3.8
ANTISEMITISM AND CONSPIRACISM

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Introduction
Conspiracy theories have been an important aspect of antisemitism through different historical phases. The representation of the Jew as an evil and disruptive figure, equipped with almost unlimited power, has been a recurrent feature of both premodern, religious anti-Judaism and modern nationalist and racist antisemitism. Although narratives of alleged Jewish conspiracies have been present in anti-Jewish sentiments from the high medieval period (1050–1300) until the present, the character and function of anti-Jewish thoughts and actions have changed considerably over time. Antisemitism is not an ‘eternal hatred’, evolving in a teleological manner from the Crusades to Auschwitz. Rather, anti-Jewish mobilisation in general – and anti-Jewish conspiracy theories in particular – have gained momentum under historical conditions marked by, for example, political polarisation, economic or social crises, or rapid social change. In this sense, the history of antisemitism is conjunctural rather than linear. In certain periods, the relationship between the majority and minority has been relatively calm and stable. In other historical periods, however, the demonisation of Jews has gained support, nourished religious and political mobilisation, and even escalated to mass violence.

Premodern conspiracy narratives
During the medieval and early modern era, anti-Jewish representations were primarily rooted in a Christian worldview. Obviously, this does not mean that the causes of anti-Jewish actions were always religious in nature. Secular factors – such as political or economic interests – also played an important role. Indeed, factors such as economic motives were often given theological rationalisations (Eriksen et al. 2005: 8).

Negative representations of Jews were already present in the early history of Christianity as part of the process of separating the new religion from other belief systems, particularly from Judaism. The Jewish minority was represented as stubborn worshippers of an outdated religion and held responsible for the execution of Jesus by Christian theologians (Grözinger 1995: 57–66).

Still, from the high medieval period onwards, the demonisation of the Jews intensified. Several new accusations evolved, presenting the Jewish minority not only as a theological antithesis, but also as a deadly threat to the Christian population (Chazan 1997: 58–94). Such
sharpened anti-Jewish demonology also developed in a context where the struggle against deviant groups, such as heretics and lepers, was intensified (see e.g. Chazan 1997: 78–94; Moore 2007). In many cases, anti-Jewish accusations were structured as conspiracy narratives. It was claimed that the Jews operated as a collective and evil unit, secretly plotting against Christianity and Christian society.

What was the content of the anti-Jewish conspiracy narratives of the medieval and early modern eras? On a general level, Jews were associated with the devil and the Antichrist (Eriksen 2005: 76–7); on demonisation, also see Trachtenberg 1943). In addition to these representations, three new accusations that developed in the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries should be mentioned: The ritual murder legend, the narrative of host desecration and the well-poisoning accusation.

Accusations of ritual murder have been charged against different outgroups in various eras. During the medieval and early modern eras, real and imaginary enemies of the Church – such as heretics and witches – were accused of committing such cruelties (Cohn 1997). Still, the historical continuity of the anti-Jewish versions of the ritual murder libel have been particularly resilient (e.g. Erb 1995: 74–9). The first known example derives from Norwich, England in 1144. In the chronicle, The Life and Passion of Saint William the Martyr of Norwich, the monk Thomas of Monmouth states that a young apprentice named William was ritually crucified and murdered by the Jews in 1144 (see e.g. Langmuir 1990). During the decades that followed, similar accusations spread to other locations (Rose 2015: 127–85). The ritual murder libel was not embraced by the Church leadership. In fact, on 5 July 1247, Pope Innocent IV promulgated a papal bill devoted to the refutation of such accusations. Still, from the twelfth to the sixteenth century, ritual murder accusations continued to nourish violent persecutions in Western and Central Europe (Hsia 1988: 1–5). In Eastern Central Europe, this led to trials and executions as late as the eighteenth century (Guldon, Wihaczka 1997: 99–140). It should also be noted that the myth of Jewish ritual murder has been present even in the modern era. In fact, between 1891 and 1900, the Berlin section of Verein Zur Abwehr des Antisemitismus – an organisation combatting antisemitism – counted 79 instances of such charges in Austria-Hungary, Germany, Bulgaria, Serbia, Romania and the Russian Empire (Smith 2003: 123). In 1946, accusations of ritual murder even contributed to violent persecutions in Kielce, Poland (Gross 2006: 81–117).

