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The importance of conspiracy theory in extremist ideology and propaganda

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Chapter 14: Conclusion

This thesis began with the question: “What is the importance of conspiracy theories in propaganda and extremist ideologies?” After initial research it emerged that there was a “main” conspiracy theory, a single kind of narrative - a tradition, that has had a disproportionate effect on politics and a disproportionate share of the attention of influential conspiracy theorists since the end of the 18th century. This is the notion that there is a massive hidden conspiracy that manipulates the world, one often associated with the spread of liberalism and republican government, as part of a plan for world domination. This thesis often called this idea the Grand Conspiracy Theory and tracked it from its birth after the French Revolution in the late 18th century all the way to its adoption by radical Islamic extremist groups in the late 20th century. One can conclude based on the research presented in this thesis that successive generations of propagandists found the idea of the Grand Conspiracy Theory useful, especially for attacking republican government, freedom of speech and religion, etc. One can also conclude that some major extremist groups have this idea, shaped by generations of propagandists, as a core part of their own beliefs. This thesis has not only made this case successfully via multiple historical examples, but even managed to illustrate several instances of overlap between these two phenomena - when some of these extremist groups also used the Grand Conspiracy Theory in their own propaganda campaigns, sometimes cynically (as in the case of Nazi propaganda designed for Muslim audiences.)

This conclusion will deal with both of these aspects beginning with the one concerning propaganda. Then, after reiterating the thesis’ argument about the role of the Grand Conspiracy Theory in extremist ideologies this conclusion will break down how various chapters in this thesis contributed to both of these arguments. This chapter will wind up with a brief discussion of some of the implications of the arguments made in this thesis.

In addition to repeatedly demonstrating how propagandists made use of the Grand Conspiracy Theory, this thesis also elucidated the importance of this propaganda from the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, especially state-sponsored propaganda, in the development of the Grand Conspiracy Theory. It was not just that propagandists used ideas about Masonic/Jewish/Jesuit conspiracies in their narratives, at times they made major modifications and updates to older versions of the Grand Conspiracy Theory, or publicized a previously obscure version because it suited their contemporary interests. While this research cannot make any claims about the efficacy of this kind of propaganda when it was used, it is evident that generations of propagandists, from 18th century Austria to 20th century Russia, have believed that the idea of the Grand Conspiracy Theory was appealing and effective and they repeatedly used it. Based on the examples provided in this thesis, the Grand Conspiracy Theory has played an important role in many propaganda campaigns, especially those combating liberalism and republican government. Anyone attempting to study the history of propaganda in Europe in the modern era must give attention to the use of the Grand Conspiracy Theory in propaganda, not only because of its repeated use, but also because of its apparent lingering effects.

As mentioned before, the targets, goals, and concerns of propagandists were often incorporated into their versions of the Grand Conspiracy Theory, versions that were also used by subsequent generations of propagandists and believed by subsequent generations of

conspiracy theorists. The hermeneutic approach taken in this thesis has proven fruitful in revealing the original circumstances, purposes, and meanings of the various texts and associated propaganda campaigns that made up many of the main sources of the Grand Conspiracy Theory or inspired or influenced the creation of new versions.

