provide important context to the "first drafts" of many versions of the Grand Conspiracy Theory discussed herein, informing us not only about the political and cultural context of certain variants of the Grand Conspiracy Theory, but also often providing useful contemporaneous commentary about the new variants. Given the nature of the Grand Conspiracy Theory - the idea that there is a massive deception - and given the practice of many propagandists to cloak the "evidence" of their conspiracy theories in ambiguity, newspaper commentary about new conspiracy theories can often elucidate the true purpose and target of the propaganda and help us understand its target. Several chapters in this thesis focus on particular newspapers as key sources to understand developments in the Grand Conspiracy Theory or explain how and why a certain variant was transmitted to a different context. As the narrative moves into the 20th century, radio broadcasts become important sources that serve much the same role.

Definitions

In the interest of clarity three key terms should be defined at this point. Unfortunately "conspiracy theory" and "propaganda" have been thrown around so much that these useful

terms are in danger of becoming nothing more than insults, like Orwell's description of the word "fascism" having "...no meaning except in so far as it signifies 'something not desirable'"⁷

Conspiracy:

A group of people secretly working together. This can describe intelligence work, criminal activities, etc. Calling something a conspiracy is not in any way denigrating the truth of its existence or the motivations or morality of the conspirators. Secret plots can indeed be decisive forces in political history, especially in states ruled by a small group of people or by a monarchy or single ruler. The second chapter of this thesis concerns the importance of conspiracies in ancient and medieval monarchies.

Conspiracy theory:

A conspiracy theory is an idea that posits the existence of a group of super-influential plotters who are able to attain great influence over some matter through manipulation and deception. For the purposes of this thesis, the phrase "conspiracy theory" refers to something that is usually false, or at least highly improbable.

Grand Conspiracy Theory:

The idea that there exists one or sometimes several organizations with nearly limitless powers of deception that has secretly seized or is attempting to seize power. This thesis distinguishes the Grand Conspiracy Theory from other conspiracy theories by the nearly all-pervasive, worldwide, nature of the Grand Conspiracy Theory along with a few other distinctive features discussed extensively herein. There are other notable conspiracy theories which will often be referenced in this research, some of which have made important contributions to the Grand Conspiracy Theory.

The author of this thesis was not the first person to recognize the importance of a particular genealogy of conspiracy theory that has appeared in different guises in different eras, and the phrase: "grand conspiracy theory" has been used before to describe this. For example, in 2004 the scholar Dr. W. Daniel Wilson, discussing the Illuminati scandal in 18th century Germany (a topic of chapter 3 of this thesis) noted that the notion that Illuminati plotters had caused the French revolution "developed into the grand conspiracy theory that in later centuries accrued Jews and Communists into a massive Masonic-Jewish-Bolshevist plot that became an obsession of National Socialists and other reactionaries."⁸ In 2012 the psychologist Dr. Joachim I. Krueger used the phrase "The Grand Conspiracy Theory" to translate into English his concept "Grosse Verschwörungstheorie,"⁹ expressed in a 2010 article, which is the idea that:

"a small group of individuals controls every aspect of the world that matters: the economy, the media, war and peace, what have you. The governments and their

⁷ George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language", first published in *Horizon*, London UK, April 1946. Available at http://www.orwell.ru/library/essays/politics/english/e_polit. Accessed April 3, 2019

⁸ W. Daniel Wilson, "Eighteenth-Century Germany in its Historical Context", in *German Literature of the Eighteenth Century*, Barbara Becker-Cantarino ed., (Camden House, 2005), pp. 273-274.

⁹ See Joachim Krueger, "Die 'Grosse Verschwörungstheorie' aus psychologischer Sicht" (The 'Great Conspiracy Theory' from a psychological perspective), *Zeitschrift für Anomalistik*, vol. 10, pp. 6-16.

representatives that we see are not really in charge; they are front pieces of darker and stronger forces that remain out of view, and they may not even know it.”¹⁰

In this thesis the scope of what constitutes “The Grand Conspiracy Theory” is expanded when compared to how Dr. Wilson uses it (to include some of the beliefs of Lenin, Khomeini, anti-Jesuit conspiracy theories, etc.) The use of the phrase is also somewhat different when compared to how Dr. Krueger used it, as herein it can include supposed conspiracies that have *not yet* seized power and taken control of “every aspect of the world that matters.” Furthermore, this thesis approaches the concept primarily historically, not psychologically, and treats it as a tradition.