The narrative of host desecration originated during the late thirteenth century and was closely related to the doctrine of transubstantiation, the notion that the bread and wine used in the Communion ritual were actually transformed into Christ’s body and blood. This was officially recognised by the Church authorities at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. The host desecration narrative stemmed precisely from the notion that the host was a holy manifestation of the body of Christ. In brief, the narrative claimed that the Jews desecrated and tortured the host to mock the Christian religion. During the medieval era, accusations of host desecration led to violent persecutions. In 1298, a wave of anti-Jewish mass violence occurred in southern Germany, triggered by such rumours (Heil 2006: 242–72).

Anti-Jewish narratives such as host desecration accusations and ritual murder libels were used as ‘evidence’ for the truth of Christianity. The legend of Jewish ritual murder, for example, often followed a well-known narrative pattern. First, it described how the Jews murdered Christian children in an imitation of the execution of Jesus Christ, then the ‘crime’ of the Jews was disclosed through divine intervention (Heil 2012: 58). At the same time, they were often constructed as conspiracy narratives, in the sense that the Jews were claimed to be acting collectively and in secret to execute their evil plans. In his chronicle on William of Norwich, for example, Thomas Monmouth stated that Jewish leaders met annually in the city of Narbonne, planning
the murder of Christian children (Heil 2012: 59). When host desecration accusations against Jews occurred, Johannes Heil claims, the Jewish community as a collective was represented as the enemy. Even when the alleged Jewish culprit was presented as an individual, or if the plot was primarily situated within a local framework, ‘connections and the complicity of others were emphatically stressed’ (Heil 2006: 247, my translation). The underlying premise was the image of the Jew as not only a timeless menace, but also a present threat to Christian society (Smith 2003: 92).

A third anti-Jewish conspiracy narrative, the accusation of well-poisoning, gained force in the fourteenth century. During the Black Death (1347–1352), the representation of the Jews as poisoners triggered huge waves of violent persecutions of Jews in the German-speaking areas and in Spain, France and the Low Countries (see Graus 1987). However, such narratives had actually already evolved decades before the plague. During the spring and summer of 1321, systematic persecutions of lepers occurred, mainly in south-western parts of France and the Kingdom of Aragon, on the basis of claims that lepers had organised a widespread plot to kill healthy Christians. A large number were executed (Barber 1981: 1–17; Barzilay 2017: 91–170). Later in the same year, similar accusations were then directed at the Jews (Barzilay 2017: 173–214; 240–1). According to some versions of the narrative, a Muslim ruler, the King of Granada, was also involved in the plot (Barzilay 2017: 213–9).

The question of continuity and breaks between premodern and modern conspiracy narratives has been interpreted in varying ways by scholars. Historian Johannes Heil, for example, concludes that medieval anti-Jewish conspiracy narratives shared important structural similarities with the antisemitism of later eras. The narrative of a Jewish conspiracy as presented in the fabrication *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is, he claims, in this sense neither unique nor exclusively modern (Heil 2012: 56). One common feature is the importance attributed to meetings and plans. A second is the notion that the Jews operate as a collective unit. A third shared element is the ‘construction of a supralocal and supranational Jewish elite’ (Heil 2012: 61). Further, a fourth commonality is the notion that the Jews pursue secret aims to the benefit of their own group and to the detriment of others (Heil 2012: 61–3). Still, Heil points out that an important change is that the medieval version of the conspiracy myth was rooted in the Christian world order. ‘Even in their loyalty to the Antichrist’, he states, ‘the Jews would – as ultimate consequence – serve the Christians and contribute to the fulfillment of history’ (Heil 2012: 66). In modern versions of the conspiracy beliefs, the Jews are no longer acting within the framework of such a divine plan.