While this thesis dealt with conspiracy-theory texts, many of them associated with propaganda campaigns, this thesis never engaged in new linguistic analysis or revealed some previously-undiscovered draft copy of a conspiracy theory text in some government archive, though it often cited scholars who have accomplished feats like these. Instead, the hermeneutic approach taken in this thesis involved research into the political and cultural context of many of these texts and exposed the commonalities and sometimes the common origins of these many different versions of the Grand Conspiracy Theory. By pointing out how these very similar narratives had great importance in various propaganda campaigns, interpreting many of these documents as propaganda, and sometimes demonstrating how a version of the Grand Conspiracy Theory is dependent on specific earlier iterations, themselves the product of propaganda campaigns, this thesis has demonstrated that they are all part of a single tradition of lies that were deemed useful in various contexts (though, as has been emphasized repeatedly, many of the most powerful advocates of the Grand Conspiracy Theory appear to have been true believers.) The advocates of the Grand Conspiracy Theory discussed in this thesis certainly did not discover hidden truths, nor did they conjure new material out of whole cloth, but usually modified older propaganda material to suit their current needs. The conspiracy theories examined herein are almost all fusions of various types of narratives from the tradition of the Grand Conspiracy Theory and sometimes material from other conspiracy-narratives, including from fiction. Research into the context and likely desires of the men who created various important documents in the history of the Grand Conspiracy Theory shed light on why they made particular changes to the narrative. For example the *Protocols* was based on earlier versions of the Judeo-Masonic conspiracy theory, Brafman's Kahal conspiracy theory, and conspiracy theories associated with the secular anti-Semitic movement, but modified to attack specific targets. As this thesis has further demonstrated, these two precursor conspiracy theories were themselves derived from previous versions of the Grand Conspiracy Theory, specifically the Freemason/Illuminati conspiracy theory and the anti-Jesuit conspiracy theory, and all of them were used in and influenced by propaganda campaigns. Even these, as the second chapter demonstrates, are themselves versions of usurpation-via-deception narratives from the age of monarchy.

What sets the Grand Conspiracy Theory apart from earlier conspiracy theories from the age of monarchy is the nature of the supposed enemy. In increasingly democratic and complex societies, an enemy capable of swaying politics through deception could no longer just be a faction at court that can fool a king. It had to be large and powerful enough to deceive an entire population. Those propagandists who wished to argue against the ideas of republican government and liberalism described an imaginary enemy who was so powerful and manipulative that it would make real republican government and political freedom extremely dangerous. Things like freedom of the press or parliamentary debate would play right into the plans of the evil conspirators. By building up the image of a hyper-deceptive globe-spanning enemy, supplying "evidence" supporting its existence, spinning narratives about how this imaginary enemy operates, and spreading news of this enemy far and wide, propagandists

using the Grand Conspiracy Theory inadvertently prepared the ground for the emergence of groups dedicated to fighting this phantasm.

This imaginary enemy is the bridge between this propaganda and the extremist ideologies examined in this thesis. This is one of the main topics of the second part of this thesis, which establishes links between these propaganda campaigns, particularly those against liberalism and republican government, and the ideologies of many of the most pernicious extremist groups that emerged in modern times. This research has decisively demonstrated that the Grand Conspiracy Theory is essential to an understanding of the ideologies of Nazi Germany, of radical Sunnis in the mold of Sayyed Qutb, of the Khomeinist regime in Iran, and even to an understanding of Lenin's theory of imperialism. This suggests a lingering unintended effect of propaganda campaigns that spread the idea of the Grand Conspiracy Theory. The genealogy of the Grand Conspiracy Theory reveals that, while these ideologies may be diametrically opposed, they share common ideas about the kind of enemy they are facing, the imaginary enemy built up by generations of propagandists. This enemy that secretly controls the world looms large in their ideologies. Each of these ideologies, in their own way, sought or is still seeking a way to destroy this imaginary enemy or limit its powers. In some cases, this takes the form of subversion and violence against states that are perceived to be in the thrall of this massive deceptive power. This suggests a possible new taxonomy of several kinds of extremist groups and even, eventually, common methods of countering radicalization that can be adapted for use against radical-right, radical-left, and radical-Islamist groups. By drawing attention to the important debt that known world-historical figures like Hitler, Lenin, and Khomeini had to earlier, more obscure conspiracy theorists this thesis throws new light on their ideologies. Their common debt to the Grand Conspiracy Theory can provide analysts with a vocabulary to discuss these disparate ideologies as part of a continuity of an extremist tradition that cuts across centuries, borders, religions, and cultures.

