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The importance of conspiracy theory in extremist ideology and propaganda

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Cover Page



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Summary

Since at least the time of the French Revolution there has been an identifiable tradition of conspiracy theorizing that posits the existence of a powerful secret network that has either taken over the world or is about to take over the world through deception under the guise of championing enlightenment, freedom, self-government, and liberalism. This thesis charts the development of this idea - called the Grand Conspiracy Theory - and examines some of the impact of this idea and demonstrates that it is a cohesive tradition that has had a decisive impact on world affairs. This is especially evident in its role in inspiring violent subversive groups to engage in “counter-conspiracies” against the evil imaginary enemy. This thesis also establishes the crucial importance of propaganda campaigns in shaping and spreading the idea of the Grand Conspiracy Theory.

In order to demonstrate that it is a cohesive tradition this thesis provides a history of the Grand Conspiracy Theory, with a special focus on the crucial contribution of propaganda campaigns to its development. This thesis then proceeds to show that this idea has been incorporated into the core ideologies of several important extremist groups.

The Grand Conspiracy Theory follows some of the basic patterns of “palace conspiracy” narratives, which could also be called conspiracy theories for the age of monarchy. These involve stories of deceptive usurpers who are reigning in the “true” king’s stead and the idea that a supposedly sovereign king could become captive of a clique which manipulates him, using deception to usurp power indirectly. The Grand Conspiracy Theory takes these narratives and applies them on a massive scale - not positing a deception to fool one king or fool the people that one man is not who he presents himself to be (events are both within the realm of historical experience) but rather to manipulate entire populations through deception in supposedly “free” societies.

The earliest appearance of the Grand Conspiracy Theory discussed herein is in an Austrian propaganda response to the French Revolution in the early 1790s. Under the patronage of the Austrian Emperor, the writer Leopold Hoffmann organized a journal, the *Wiener Zeitschrift*, that championed the idea that the French Revolution was the work of the Bavarian Illuminati, a then-defunct secret society that had caused a scandal in Germany some years before. Hoffmann argued that the Illuminati had re-constituted itself and had begun its plan to destroy all governments and all religion in Europe by revolutionizing peoples with the false-songs of liberty and equality. The Illuminati penetration of the Freemason societies had supposedly facilitated this plot.

Hoffman’s ideological legacy was taken up by later writers, most notably Augustin Barruel and John Robison, who wrote very popular books that spread the idea of an Illuminati/Freemason conspiracy to take over the world under the guise of spreading enlightenment and democracy. Eventually, versions of these ideas were incorporated into an influential idea that there were Italian and Prussian secret societies that were either analogous to, allied with, or subordinate to the larger Illuminati/Freemason Grand Conspiracy against all governments and true religion. A version of this idea was believed by the Emperor Alexander I of Russia and the Austrian statesman Klemens von Metternich. Metternich used his influence to have the idea of a massive global anti-Christian, anti-legitimate-government conspiracy included in the 1821 papal bull *Ecclesiam a Jesu Christo*, further elevating the profile and spread of the

Grand Conspiracy Theory. Interestingly, around the same time a pair of Anglo-Swiss nobles in Switzerland were planning a (stymied) rebellion against the Austrian Empire, believing that it had come under the control of the Illuminati.

By the early 19th century, anti-Jesuit conspiracy theories had been circulating for hundreds of years, but in the mid-19th century anti-Jesuit conspiratorial narratives began to pick up aspects of and even to merge with the Grand Conspiracy Theory. While anti-Jesuit conspiracy theories tended to show up in more liberal circles in Western Europe, the inherent usefulness of this idea to propagandists, especially propagandists of absolutism, is evident in its adoption by Russian propagandists militating against the Polish rebellion of 1863. The centerpiece of this anti-Polish campaign was the *Polish Catechism*, a document which purported to be a captured Jesuit plan to destroy Russia through Polish subversion. This document is an unacknowledged precursor of the more infamous anti-Jewish text, the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

This Russian version of the anti-Jesuit conspiracy theory was likely adapted as an anti-Jewish conspiracy by Jacob Brafman, who popularized in Russia the idea of a massive global conspiracy of *Kahal* (traditional Jewish local self-government in Eastern Europe). In Western Europe the Illuminati/Freemason version of the Grand Conspiracy theory had also been adopted to include anti-Jewish elements, either painting a Jewish conspiracy as a powerful ally of the Illuminati/Freemason conspiracy or as the actual leaders of the conspiracy. Joseph de Maistre, among others, contributed to this tradition, but it also appeared in Portugal in 1821 in more run-of-the-mill anti-republican propaganda. During this era the utility of the Grand Conspiracy Theory to propagandists attacking republican government and liberalism is quite evident, as the existence of such a powerful anti-Christian network would make “safe” liberal reforms impossible, as they would play into the hands of the malign conspiracy.

The increasing prominence of Jewish bankers allowed rumors of their influence to be incorporated into narratives of a massive Judeo-Masonic conspiracy in the latter half of the 19th century. Some partisans of Tsarism and enemies of economic and political reform found the idea of a Judeo-Masonic conspiracy theory persuasive, and began to incorporate it into propaganda against reform in the Russian Empire. The most notorious document from this trend is the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which purported to be the secret plans of the Jews to take over the world by using Freemasons, liberalism, capitalism, socialism, and democratic reform. Placed in its original context the *Protocols* is evidently a thinly-veiled paean to Russian absolutist government. This document and the narrative it supported were widely used by pro-Tsarist propagandists responding to the Revolution of 1905 with the support of the Russian state, increasing the idea’s reach. Their propaganda pushed the idea of a massive imaginary Jewish enemy, one that was manipulating Russia, indeed, manipulating the world.