**Modern antisemitism and conspiracism**

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Europe underwent profound changes. In the 1700s, the new Enlightenment discourse challenged the hegemonic Christian and autocratic orthodoxy, culminating in the American (1765–1783) and French (1789–1799) revolutions. During the 1800s, the Industrial Revolution, the formation of new class constellations, rising urbanisation, the triumph of modern industrial and financial capitalism, and the development of new ideologies — such as liberalism, conservatism, socialism and anarchism — profoundly changed the political, social and intellectual landscape of the continent. An important aspect of the process of modernisation was also the emancipation of the Jews. In 1791, the French National Assembly decided that Jews and other religious minorities should be granted civil rights. In other parts of Europe, the process of emancipation evolved at a much slower pace. In Germany, for example, the emancipation of the Jews was first realised in all areas with the unification of 1871.
In the context of the changing political and social landscape of Europe during the ‘long nineteenth century’ of 1789 to 1914, antsemitism adopted new forms and shapes. Obviously, this did not mean that the old Christian images of the Jew as enemy disappeared overnight. Traditional Christian images of the Jew still served as a cultural precondition for modern forms of hostility (on the continuity and break between anti-Judaism and modern antisemitism, see e.g. Hoffmann 1994: 294–317). Nonetheless, some new developments should be noted.

During the eighteenth century, anti-Jewish argumentation based on Enlightenment forms of reasoning began to evolve. While the Church had accused the Jews of being the enemy of Christianity, Enlightenment philosophers such as Voltaire condemned the Jewish religion as barbaric and outdated, and as an obstruction to progress and reason (e.g. Sutcliffe 1998: 107–26). During the nineteenth century, a socialist antisemitism also developed, attacking what was described as ‘Jewish financial power’ (e.g. Green 1985: 347–99).

Still, antisemitism as a more or less coherent worldview first and foremost became a hallmark of the conservative and nationalist right. Three new features associated with this form of antisemitism should be noted. First, in the second half of the 1800s, antisemitism entered into modern mass politics. In Germany and Austria-Hungary, political parties and associations that claimed to struggle against an alleged ‘Jewish influence’ were founded (Pulzer 1988). In France, the Dreyfus affair activated political mobilizations against the Jewish minority (Wilson 1973: 789–806; Hyman 2005: 335–49). In Tsarist Russia, waves of anti-Jewish violence occurred between 1881–1884, in 1903 and again between 1905–1906 (de Klier, Lambroza 1992). Second, anti-Jewish agitation was increasingly formulated in nationalist and racist terms. Antisemitic ideologues in Germany and Austria, for example, often described the past and present as a ‘racial’ struggle between the Jews and ‘the Germanic/Aryan’ peoples (e.g. Pulzer 1988: 47–57).

As a consequence, the Jews were claimed to be Jewish by blood: An identity they could not escape through conversion. Third, antisemitism was closely related to the fear of and attacks on modernity. In the worldview of German conservatives and anti-modernists, Jews and Judaism represented ‘the perilous new that destroys the familiar structures of tradition’ (Hoffmann 2001: 100; cf. Volkov 2006: 107–18). Similar tendencies can also be identified among antisemites in other European countries. In France, political Catholicism – fearing ‘godless’ atheism, the socialist movement and capitalism – was an important force in the rise of political antisemitism during the late 1800s (Caron 2009: 296, 300–1). In Russia, antisemitism was associated with the struggle for autocracy and religious orthodoxy against the forces of liberalization and democratization (Kellogg 2005: 30–46).

To what extent was the anti-Jewish hostility developing in the nineteenth century based on conspiracy narratives? The modern, political notion of a ‘Jewish world conspiracy’ can be traced back to the attacks against the French Revolution and the Enlightenment. In 1797, the French Jesuit priest Abbé Barruel published a four-volume book wherein he described the French Revolution as planned and initiated by a conspiracy consisting of the Philosophes, the Freemasons and the Illuminati (von Bieberstein 2008: 114–25). Nine years later, in 1806, Barruel received a letter from an army officer named Jean Baptist Simonini that stated that the Jews controlled the Illuminati and that they aimed to achieve a world government. This claim was not particularly original. In fact, since the 1770s, secret societies had been represented as puppets in the hands of the Jews (Byford 2011: 47).

It was particularly during the second half of the 1800s, when antisemitism rose as a modern political movement, that anti-Jewish conspiracy narratives were widely distributed. On a general level, antisemitic ideologues frequently represented the Jews as powerful, influential and threatening. During the 1870s, German antisemites also launched the term ‘the Golden International’ as a synonym for so-called ‘Jewish capitalism’ (Pulzer 1997: 199). This fear of international
financial power – associated with the Jews – merged with the fear of ‘Jewish’ socialism and communism (see e.g. Friedländer 1997: 76).