By investigating the biographies and ideas of prominent promoters or modifiers of the Grand Conspiracy Theory across three centuries, from Hoffman, to Butmi and Dubrovin, to Hitler, and even to Qutb and Khomeini, this thesis demonstrated that there is really no stark break between the first and second parts of the thesis, between the 18th-19th century European propagandist and the 20th and 21st century European or Middle Eastern extremist. A hoped-for effect of this thesis would be increased attention to relatively obscure but critically important thinkers and propagandists, Butmi most of all.

An important upshot of this findings is that many true believers in the Grand Conspiracy Theory who engage in violent rebellion against their imaginary secret masters are, in a way, the unintended dupes of propaganda campaigns, often from decades earlier. Sometimes the gap between the propaganda campaign and the true believers who decide to take action is quite large, both in time and space and ideological affiliation. Indeed, this research has demonstrated the surprising flexibility of the Grand Conspiracy Theory, and the ease with which conspiracy-theory narratives and "evidence" have been adopted by people in radically different circumstances. The creators of many prominent versions of the Grand Conspiracy Theory would be shocked by the beliefs of its latter-day proponents. This flexibility is aided by the idea of a massive deception at the heart of the Grand Conspiracy Theory, a deception that allows believers to ignore contradictory evidence and interpret any element of reality, including efforts to reveal the true origins of their conspiracy-theory beliefs, as further efforts at deception. This

promiscuous flexibility is especially true of the *Protocols*, which this thesis traced from its origins in the western Russian Empire at the dawn of the 20th century, to its influence on leading Nazis and on Sayyed Qutb in mid-20th century Egypt.

Chapter Review

This section will review the chapters of the body of this text with regard to their contribution to both of the main arguments of this thesis. To reiterate: that the tradition identified as the Grand Conspiracy Theory played an important role in multiple propaganda campaigns, that in turn versions of the Grand Conspiracy Theory were influenced by these propaganda campaigns, and that groups of extremist subversives have been inspired to fight against the imaginary enemy created by these successive propaganda campaigns and accompanying versions of the Grand Conspiracy Theory.

Chapter 2 explained that the roots of the earliest iterations of the Grand Conspiracy Theory came from narratives of palace plots and usurpation-via-deception. These were often used in propaganda, sometimes to threaten the legitimacy of a monarch or to attack his policies without attacking him by blaming them on manipulation. The subsequent use of these kinds of narratives is the important first round of the recurring pattern witnessed in this thesis: older narratives, often used in propaganda, provide much of the plot for subsequent versions of the Grand Conspiracy Theory. This chapter also briefly commented on an important idea to keep in mind in the second “part” of this thesis, the part dealing with extremist ideologies, namely the idea that a usurper or potential usurper, even one working mainly through deception rather than violence, should be killed, and his plans violently upset. A latter-day variant of this idea would be used by some of those justifying their violent actions as self-defense against a deceptive, usurping, imaginary enemy described in the Grand Conspiracy Theory.

Chapters 3 and 4 dealt with the earliest version of the Grand Conspiracy Theory, adapted by Austrian and German propagandists in the wake of the French Revolution. This is the version that identifies the Freemasons or the Illuminati or some variant of them (such as the Carbonari) as the main enemy attempting to take over the world by pushing revolution, republican government, and Enlightenment values. Using the concept of usurpation-via-deception discussed in chapter 2, the writers of *Weiner Zeitschrift* and *Eudämonia* described the French Revolution as the work of a massive conspiracy of Masons who secretly ruled revolutionary France and who were intent on bringing down other monarchies in a similar fashion. This story was taken up by Barruel and Robison, who popularized this story throughout Europe. These chapters also showed how this conspiracy theory or variants of it continued to affected politics, even long after the propaganda campaigns were over. Metternich is of special interest in chapter 4 because he became a true believer in a variant of this conspiracy theory and appeared to make major decisions based on this errant belief. In order to further propaganda against the Italian patriots who he considered a threat he persuaded senior figures in the Roman Catholic church to make this theory part of their official doctrine, starting with the 1821 papal bull *Ecclesiam a Jesu Christo*. The last part of chapter 4 briefly examines the obscure but interesting case of the Salais-Soglio brothers, who appear to have been the first

people to attempt violent subversion based on their belief in the Grand Conspiracy Theory, specifically a belief that the Austrian empire was actually under the control of the *Illuminati*.