The tradition of the Grand Conspiracy Theory usually points to the conspiracy’s use of the press to manipulate public opinion, its use of republican government to manipulate politics through bribed and compromised legislators, and often links the Grand Conspiracy to agitation for increased political freedom and toleration, and freedom of thought and the press. Another feature, though this is also true of many other conspiracy theories, is that the Grand Conspiracy Theory usually describes the leaders of the Grand Conspiracy as liars – liars even to some of their close followers. The leaders of the conspiracy claim to be in favor of democracy and manipulate their duped liberal followers when they are actually planning to establish an autocracy - or they claim to be pious members of some religion and lead a flock of believers, but are in fact secret atheists. Various versions of the Grand Conspiracy Theory often depict a small group of power-mad plotters bent on world domination who use a larger conspiracy staffed with idealists and true believers in order to manipulate the rest of society.

This thesis suggests that the inspiration of the Grand Conspiracy Theory was, in part, the application of an older way of thinking about a conspiracy to manipulate a monarch, which can actually occur, but applied on a massive scale: describing a plot to manipulate entire populations. Fittingly, this thesis begins the narrative of the Grand Conspiracy Theory with responses to the birth of mass-democracy in Europe, i.e. certain anti-revolutionary responses to the French Revolution, and most of the earlier chapters deal with the “right-wing” applications of this idea - that is, anti-liberal, anti-republican versions of the Grand Conspiracy Theory. However, as will be discussed especially in chapters 5 and 7, the Grand Conspiracy Theory has been taken up by partisans of different ideological stripes with relative ease.

Propaganda:

In modern English the term “propaganda” has taken on a negative connotation, denoting cynicism and malicious deception.¹¹ In this thesis the term is used in a more neutral sense, meaning merely persuasive speech directed at populations, not speech that is necessarily deceptive. However, given that this thesis often deals in deceptive propaganda spread by men trying to do harm, a reader might get the impression that the word “propaganda” is used here in

¹⁰ Joachim I Krueger, “A Conspiracy of One”, from the website of *Psychology Today*, March 8, 2012. Available at <https://www.psychologytoday.com/ie/blog/one-among-many/201203/conspiracy-one?collection=163831>. Accessed December 11, 2019.

¹¹ Cristina Lucia Șutiu, “Propaganda: How a Good Word Went Wrong”, *Agathos : an International Review of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol. 3, Issue 2, 2012, p. 127.

a negative sense. This is to be credited to the pernicious nature of the central idea examined in this thesis, rather than as an intended commentary on the nature of propaganda as such. Indeed, it might have been possible to write this thesis using the word “rhetoric” or “messaging” in lieu of “propaganda,” though this would lose the punch of the word “propaganda” that suggests a desired political effect for the messaging and that the messaging is deliberately spread. In this thesis the term “propaganda” is confined to political and sometimes religious/sectarian persuasive speech (and occasionally a mixture of both). This thesis does not define propaganda as a “central means of organizing and shaping thought and perception,”¹² as the introduction to the Oxford Handbook of Propaganda Studies does, partly because of the demonstrated continuity between the ideas and messaging of certain groups before and after they achieve state power or even before they got organized and centralized. A document containing propaganda is described as such if it has the goal of political persuasion, even if it is written by a lone person at the fringes. When the creation and spread of propaganda does become centralized, as when an organized group, sometimes with the sponsorship of a state, engages in the systematic spread of propaganda, this thesis will describe this event as a “propaganda campaign.” This thesis is only incidentally concerned with the methods by which propaganda is spread, insofar as it affects how and by whom propaganda containing conspiracy theories is consumed.