In the latter half of the nineteenth and in the early twentieth centuries, several publications explicitly focusing on the alleged ‘Jewish world conspiracy’ emerged. One example is the document that, in antisemitic circles, was known as ‘The Rabbi’s Speech’. This script originated in a novel named Biarritz (1868), written by Hermann Goedsche, a former employee of the Prussian postal service. One of its chapters takes place at the Jewish cemetery in Prague, where the ‘elders’ of the 12 tribes of the Jews had gathered to plan the subversion of the political, economic and political order, with the aim of achieving world power (Cohn 1996: 38–41; Bronner 2000: 81–2). In 1872 and 1876, the document was published in St Petersburg and Moscow. By 1881, when it appeared in the French journal Le Contemporain under the name ‘The Rabbi’s Speech’, the text was presented as authentic (Modras 1994: 90; Cohn 1996: 41–2). In 1887, ‘The Rabbi’s Speech’ was republished in Theodor Fritsch’s book entitled Antisemiten-Katechismus as well as in a French antisemitic anthology named La Russe Juive (Cohn 1996: 42). In 1903, the document seems to have been used to inflate pogroms in Bessarabia (Cohn 1996: 43).

The most widespread and well-known document within the genre of anti-Jewish conspiracy literature is the falsification known as The Protocols of the Elders of Zion. The Protocols were first published in Russia in 1903, in the Znamia magazine, edited by a far-right-journalist named Pavel Krushevan (Langer 2007: 34–5, cf. Zipperstein 2018: 145–84). The version of the text that was translated and distributed worldwide after the First World War first occurred in 1905 as a part of Sergei Nilus’ script The Great and the Small: Antichrist as an Inminent Possibility. Nilus, an orthodox Christian who was convinced of the second coming of Christ, interpreted The Protocols in accordance with a religious and apocalyptic worldview. According to these perceptions, ‘Satanic forces’ – represented by Jews and Freemasons – fought ‘against the Divine forces of light, embodied in the Russian Orthodox Church’ (Hagemeister 2012: 81).

Scholars still debate when and by whom The Protocols of the Elders of Zion was written (for two different interpretations, see Cohn 1996: 84–117 and Michelis 2004: 65). However, regardless of the origins of the text, the document is beyond doubt a fake, written by the antisemites themselves. Large parts of the text are actually plagiarised from the French book A Dialogue in Hell: Conversations between Machiavelli and Montesquieu about Power and Right, written by French lawyer Maurice Joly in 1864 as a polemic against the regime of Napoleon III (Cohn 1996: 80–3).

A main motif of The Protocols was obviously to influence politics in Tsarist Russia. For example, many newspapers associated with the far-right organisation known as The Black Hundred, founded in 1905, ‘reprinted The Protocols, which they cited as proof of a worldwide Jewish conspiracy against the entire non-Jewish world’ (Langer 2007: 35). In other words, the ideas promoted by the text have to be understood as a part of the reactionary worldview advocated within autocratic political circles in Tsarist Russia. Here, antisemitism was an integrated element (Bronner 2000: 76–7). The Protocols was published in a period when serious pogroms occurred in Russia, and it was only one of several anti-Jewish pamphlets and books published in this area during the same period (Bronner 2000: 93).

The ideological content of The Protocols, then, can best be summarised as a combination of antisemitism and anti-modernism. It offered a pseudo-explanation of the perils of modernity, as seen from the viewpoint of the ultraconservative and extreme right. As already pointed out, such a representation of modernity as a ‘Jewish threat’ was common within antisemitic circles during the second half of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. Although the text is barely coherent and often self-contradictory, its main message is that a worldwide ‘Jewish conspiracy’ exists: That the Jews are working systematically and in secret, with the aim of achieving world power. Economic crises, revolutions, wars, capitalism, socialism, liberalism...
and democratic and anti-religious ideas are all claimed to be invented by the Jews as a part of this plot. In other words, *The Protocols* offers a simple and total model that claims to make sense of everything. Here, history and politics, and in fact the rise of modernity itself, is claimed to be orchestrated by a ‘Jewish conspiracy’.