Chapter 5 discussed anti-Jesuit versions of the Grand Conspiracy theory, and examined how even those who were pro-French Revolution could make use of the Grand Conspiracy Theory to attack their enemies. This chapter focused on the idea, popular in mid-19th century France, that there was a massive Jesuit conspiracy to overturn the French Revolution, fight liberalism, and roll-back the Enlightenment. While this iteration of the Grand Conspiracy Theory presented the idea of an enemy with intermediate goals totally different from that of the purported Freemasons/Illuminati conspiracy discussed earlier, it included some very similar ideas about how the Jesuits were planning to take power, and even indicated that the core of the Jesuit conspiracy was made up of amoral usurpers, just like the Illuminati supposedly were. This anti-Jesuit conspiracy theory grew to greatly resemble the anti-Freemason/anti-Illuminati conspiracy theory discussed in previous chapters. One of the main texts discussed in this chapter is *The Secret Plan of the Order*, a classic of anti-Jesuit conspiracy theorizing, which this chapter revealed to be a text likely written as propaganda for the 1845 Sonderbund War in Switzerland. The second part of this chapter focused on the use of this anti-Jesuit conspiracy theory in the Russian propaganda campaign against the Polish January Uprising of 1863; again demonstrating the debt this version of the conspiracy theory has to the propagandists who modified and spread it. The text the *Polish Catechism* discussed in this chapter in connection with this propaganda campaign has relevance as a likely neglected precursor of the *Protocols*.

Chapters 6, 7, and 8 mainly dealt with the emergence and spread of the Judeo-Masonic conspiracy theory, arguably the most persistent and deadly variant of the Grand Conspiracy Theory. These chapters showed how successive variants of anti-Jewish conspiracy theories were ultimately dependent on the Freemason/Illuminati conspiracy theory or the anti-Jesuit conspiracy theory described in the previous chapters. These older narratives were mixed with anti-Jewish ideas and also the concerns of various later generations of propagandists and/or conspiracy theorists, such as socialist who hated bankers or those who hated the gold standard. These chapters examine a number of important texts in the history of the Grand Conspiracy Theory, such as the *Kniga Kagala* or *La France juive*, and various pieces of propaganda from newspapers, but the main text discussed was the *Protocols*. By researching the political context that the *Protocols* appeared in and the backgrounds of its likely authors, it was also revealed to be a propaganda text, and one dependent on ideas developed in earlier iterations of the Grand Conspiracy Theory, themselves often developed from propaganda.

Chapter 8 also discussed the use of the narrative encapsulated in the *Protocols* in political propaganda against the reforms that came after the Revolution of 1905. This chapter also dealt with the turn to organized violence of some true believers in the massive Jewish conspiracy, as they sought to form their own conspiracy and strike back at their imaginary antagonists.

Chapter 9 focused on the emergence of the Nazis and the special role that the anti-Jewish, Russian-origin version of the Grand Conspiracy Theory had in the development of Hitler's ideology and the actions of the early Nazi party. It paid special attention to the

biographies of some leading figures of the early Nazi party who hailed from the Russian Empire and the organization *Aufbau* which was the midwife of the Nazi party and may have itself participated in violent subversion against the perceived servants of the imaginary Jewish enemy. This chapter presented a glaring example of a version of the Grand Conspiracy theory “escaping” its original context and creating havoc by inspiring violent subversives. While the main focus of this chapter was on the effects of “outdated” Russian propaganda, including the *Protocols*, on the emergence of Nazi ideology and the Nazi’s turn to violent subversion with the Beer Hall Putsch, there was some comment on how these ideas influenced the Nazi’s later genocidal program and their attempted conquest of Europe.