The word “propaganda” is derived from the Latin *propagare* – to generate or to increase, to enlarge. It is believed have entered modern English vocabulary through the 1622 bull of Pope Gregory XV’s *Inscrutabili Divinae* which established the “Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith,” a Roman Catholic institution to conduct missionary work and spread the Roman Catholic faith all over the world and to combat the rise of Protestantism.^{13 14} Perhaps protestant England’s fear and disdain for this institution is partly responsible for the negative connotation the word has in English today. However, it would be fatuous to restrict one’s discussion of such an important concept to modern etymology, and the papal bull itself speaks of the work of the Devil to “*propagari*” (translated by Pendergast and Pendergast as “perpetuated” but the word is *propagare* in the present passive infinitive) ignorant peoples in preparation for hellfire, an activity that the author certainly did not believe began in 1622 AD.¹⁵ The recognition that propaganda – politically persuasive speech directed at populations – long predates the modern era is implicitly recognized by scholars. The word “propaganda” is commonly used by historians of pre-modern eras to describe texts, ceremonies, ideas, etc. that have a political, religious, or politico-religious persuasive purpose, sometimes without knowledge of how organized or centralized the activity

¹² Jonathan Auerbach and Russ Castronovo, “Introduction: Thirteen Propositions About Propaganda,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Propaganda Studies*, Jonathan Auerbach and Russ Castronovo eds., (Oxford, 2013), p. 2.

¹³ See the entry in the Oxford English Dictionary: “propaganda, n.”, OED Online, December 2019, Oxford University Press. Accessed December 11, 2019.

¹⁴ Maria Teresa Prendergast and Thomas A. Prendergast, “The Invention of Propaganda: A Critical Commentary on and Translation of *Inscrutabili Divinae Providentiae Arcano*”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Propaganda Studies*, Jonathan Auerbach and Russ Castronovo eds., (Oxford, 2013), pp 19-25.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 21.

to spread these ideas/texts/etc. were.¹⁶ The next chapter of this thesis will discuss some examples of ancient and medieval propaganda.

There is no discussion of “corporate propaganda” or “advertising” or “public relations” in this thesis. This is driven partly by a desire to limit the historical scope and partly by the fact that the ideologies of the extremist groups inspired by the Grand Conspiracy Theory discussed in this thesis appear to have been mostly formed under the influence of non-commercial, political, often state-sponsored propaganda campaigns. This thesis does not examine the birth and growth of mass advertising in newspapers and later in radio and television. Future research on the spread of entertainment which borrows elements or whole narratives from variants of the Grand Conspiracy Theory, especially in Hollywood films, would surely deal with this aspect.

It should be noted that a regular refrain one finds in all variants of the Grand Conspiracy Theory is the idea that the sinister conspiracy has amazing powers of deception and persuasion and is engaged in an enormous, and enormously successful, well-organized propaganda campaign – often involving false-fronts and infiltration. This thesis does speak a great deal about propaganda, but it avoids this conspiracist obsession and, as mentioned earlier, conducts research into the actual, existing propaganda campaigns which spread the idea of the Grand Conspiracy Theory, taking care to avoid accusations of vast clandestine networks of which there is no evidence or certainly not espousing the belief common among conspiracy theorists that the supposed long-term effects of these campaigns are the work of some largely successful, multi-generational, secret plan. This approach allows this thesis to highlight the irony that many influential individuals who are obsessed with the supposed baneful effects of a massive non-existent propaganda campaign are themselves often the dupes of actual propaganda campaigns, sometimes campaigns from long-defunct regimes.

Propagandist:

One who engages in creating and spreading propaganda, either professionally or just as an enthusiastic “amateur” agitator.

The state of scholarship about conspiracy theories

The importance of particular conspiracy theories in propaganda campaigns or in the ideology of a few violent movements has been noted before by many different scholars, most of them studying a particular era of history. For some prominent examples, take J. M. Roberts' *The Mythology of Secret Societies*¹⁷ which documents the evolution of the conspiracy theory about Freemasons and the Illuminati after the French Revolution, starting from its use in Austrian propaganda - or Jeffrey Herf's *Nazi Propaganda for the Arab World*¹⁸ which illustrates the importance of anti-Jewish conspiracy theories in Nazi propaganda for the Middle East. These books and many others like them are often cited in the chapters that deal with the historical

¹⁶ For example see R. A. Hazzard, *Imagination of a Monarchy: Studies in Ptolemaic Propaganda*, (University of Toronto Press, 2000) or Judith Kolbas, “Historical Epic as Mongol Propaganda? Juwaynī's Motifs and Motives” in *The Mongols' Middle East*, (Brill, 2016).