**World War, revolution and radicalisation**

Although conspiracy theories were an integral part of modern, political antisemitism prior to 1914, during and after the First World War European antisemitism underwent radicalisation. The mass deaths of the war, and especially the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, fuelled a ‘pervasive apocalyptic mood that settled over Europe’ (Friedländer 1997: 90). In this political context, anti-Jewish conspiracy theories were spread on a massive scale. Among those who feared a socialist revolution, Bolshevism and Marxism were frequently described as a ‘Jewish phenomenon’ (Blomqvist 2006: 49–60). During the civil wars following the Bolshevik Revolution, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, as well as other antisemitic publications, were widely distributed among the counterrevolutionary ‘White Forces’ in the former Russian Empire (Bronner 2000: 107–8). In this area, the anti-Jewish conspiracy narratives also triggered mass violence. During the civil wars, Jews were attacked and murdered on a massive scale by counterrevolutionary forces, nationalists and rebellious peasants, particularly in Ukraine (Kenez 1992: 293–313).

During the first years after the First World War, *The Protocols* was translated into numerous languages and distributed widely throughout Europe, and even globally. A Swedish version came into print in 1919, and in 1920 the document was published in Germany, England, France, Norway, the U.S.A. and Poland. Emigrants from former Tsarist Russia played an important role in spreading the message. In Germany, for example, *The Protocols* seems to have been brought to the country by a Russian lieutenant and right-wing extremist named Pyotr Shabelskii-Bork (Kellogg 2005: 63). In other countries, such as the U.S.A., extreme rightists with a former Tsarist background were instrumental in introducing *The Protocols* (Singerman 1981: 48–78).

In the aftermath of the First World War, conspiracist antisemitism gained a particularly strong influence in Germany. Here, the political polarisation triggered by the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917, and the Spartakist uprising in Germany itself in 1919, was reinforced by nationalist frustration born out of defeat (Friedländer 1997: 91). The extreme right claimed that the war was not lost on the battlefield, but that it was orchestrated by subversive enemies within: Social democrats, Freemasons, Communists and Jews (e.g. von Bieberstein 2008: 217–43). Within far-right circles, *The Protocols* was known from the beginning of 1919. Then, in January 1920, the text was published under the title *Die Geheimnisse der Weisen von Zion*. By the end of 1920, 120,000 copies had been printed (Zu Utrup 2003: 91–2). Moreover, other publications containing anti-Jewish conspiracy narratives were distributed in large numbers.

Although conspiracist antisemitism found an especially fertile ground in Germany, *The Protocols* was also distributed in large numbers – and discussed within mainstream circles – in other countries. In the U.S.A., the magazine *Dearborn Independent*, owned by industrial magnate Henry Ford, published a series of articles on the alleged ‘Jewish world conspiracy’. The articles were later published as a book named *The International Jew*, of which half a million copies were printed in the U.S.A. and later translated into 16 different languages (Cohn 1996: 158, 162). In Britain, the prestigious newspaper *The Times* published an editorial on 8 May 1920, asking whether the message of *The Protocols* was authentic (Friedländer 1997: 95). One year later, however, an article by journalist Philip Graves determined that the text was indeed a forgery (Cohn 1996).
In Poland, the first version of The Protocols appeared in early 1920 and sold out within a year (Modras 1994: 92). At least nine editions were printed during the interwar period (Kosmala 2011: 133).

**Nazi antisemitism**

The myth of the Jewish world conspiracy became a cornerstone of National Socialist ideology and propaganda. Although National Socialist Weltanschauung was interpreted in various ways by different fractions of the N.S.D.A.P., a racist and social Darwinist outlook on the world was one of its core features. In short, within the National Socialist worldview, history and politics were perceived as a struggle between different ‘races’, particularly the ‘Aryan/Germanic race’ and the Jews (see e.g. Hitler quoted in Friedländer 1997: 97).