Chapter 10 turned to the inclusion of the Grand Conspiracy Theory in Soviet ideology, specifically through Lenin’s theory of imperialism. While one cannot point to the roots of Lenin’s theory of imperialism in a specific previous propaganda campaign, by Lenin’s own admission his theory is dependent on *Imperialism* by John A. Hobson. Hobson’s ideas about imperialism stemmed from an anti-banker/anti-Jewish version of the Grand Conspiracy Theory. The circumstances surrounding the formulation of Lenin’s theory of imperialism and its use in early Soviet propaganda show that Lenin and his companions at the very least saw it as useful in creating propaganda against some of the Bolshevik’s enemies (including other socialists) and also probably in excusing their own collaboration with Germany during WWI by arguing for a moral equivalence between Germany and the Allies. Lenin’s theory of imperialism argued that the Allies, including Russia’s nascent republic, were really under the control of cabals of bankers. As this idea was enshrined in one of Lenin’s three major works *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* this version of the Grand Conspiracy Theory became a pillar of Soviet ideology, and was further spread via Soviet propaganda.

Chapter 11 focused on the spread of a few different versions of the Grand Conspiracy Theory in the Middle East in the mid-20th century and especially on the importance of the Grand Conspiracy theory in Soviet and Nazi propaganda destined for Arabic and Persian-speaking audiences. In addition to a few other conspiracy theories from the Middle East, this chapter examined some adaptations of the Grand Conspiracy Theory likely influenced by Nazi or Soviet propaganda, and how the Grand Conspiracy Theory was adapted for the Middle Eastern context. Special attention was paid to the biography of one of the main interpreters and transmitters of the Grand Conspiracy Theory to Islamic audiences: Hajj Amin al-Husseini. He was a major political/spiritual figure in Palestine as well as a contributor to Nazi propaganda during WWII. This chapter also discussed the radio broadcasts of Nasser’s regime in Egypt that also spread word of the Zionist/Imperialist conspiracy. These three propaganda campaigns in the Middle East: Nazi, Soviet, and Nasserite, were all demonstrated to include their own versions of the Grand Conspiracy Theory.

Chapter 12 discussed the ideas of Sayyed Qutb, the key figure in the ideology of radical Sunni Islam, and how he and his successors sought and still seek to wage war against the imaginary Zionist-Crusader alliance which they believe threatens Islam. Qutb’s core theory of *jahiliyyah* is his most important innovation, and this chapter demonstrated that it was dependent on a belief in a version of the Grand Conspiracy Theory, this time a Zionist-Crusader conspiracy

to corrupt Islam. Qutb's theory is in debt to the idea of a grand Jewish conspiracy behind many aspects of modern Western civilization, and cites the *Protocols* and makes references to Jewish conspiracies against Islam several times in his Quran commentary. Qutb believed that this conspiracy was a "living and active organization"¹ armed with a powerful ability to deceive, and that it had infiltrated Islamic lands and corrupted Muslim governments in addition to corrupting the West and spreading sexual immorality. In response to this, Qutb and his close followers planned to violently overthrow the supposedly Muslim government of Egypt (which they believed was actually in the thrall of a massive anti-Islamic conspiracy) and establish a truly Islamic state. This vision is today still championed by the leadership of the terrorist group Al Qaeda, which seeks to strike so violently at the main national "tool" of the conspirators (the United States) that a truly Islamic state could be established in the Middle East, free from their interference.

Chapter 13 analyzed the work of Sayyed Ruhollah Khomeini, the Shi'a who became the leader of revolutionary Iran. After a discussion of some of the kinds of conspiracy theories circulating in Iran before Khomeini announced his theory of *velayat-e faqih*, governance of the jurist, this chapter demonstrated that a belief in a massive, multi-generational Jewish/imperialist conspiracy against Islam is an indispensable part of his theory. Though it is perhaps impossible to detail the precise origins of Khomeini's conspiracism, Khomeini's theory shares remarkable similarities with Qutb's, and this suggests that Khomeini may have been familiar with Qutb's ideas or at least that they shared similar influences, including the anti-Jewish variant of the Grand Conspiracy Theory encapsulated in the *Protocols*. The regime established by Khomeini along with the violent extremist group Lebanese Hizballah which shares Khomeini's theory of *velayat-e faqih* continue to spread propaganda containing the idea of a massive Jewish-imperialist conspiracy against Islam.