¹⁷ J. M. Roberts, *The Mythology of Secret Societies*, (London: Secker & Warburg, 1972).

¹⁸ Jeffrey Herf, *Nazi Propaganda for the Arab World*, (Yale University Press, 2009) Kindle Edition.

periods these works are concerned with. This thesis is partially an attempt to unite many of these disparate threads and discreet historical studies into a larger theme.

An earlier book that unified the work of many historians and provided a foundational narrative of the emergence of the Judeo-Masonic conspiracy theory and its classic text *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is Norman Cohn's *Warrant for Genocide*,¹⁹ first published in 1966. In a way, this thesis is an expansion and continuation of Cohn's seminal work, broadening the study of the sources that lead to *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, updating Cohn's outline of the evolution of the idea to include more recent scholarship and discuss the adoption of similar ideas in ideologies that were not necessarily anti-Jewish. Several chapters will also cite Daniel Pipes' 1997 *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From*²⁰ and a few will cite his 1996 *The Hidden Hand: Middle East Fears of Conspiracy*.²¹ These books remain the two best historical and thematic summaries of conspiracy theories around the world written since *Warrant for Genocide*.

Some recent scholarship on political extremism has noted the popularity of conspiracy theories among political extremist groups. A paper which this study is surely indebted to is the notable and to some, notorious paper "Conspiracy Theories" by Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule first published in 2008.²² Sunstein and Vermeule note the ability of conspiracy theorists to see debunkers as "agents or dupes of those responsible for the conspiracy in the first place"²³ and also the existence of "conspiracy entrepreneurs" - people who deliberately concoct and spread conspiracy theories for profit.²⁴ The first part of this thesis focuses on a particular type of "conspiracy theory entrepreneur" the propagandist, whose motive is usually not financial, but political. Cass and Vermeule's interesting essay tends to focus on the role and spread of conspiracy theories in a free society, as does most current scholarship on conspiracy theories. This thesis demonstrates the important role that unfree societies, and especially governments and governing ideologies presiding over unfree societies, have on the evolution of the Grand Conspiracy Theory. Indeed, as this thesis will demonstrate, many important developments in the history of the Grand Conspiracy Theory can be seen as attempts by the rulers of unfree societies to construct ideological defenses against the blandishments of Western liberalism.

A 2010 study of conspiracy theories in violent extremist groups by Jamie Bartlett and Carl Miller with the British think-tank Demos conducted an analysis of the ideologies of 28 different extremist groups, many of them violent, and concluded that: "The frequency of conspiracy theories within all these groups suggests that they play an important social and

¹⁹ Norman Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide*, (London: Serif, 2001).

²⁰ Daniel Pipes, *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From*, (Touchstone, 1999), Kindle Edition.

²¹ Daniel Pipes, *The Hidden Hand*, (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1998).

²² Original version is Cass R. Sunstein, Adrian Vermeule, "Conspiracy Theories," *Harvard Public Law Working Paper*, No. 08-03, January 15, 2008. Available at https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1084585. Accessed April 3, 2019. This thesis will use the later edition published in Cass Sunstein's *Conspiracy Theories and Other Dangerous Ideas*, (Simon & Schuster, 2014).

²³ Sunstein, p. 5.

²⁴ Sunstein, p. 13.