This racist interpretation of history was linked to the notion of a worldwide ‘Jewish conspiracy’ (Zu Utrup 2003: 100). During the formative years of the Nazi movement between 1920 and 1933, the N.S.D.A.P. presented itself as a community of struggle, fighting against an international ‘Jewish conspiracy’. Leading Nazi party activists and ideologues actively embraced conspiracist antisemitism. Furthermore, the myth of a ‘Jewish conspiracy’ became a core element of daily propaganda. The N.S.D.A.P.-newspaper Völkischer Beobachter, for example, regularly claimed that the Jews pulled the strings behind international capitalism and communism and described the Weimar Republic as a ‘Jewish system’ or ‘Jewish democracy’. In fact, according to Wolfram Zu Utrup, more than half of the articles published in Völkischer Beobachter that touched upon the so-called ‘Jewish Question’ from the beginning of 1925 to the end of 1932 contained motifs related to the concept of a ‘Jewish conspiracy’ (Zu Utrup 2003: 97, 102–20, 150–61, 185–92).

With the Nazi seizure of power in 1933, antisemitism became official policy in Germany. Between 1933 and 1939, the Jews were successively pushed out of German society: Socially, politically, legally and economically. The first wave of antisemitism, starting in March 1933, was closely related to the consolidation of the National Socialist regime. The second phase took place in 1935, resulting in the Nürnberg Laws. The last phase culminated in violent attacks on the Jews all over Germany during the night of 9–10 November 1938 (Longerich 2010: 30–130). After the outbreak of the Second World War, Nazi antisemitism was further radicalised. During the German invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941, the policy of persecution was radicalised to be a policy of mass murder. The German military forces advancing into Soviet territory were followed by killing squads, organising mass executions of Jewish civilians (Longerich 2010: 191–253). In the autumn of 1941 and the first half of 1942, the death camps were constructed and Jews from all parts of Nazi-occupied Europe were arrested and deported to these killing installations in the East.

The cumulative process of radicalisation, from persecution to extermination, can of course not be explained exclusively through ideological factors. Still, racist and conspiracist antisemitism was a necessary – although not sufficient – precondition for the genocide. In fact, between 1939 and 1945, the Nazis’s anti-Jewish outlook was adapted to the war context, and even further radicalised. In his study of the anti-Jewish propaganda of the Nazi regime during the Second World War, historian Jeffrey Herf (2006) concludes that the most dangerous aspect of this antisemitism lay in the paranoid, political belief in an entity called ‘International Jewry’, allegedly striving to undermine Germany. Conspiracist antisemitism, he claims, served as a framework for interpreting historical and contemporary events, particularly the ongoing development of the war. The enemies of Nazi Germany – the U.K., the Soviet Union and the U.S.A. – were represented as puppets in the hands of a global Jewish cabal. As a result, both the Second World
War and the policy of extermination within Nazi circles were perceived as parts of the same struggle: A struggle of life and death between Germany and ‘International Jewry’ (Herf 2006: 1–16).

In this sense, the myth of a Jewish world conspiracy served both as an ideological motivation for the extermination policy and as a rationalisation of the atrocities. In short, the Nazis justified mass murder as a legitimate act of ‘self-defence’. In this sense, they also advocated what Saul Friedländer has termed *redemptive* antisemitism (Friedländer 1997: 73–112). From when the N.S.D.A.P. was founded in 1920 until the fall of the Hitler regime in 1945, the Jews were described as the driving force behind all negative developments in the past and the present, and as the hidden hand pulling the strings behind all of National Socialism’s political enemies. The struggle against this alleged conspiracy was perceived as a necessary prerequisite for national and ‘racial’ rebirth and salvation.

**Post-war developments**

The defeat of the Hitler regime in 1945 marks a turning point in the history of European antisemitism. Due to the experiences with Nazism and Fascism, particularly the Holocaust, antisemitism in its open, ideological form was no longer accepted in the public sphere, at least in Northern, Western and parts of Central Europe (see e.g. Bachner 2003: 15). However, this does not mean that antisemitism as a cultural structure disappeared. While open antisemitism was to a large extent forced out of the public sphere, it continued to exist as attitudes and exclusionary social practices in the private sphere. Sociologists Rainer Erb and Werner Bergmann call this phenomenon *communicative latency* (Erb, Bergmann 1991: 275–9). It should also be pointed out that the taboo against antisemitism during the first decades after the Second World War was not established all over Europe. In fact, in Poland, the first years after the war were marked by waves of anti-Jewish violent outbursts. Probably 1500 to 2000 Jews were killed between 1944 and 1947 (Dahl, Lorenz 2005: 560).