Concluding thoughts

This thesis set out to demonstrate the importance of the Grand Conspiracy Theory in propaganda and in extremist ideologies, especially the ideologies of violent subversive groups. At first blush, the pattern that appeared in the research was that propagandists created an imaginary enemy that some other people believed was real, and rebelled against. As mentioned in the introduction and demonstrated throughout the body of the thesis, this rubric is somewhat true but reality is not so simple. This basic pattern is complicated by the fact that many of the most effective propagandists who spread variants of the idea of the Grand Conspiracy Theory were themselves believers in it. A further complication was that the violent subversives who believed in the Grand Conspiracy Theory did not always remain violent subversives. When they succeeded in taking control of a state, the imaginary enemy did not disappear from their calculations. The Grand Conspiracy Theory was not just a propaganda cudgel dropped by the defenders of throne and altar and later taken up by the Nazis, the Bolsheviks, Qutubists, and others. This thesis has shown that the idea had already been infused into their own ideologies. Three of the four main examples presented in the second half of this thesis, the Nazis, the Bolsheviks, and the followers of Khomeini managed to set up totalitarian or quasi-totalitarian

¹ Sayyed Qutb, *Milestones*, p. 57.

states. Two of them, the Nazis and the Bolsheviks, were the most high-profile dictatorships of the 20th century.

There is insufficient evidence presented here to make a general argument regarding the Grand Conspiracy Theory and the nature of totalitarianism, and this was not a goal of this thesis. In order to make such an argument one would need to seriously study a broader set of regimes in the 20th century, including Mao's in China, probably some south-European fascists, and others. However, one can surely note, based on the evidence presented here, that while the Nazis, Bolsheviks, and Khomeinists had or have very different ideologies with entirely separate and even mutually-antagonistic goals, they all share very similar images of an ultimate enemy that has common roots in the Grand Conspiracy Theory. The Qutubists, e.g. al Qaeda, also share this belief that they face a super-deceptive enemy, and one suspects that they too would not abandon their cherished idea of their imaginary enemy should they ever achieve stable state power and establish an "Islamic state." If they tried to abandon this imaginary enemy they would have to jettison one of the things that justifies their rebellion, the sine-qua-non of Qutb's theory of *jahiliyyah*: the belief in a massive Jewish foe that has been attempting to destroy and subvert Islam for centuries.

Here one should note the major exception to this pattern examined in this thesis, that of Lenin and the Bolsheviks. As chapter 10 stated, this thesis does not argue that any roots of Lenin's extremism lie with the Grand Conspiracy Theory. He was already pushing for violent revolution long before he wrote *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*. As chapter 10 showed, the adoption of this idea by Lenin and his Bolsheviks probably had a lot to do with the needs of their faction at the time and the usefulness of the idea for attacking Lenin's ideological enemies, especially non-Bolshevik socialists. Lenin's theory of imperialism was a high-profile pillar of his thought, and it made an important impact on Bolshevik and later Soviet propaganda, and as demonstrated in chapter 11, the USSR helped spread the Grand Conspiracy Theory via its huge propaganda machine.

The usefulness of the Grand Conspiracy Theory to propagandists defending authoritarian governments from the ideological threat of democracy combined with its importance in the ideologies behind major forms of despotism and violent subversion should highlight the importance of studying the history of ideas, even those of defunct political ideologies and the indirect, long-term damage that sclerotic and failing despotisms can do through their propaganda. Indirect because, as this thesis has suggested, the most violent and impactful consequences of their propaganda can take place long after the regime has disappeared. The enduring impact of the *Protocols* is the most glaring example of this.