functional role within extremism itself”²⁵ while also denying the impossibility of demonstrating “direct causal links between conspiracy theories and extremism...”²⁶ Sunstein and Vermule also make a passing reference to when conspiracy theorists turn to violence, mentioning as an example the 1995 bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City by two men with conspiratorial beliefs about the US Federal Government, remarking that “people who are prone to conspiring are especially likely to accept conspiracy theories.”²⁷ This is an interesting observation, similar to those made by many others (several of which will be discussed in herein), but this thesis is mainly interested in demonstrating the inverse: that those who believe in conspiracy theories sometimes become prone to conspire. This thesis attempts to demonstrate that conspiracy theories also play a crucial role in the ideologies of the most feared contemporary Muslim terrorist organizations, including the one that perpetrated the September 11th 2001 attacks on the United States, and that this is similar to other conspiracy theorists turn towards violence witnessed earlier in European history. This observation about the centrality of conspiracy theory narratives to the ideologies and the strategies of some Islamist extremist groups was the initial impetus for this research. Subsequent research showed not only that there was a central conspiracy theory shared by several different kinds of violent extremist groups, but that this idea mainly developed in Europe before the mid-20th century and that there were a few other groups of violent extremists who operated along the same lines. Their resort to organizing subversive conspiracies is, to them, often a defensive tactic against the imaginary enemy at the center of the Grand Conspiracy Theory.

To reiterate: this thesis is not attempting to totally explain all subversive extremist violence as a consequence of the belief in the Grand Conspiracy Theory or in conspiracy theories in general. It is attempting to raise the profile of conspiracy theorizing as a contributing factor to the ideologies and strategies of several major subversive extremist groups, which the author believes is an under-studied and overlooked aspect of their thought.

Thesis overview

As was stated earlier in this introduction, this thesis was originally intended to be a series of self-contained case-studies of several examples of violent extremist ideology that feature conspiracy theories and also of propaganda campaigns that employed conspiracy theories. However, during the course of research enough connective tissue was found to fashion a single narrative about the Grand Conspiracy Theory. In the interests of preserving this narrative the chapters are arranged more-or-less chronologically, instead of thematically.

Chapter 2 discusses pre-modern conspiracy theories dealing with manipulation and usurpation in monarchical governments. The kinds of narratives discussed in this chapter feature the ideas of usurpation-via-deception, i.e. the idea of someone taking power through manipulation and trickery as opposed to by war and “open” politics. It is important to discuss these pre-modern

²⁵ Jamie Bartlett, Carl Miller, *The Power of Unreason: conspiracy theories, extremism and counter-terrorism*, Demos, 2010, p. 4. Available at <http://demos.co.uk/project/the-power-of-unreason/>. Accessed April 3, 2019.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Sunstein, pp. 24-25.

narratives and their use in propaganda before the democratic age. They provide a lot of the narrative material that is the foundation of the earliest version of the Grand Conspiracy Theory. Also, this chapter shows that much of the substance of “modern” conspiracy theories were in fact old staples of political propaganda, even from antiquity.

Chapter 3 deals with the birth of the Grand Conspiracy Theory and its use in two anti-French Revolution propaganda campaigns, each of which enjoyed the patronage of rulers who opposed the French Revolution. These relatively short-term campaigns described the French Revolution and some of the ideas associated with it in line with the old “usurpation-via-deception” stories discussed in chapter 2. The French Revolution was presented by them not as a republican revolution against a monarchy but as an attempt by a conspiracy of Freemasons led by the Bavarian Illuminati to seize power. The subsequent popularizers of this idea, Augustin Barruel and John Robison, spread it throughout Europe and embellished the reach and antiquity of the supposed conspiracy.

Chapter 4 analyzes the mutation of the “second generation” of the Grand Conspiracy Theory in the post-Napoleonic era, after the threat of the French Revolution had disappeared, but the myth of a Masonic revolutionary conspiracy persisted and changed to fit contemporary fears. This chapter pays special attention to the role that a version of the Grand Conspiracy Theory played in the thought and outlook of Klemens von Metternich, who evidently believed he was facing a Masonic or Masonic-inspired enemy with amazing powers of deception. This chapter will examine the possible influence of Medieval Persian conspiratorial narratives, mixed with those about the French Revolution, on Metternich’s thought and how Metternich was instrumental in making the idea of a massive Masonic conspiracy part of accepted Roman Catholic dogma. This chapter also makes a brief mention of the first documented time that a small group of believers in the Grand Conspiracy Theory took up arms to combat the supposed conspiracy, though the power they were preparing to attack was not a revolutionary state but Austria.