Still, in large parts of Europe, the establishment of antifascist norms in general and the tabooing of political antisemitism in particular changed the conditions for anti-Jewish conspiracy thinking after 1945. The fact that outspoken antisemitism became taboo in mainstream public debates led to a development where *full-blown* anti-conspiracy narratives primarily became a trademark of political extremism. Several versions of conspiracy theories have developed in this regard, including the Z.O.G.-mythology of the far right (see below), antisemitism masked as anti-Zionism in the Stalinist tradition and Jihadist antisemitism.

However, it should also be mentioned that antisemitism in a more latent form also persists in broader parts of contemporary conspiracy culture. Social psychologist Jovan Byford claims that a clear example of discontinuity in this culture is the ‘shift away from the emphasis on the Jewish conspiracy towards a new variant of secret society mythology’ (Byford 2011: 97). A closer inspection nevertheless shows that antisemitism as a legacy still influences conspiracy literature, even when the writers seek to distance themselves from anti-Jewish sentiments. This tendency is expressed most clearly when believers in a conspiracy attempt to place their theories into a historical context. Because antisemitism was for a very long time a dominant conspiracy narrative, when contemporary authors seek to expose the historical roots of the alleged plot, they ‘invariably come into contact with the antisemitic legacy of the conspiracy culture’ (Byford 2011: 102).
Far-right antisemitism

Among European and American neo-Nazis, the myth of a ‘Jewish conspiracy’ has often served as an explanation for the lack of support and acceptance within the mainstream sphere. Such ideas have circulated within far-right circles throughout the postwar period. According to historian Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, ‘despite their overriding concern with colored races, neo-Nazi ideology still identified the Jews as the demonic adversary of the white Aryan peoples’ (Goodrick-Clarke 2002: 3).

One phrase that has functioned as a signal marker within the far-right conspiracist discourse during the last three to four decades is the abbreviation ‘Z.O.G.’, short for Zionist Occupied Government. The term itself originated within racist political circles in the U.S.A. during the 1970s and 1980s and then spread to the European racist-revolutionary milieu (Sprinzak 1995: 26). Although the term is new, the Z.O.G.-discourse is clearly a modern adaption of the old notion of a ‘Jewish conspiracy’. The believers claim that the Jews pull the strings of global capitalism, multiculturalism and the mass media, and that political opponents are puppets of the same (Jewish) conspiracy. The emergence of the Z.O.G.-discourse is closely related to a process of radicalisation that occurred within the American racist right during the 1980s and 1990s. Increasingly, within far-right circles, the American political system as such was claimed to be conquered by the Jews and their puppets (Gardell 1998: 170–1). This belief in the myth of a ‘Jewish conspiracy’ is still present within neo-Nazi and racist-revolutionary circles, both in Europe and in the U.S.A.

A new element within post-war antisemitism, particularly on the far right, is Holocaust denial: The claim that the National Socialist genocide of the Jews is a ‘myth’ that never occurred. Holocaust denial evolved as a discourse within extreme right circles shortly after the Second World War. Already during the latter half of the 1940s and into the 1950s, writers such as French fascist Maurice Bardèche, American revisionist Austin J. App and the former concentration camp inmate Paul Rassinier published tracts rejecting that the murder of six million Jews actually took place (Lipstadt 1994: 49–64, 85–92).

Holocaust denial as a discourse is based on conspiracy theories. As a form of argumentation, it consists of four core elements. First, the deniers claim that the number of Jews killed by the Nazis was far less than six million. Second, they deny that the gas chambers were used for murdering humans. Third, they assume that neither Hitler nor the Nazi leadership systematically worked towards the extermination of European Jews. Fourth, the Holocaust is described as a myth, ‘invented by Allied propaganda during the war and sustained since then by Jews who wished to use it to gain financial support for the state of Israel or for themselves’ (Evans 2001: 110). In other words, deniers claim that the history of the Holocaust has been ‘created’ by a powerful conspiracy that controls academic institutions as well as the media.

As a discourse, Holocaust denial in Europe is prevalent on primarily the far right and was from the very beginning marked by a clear political-ideological tendency. From the 1970s onwards, however, the deniers have increasingly tried to present themselves as ‘serious academics’. In 1979, they even founded their own ‘institute’, the Institute for Historical Review in the U.S.A.