A way of preventing the emergence of new versions of the Grand Conspiracy Theory might be to ensure the preservation of liberal democracies, free countries where there is greater government transparency, independent courts of law, and genuine elections and transfers of power. These societies are the best refutation to the idea that there is a secret cabal manipulating world events and spreading liberal and democratic ideas as part of their world-conquering scheme. Of course, any devotee of the Grand Conspiracy Theory who is looking at a liberal democracy will conclude that the manipulators are always cleverly hidden, manipulating the public from just off-stage. The devotees' obsession with the power of deception means that there is no silver-bullet refutation to the Grand Conspiracy Theory. Nevertheless, real examples

of free societies, free peoples going about their lives without fear of punishment from secret overlords and relatively free from mass manipulation is the best cumulative counter-argument.

This is in no way to imply that democratic countries are immune to the Grand Conspiracy Theory. It is not a focus of this thesis, but recall how the anti-Jesuit conspiracy theory flourished in liberal circles in mid-19th century France and Switzerland (see the first part of chapter 5). The narrative of this thesis stops before the widespread use of the internet, and deals hardly at all with US popular culture, which is famously fond of conspiracy theories. This topic- the role of the Grand Conspiracy Theory in American politics and culture and the global impact of American versions of it- is a worthy topic for future study.

This thesis has indicated a potential strategy towards combating the spread of new versions of the Grand Conspiracy Theory, including in democratic societies: pointing out the importance that propaganda campaigns had in creating and sustaining the Grand Conspiracy Theory over two centuries. After a tradition has been identified, people can be educated to pick out its salient features in new material, and to spot updated versions of the Grand Conspiracy Theory as they emerge. In doing so they would rob it of much of its potential persuasive power, and would also perhaps be keyed up to search for underlying propagandistic purposes wrapped in the Grand Conspiracy Theory. If properly educated on the origins of the Grand Conspiracy Theory and its most pernicious versions they would also, of course, to be skeptical towards conspiracy theory texts like the *Protocols* or Jacopo Leone's *Secret Plan of the Order* which are both evidently propagandistic documents once one examines their original context.

Attempts to use this insight about the origins of the Grand Conspiracy Theory to persuade hard-core true believers in it to abandon their cherished conspiracist narratives may be a fool's errand, given their mental preparation to see massive deceptions everywhere. Even the evidence in this thesis, with citations from books available in every library and also from disintegrating newspapers sitting on neglected shelves in Eastern Europe, would doubtless be considered part of a massive conspiracy to cover the tracks of the "real" massive deception. However, it may help to persuade those on the fence, those in danger of radicalization, by presenting the Grand Conspiracy Theory for the long-term lie that it is, and in the process to discredit the ideologies that have embraced it. For example, pointing out the importance of the Grand Conspiracy Theory to modern Islamist extremists shows them to be dupes of propaganda campaigns from long-defunct European regimes rather than true-believing jihadists acting out the basic commandments of their faith. Ditto for some "white nationalist" and "anti-elite" conspiracists that have embraced 19th century propaganda narratives created to defend elites of the 19th century. Furthermore, by recognizing the importance of the enemy at the center of the Grand Conspiracy Theory analysts may shed light on the motivations of extremists engaged in violent subversion, helping to better understand their target selection, their goals, and the strategy behind what might seem to a normal person to be random acts of horrific violence.