Chapter 5 deals with anti-Jesuit conspiracy theories, arguably the most important type of sectarian conspiracy theories before the explosion of anti-Jewish conspiracy theories in the late 19th century. It explores how this conspiracy theory merged with the tradition of the Grand Conspiracy Theory. In contrast with much of the rest of this thesis, this chapter deals with how some liberals in Western Europe used this variant of the Grand Conspiracy Theory to attack their anti-liberal opponents, and some of the interesting consequences of this adoption. This chapter will conclude with an examination of how this “liberal” version of the Grand Conspiracy Theory was used in Russian anti-Polish propaganda in the lead up to and during the Polish Uprising of 1863. This will include a discussion of a neglected document, the *Polish Catechism*, an evident forerunner of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

Chapter 6 details the birth of the Judeo-Masonic conspiracy theory, emerging from the conspiracy theories about the Masons and the Illuminati discussed in chapters 3 and 4, and the separate birth of a Russian anti-Jewish conspiracy theory that appears to be a modification of the anti-Jesuit conspiracy theory discussed in chapter 5.

Chapter 7 begins with a discussion of “socialist” anti-Jewish conspiracy theories and then narrates how these ideas blended and mixed with other anti-Jewish variants of the Grand Conspiracy Theory in the late 19th and early 20th century. This chapter is mainly about how easily the Grand Conspiracy Theory can be adapted to different contexts, and how propagandists and ideologues of totally different political persuasions and cultures can adapt and mix conspiratorial narratives and evidence of conspiracy from myriad sources to suit their ends. This chapter concludes with a detailed examination of the ultimate classic of the Grand Conspiracy Theory, the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, and places it in the context of illiberal Russian propaganda in the lead up to the revolution of 1905.

Chapter 8 analyzes the response of elements of the Russian government to the Revolution of 1905. To combat the rising tide of liberalism and republican government pro-Tsarist propagandists embraced the version of the Grand Conspiracy Theory laid out in the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, popularizing the idea of a massive Jewish conspiracy to rule the world by encouraging liberalism. This chapter will also examine how some believers in this idea took matters into their own hands and tried to violently strike back at what they perceived as their Jewish-led enemies.

Chapter 9 deals with how the version of the Grand Conspiracy Theory discussed in chapters 7 and 8 made its way to Germany and inspired Adolf Hitler and other leading Nazis, provoking them to revolutionary rebellion against the Weimar Republic. It focuses on the lead up to the 1923 Beer Hall Putsch, but will also briefly deal with the importance of the Grand Conspiracy Theory in Nazi ideology after Hitler came to power.

Chapter 10 examines the curious case of the importation of a version of the Grand Conspiracy Theory into Soviet ideology during the 1917 Communist Revolution. This chapter will show how Lenin’s seminal 1917 work *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* was based on an anti-Jewish version of the Grand Conspiracy Theory, though Lenin transformed it into a merely anti-banker conspiracy theory. Again, this demonstrates the amazing flexibility of the idea of a massive conspiracy to fit ideological contexts of all kinds, and shows how this idea was used by the first generation of Soviets to attack the idea of liberal democracy.

Chapter 11 narrates the spread of the Grand Conspiracy Theory to the Middle East through propaganda, focusing on Nazi, Soviet, and Nasserist (Egyptian) radio broadcasts.

Chapter 12 focuses on the work of Sayyed Qutb, the godfather of modern radical Sunni extremism. The importance of the Grand Conspiracy Theory in his thinking becomes clear upon an examination of his works, especially his multi-volume commentary on the Quran. This chapter also examines how his ideas were put into practice by himself and his ideological successors Osama Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri through their pursuit of violent jihad against governments they believed were in the thrall of a grand Jewish-led conspiracy against “true” Islam.

Chapter 13 discusses the thought of Ruhollah Khomeini, the first leader of revolutionary Iran, and the key role that a version of the Grand Conspiracy Theory played in his primary work *Governance of the Jurist*. Despite the large theological differences between him and Sayyed Qutb, this chapter will detail the similarities between the worldviews of Qutb-type radical Sunnis and Khomeini-type radical Shia.

Chapter 14 is the conclusion to this research, that includes some brief speculation on emerging trends in the link between the Grand Conspiracy Theory and extremist violence.