After tracing the development of the idea of this imaginary enemy, this super-powerful conspiracy that was developed by generations of propagandists, the second part of this thesis is primarily concerned with the way this idea influenced and inspired subversive extremist groups in the 20th and 21st centuries, beginning with Leninism.

In WWI Vladimir Lenin embraced the anti-Jewish conspiracy theory of the English liberal writer John A. Hobson to explain the survival of capitalism through imperialism and the choices of many of Lenin’s fellow socialists. Hobson believed that small cliques of Jewish bankers controlled each of the major powers, including the supposedly democratic ones, and

conspiratorially manipulated their governments and populations into supporting imperialist adventures that would be profitable to these Jewish bankers. Lenin took this idea shorn of its anti-Jewish elements and integrated it into Bolshevik ideology through his theory of imperialism. One of Lenin's best-known works *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* is an exposition on this idea and demonstrates how a version of the Grand Conspiracy Theory became an essential part of Bolshevik - and therefore Soviet - ideology. In the run-up to the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the Bolshevik coup of October 1917 Lenin and his followers used Lenin's theory of imperialism to attack the Allied powers as being faux-democratic and the Russian republic as being the servant of a conspiracy of bankers. The Bolsheviks were helped in these propagandistic and subversive efforts by secret German aid. Lenin's theory of imperialism was also a major part of one of Lenin's other major works *The State and Revolution*.

Meanwhile in Germany, some emigres from the Russian Empire were instrumental in the formation of the Nazi party. A group of them coalesced in Munich and founded an organization *Aufbau* as part of an effort to overthrow the Soviet regime, but eventually became involved in subversion against the new German republic. The leader of this organization, Ludwig Maximilian Erwin von Scheubner-Richter (who grew up in the Russian Empire) became one of Hitler's mentors as did another member of the organization Alfred Rosenberg (who was from Tallinn, also in the Russian Empire.) Both of these men were instrumental in transmitting the Tsarist era Judeo-Masonic version of the Grand Conspiracy Theory to Hitler. *Aufbau* was an important contributor to the formation of the early Nazi party and an examination of the organization's journal *Aufbau-Korrespondenz* reveals how they adapted a Russian-origin conspiracy theory to German conditions. Scheubner-Richter and Rosenberg encouraged Hitler to attempt his failed 1923 coup known as the Beer Hall Putsch. Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf* while he was in prison following this attempted coup, and in that book one can see how Hitler blended the Judeo-Masonic/Judeo-Bolshevik conspiracy theory with more racialist strains of thought. The imaginary enemy of the massive international Jewish conspiracy pushing communism and capitalism remained the primary antagonist in Hitler's mind and in Nazi ideology till the end of WWII. Eventually this belief contributed to his decision to attempt to annihilate the Jews.

Both the Nazi and the Soviet regime broadcast propaganda into the Middle East that spread both of their mirror-image conspiracy theories, both positing that the West was under the control of shadowy forces (either a Jewish conspiracy or a conspiracy of imperialist bankers). Nazi propaganda in Arabic in particular emphasized that there was a massive multi-generational Jewish conspiracy against Islam that had successfully corrupted Islam and was manipulating Western powers to do its bidding in the Middle East. One of the champions for this idea was Hajj Amin al-Husseini, a Palestinian leader who worked for Nazi radio propaganda efforts during the War. Soviet propaganda tended to emphasize that Zionism was a servant of a Western conspiracy of imperialist finance capital, and that the creation of Israel was part of a wider anti-Arab plan in the Middle East. Many of the ideas spread by Nazi and Soviet propaganda can subsequently be found in Nasserist radio propaganda from the 1950s, emerging from a nationalist Egypt.

These ideas can later be seen in prominent radical strains of both Sunni and Shi'a Islam. Sayyed Qutb, a member of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and a disillusioned former supporter of Nasser's revolution in Egypt, made the anti-Jewish version of the Grand Conspiracy Theory a pillar of his theology via his idea of modern *jahiliyyah* - positing that the

Islamic world was under the influence of a multi-generational Jewish anti-Islamic conspiracy. This idea is especially evident in his multi-volume Quran commentary. Qutb himself organized a violent subversive group to strike against the Egyptian government, which he and his followers believed was under the control of a Jewish/imperialist conspiracy. After his execution for plotting this subversive activity, some of his successors have continued organizing subversive attacks against the imaginary enemy of the Grand Conspiracy Theory that they believe is actively corrupting Islam. The leaders of Al Qaeda - Usama Bin Ladin and Ayman al-Zawahiri - were/are carrying on this tradition in the dramatic attacks of Al Qaeda on Western targets. Al Qaeda's strategy, as stated by the founders, is directed against the US and the supposed secret Jewish world government that controls it.

The Iranian cleric Ruhollah Khomeini also integrated a version of the Grand Conspiracy Theory into his ideology. He maintained that his novel idea of the "guardianship of the jurist" (*velayat-e-faqih*) - the idea that Islamic clerics should be the heads of state - was not novel, but was in fact the original plan set out by the prophet Mohammed. Khomeini explained the apparent lack of historical precedent for *velayat-e-faqih* by insisting that a massive Jewish conspiracy against Islam had been operating for centuries, aided in the last three centuries by a more recent imperialist conspiracy against Islam. The evil works of these conspiracies and the need to combat them are laid out in his seminal work *Governance of the Jurist*, which remains a key ideological text of the current Iranian regime.

The crucial role that various versions of the Grand Conspiracy Theory played in these four major extremist ideologies is demonstrated in this thesis, mainly through a close reading of some of the aforementioned foundational ideological texts of these groups and an examination of their propaganda. This reveals the important role that earlier propaganda campaigns from now-defunct regimes still have today and also indicates a relationship between belief in a massive super-powerful conspiracy and a turn towards subversive violence.