A further conclusion suggested by this thesis, a troubling one, is that much of the ideology and some of the most important goals of some extremist groups may only be marginally connected to real grievances that can be allayed or even deep disagreements which might still provide a basis for eventual compromise or appeasement. To paraphrase and criticize two truisms often bandied about in discussions of extremism: it may not be that they "hate us for who we are," or hate us for "what we have done." While real grievances might contribute to the

acceptance of some version of the Grand Conspiracy Theory, once one has embraced the idea of the massive imaginary enemy thoughts of compromise look like thoughts of surrender, and any number of concessions or actions to ameliorate grievances can be interpreted as ploys of the great enemy. Furthermore, true-believing, violent, and motivated opponents of this imaginary enemy will pursue it and its servants to the ends of the earth if they can – and they have in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and even more recently in spectacular attacks in Western Europe and the Americas. One could make this argument, for example, about the Nazis (angry at the Treaty of Versailles, but also obsessed with the Judeo-Bolshevik/Judeo-Masonic conspiracy) Al Qaeda and other similar radical Sunni groups (perhaps angry about something Israel has done but also obsessed with Sayyed Qutb's anti-Jewish conspiracy theory) or the extremist Shi'a rulers of present-day Iran (angry about past European imperialism but also obsessed with a conspiracy theory about an imperialist/Jewish plot to corrupt Islam).

This thesis did not attempt to present a comprehensive explanation for political violence, but one suspects that if one examines the ideas of many modern violent extremist groups not included in this thesis, one will also find that the Grand Conspiracy Theory plays a crucial role in several of them. For further research, the ideas of present-day right-wing extremists groups in the United States and some of the left-wing groups behind the wave of terrorism in the early 70s are low-hanging fruit.² For the left-wing extremists, there is Lenin's theory of imperialism to connect them to the Grand Conspiracy Theory. Among right-wing extremists in the United States and Europe there appears to be a continuing fascination with Nazi ideas that goes beyond iconography. It may have escaped the reader's notice, but chapter 7 cited a translation of an essay by Dietrich Eckart, one of Hitler's intellectual mentors.³ This essay was translated by William Luther Pierce, the American right-wing anti-Jewish radical best known for writing *The Turner Diaries*, a novel popular among right-wing extremists in the United States.

While many of the ideas connected to the Grand Conspiracy Theory are pseudo-intellectual, paranoid, foolish, even stupid, this thesis has nevertheless demonstrated that they are relevant, especially to understanding the history of ideas, the strategies behind certain kinds of propaganda, and the origins of several major political ideologies. Examining the development and spread of conspiracy theories as political acts has led to interesting research findings, especially regarding the origins and purpose of certain malignant political ideas. By paying attention to ideas that were "mainstream" for a time in certain states and societies this study was able to illuminate the contributions that a certain kind of propaganda has had on intellectual history. This research was able to emphasize some important texts and traditions which have been mostly ignored by scholarship due to their present-day obscurity and the fact that they are often outdated propaganda. This is not in any way to diminish the utility of studying the creation and spread of conspiracy theories in the present day, under the conditions of free societies, or of sociological, biological, and even financial and demographic studies of the roots of conspiracy theories, political repression and violence. The author hopes that this research will help inform

² A good starting place for this would be the 5th chapter of Laurent Murawiec's *The Mind of Jihad*, which deals with early Soviet attempts to spark anti-imperialist revolution in the Middle East. See Laurent Murawiec, *The Mind of Jihad*, (Cambridge University Press, 2008).

³ See footnote 135, chapter 7: Dietrich Eckart, *Bolshevism from Moses to Lenin: A Dialogue Between Adolf Hitler and Me*, Dr. William Pierce trans. Available at: http://library.flawlesslogic.com/eckart_1.htm. Accessed Feb 13, 2019.

those working in other disciplines as well as historians and political theorists, and highlight for all of them the important effects that successive propaganda campaigns and paranoid writers and leaders have had on modern history. If one is to distill a single epigram from this research, perhaps it should be: ideas have consequences, especially bad ideas.

The tradition identified in this thesis as the Grand Conspiracy Theory, far from being a defunct and marginal idea consigned to the dustbin of history, is living and active. It is still shaping politics and motivating political violence, and is an important idea to understand several strains of extremist ideology, some of which are still threats to peace. An understanding of its origins and core tenants should allow us to recognize and oppose it in its nascent forms, including when it is used in propaganda, and hopefully to help us devise ways to limit its impact.