Stalinism and anti-Zionism

Post-war antisemitism has also been closely related to the Israel/Palestine debate. Although criticism of Israel’s policy in itself is not by any means antisemitic, conspiracy narratives linking ‘anti-Zionism’ to notions of ‘Jewish power’ have emerged within certain political circles, the clearest of which can be seen in the history of Soviet anti-Zionism.
Although Lenin and the Bolshevik party emphasised the struggle against antisemitism, the party was also, from early on, highly critical towards Jewish nationalism and demands for national autonomy (Bachner 2003: 187). On the one hand, Lenin held up the progressive, assimilated Jew as an ideal. On the other hand, he and the Bolsheviks promoted a negative image of the ‘bourgeois’ and ‘reactionary’ Jew, which they associated with capitalism, traditions and the old society (Gjerde 2011: 16–55). During the Stalin era, antisemitism increasingly became an element of the totalitarian worldview and politics of the Soviet regime. In 1948, Stalin launched a political campaign against ‘rootless cosmopolitanism’ and ‘bourgeois, Jewish Nationalism’, leading to the persecution of members of the Jewish intelligentsia and the prohibition of Jewish cultural organisations. In 1951 and 1952, communist leaders of Jewish origin were tried and executed for treason in Czechoslovakia, and in 1953 a group of doctors, most of them Jews, were falsely accused of an attempted plot against the Soviet leadership. As a result of Stalin’s death in March 1953, this campaign was eventually called off (Bachner 2003: 188–9).

Under and after Stalin, anti-Zionism within the Soviet Union and its satellite states also became more explicitly based on conspiracy theories. Stalin perceived Zionism as a fifth column of American and British imperialism (Wistrich 2015: 190). After the Arab-Israeli Six-Day War in 1967, this conspiracist outlook intensified. In 1968, for example, an anti-Jewish campaign was launched in Poland, barely coded as anti-Zionist. As a result of the campaign, approximately 15 000 Jews left the country (Stola 2006: 175–201; Kosmala 2011: 133–46). In fact, during the campaign, the party committee of The Polish United Workers Party in Łódź reprinted The Protocols of the Elders of Zion for distribution within the party (Kosmala 2011: 133–46).

As a discourse, Soviet anti-Zionism consisted of two main motifs. First, Zionism and Israel were associated with Nazism and fascism. Second, Zionism was represented as a tool for, or even as the core of, an international conspiracy; as a ‘great invisible power whose influence extended into every nook and cranny of politics, finance, religion, and the communications media in the Western world’ (Wistrich 2012: 433). Still, the character of Soviet anti-Zionism and antisemitism has been interpreted somewhat differently by scholars. Some historians have claimed that the word Zionism in Soviet propaganda simply worked as coded references to ‘Jews’ or ‘Jewry’, with The Protocols as a model (see e.g. Bachner 2003: 200). Others have claimed that the Soviet Union’s anti-Zionist propagandists – in contrast to traditional antisemitic narratives – perceived the Zionist conspiracy ‘as merely one part of a larger imperialist conspiracy against the Soviet Union’ (Gjerde 2011: 115).

Scholars have disputed how far the mixture of antisemitism and anti-Zionism as it appears in the Soviet context has influenced Western anti-Zionism. In his study of Swedish post-war antisemitism, Bachner concludes that, while criticism of Israel has in most cases been free of anti-Jewish sentiment, the Israel/Palestine debate also became a forum where antisemitism could be legitimately expressed, ‘since it was here where they could be packaged and rationalized as criticism of Zionism or Israeli policy’ (2003: 474). Historian Brian Klug has criticised the claim that the anti-Zionist position is inherently antisemitic. Nonetheless, he agrees that attacks on Israel are at times coloured by anti-Jewish images (Klug 2003: 117–38). Byford claims that the conspiracist element of the ‘new antisemitism’ is most obvious in discussions regarding the Israel/Zionist/Jewish lobby (Byford 2011: 111).

Antisemitism in the Middle East

Another new development in the post-war period is that conspiracy theories focused on the Jews and Zionism have been spread on a large scale in the Middle East.
Historically, modern antisemitism was to a large extent imported from Europe to the Arab world during the late 1800s and early 1900s (Krämer 2006: 243–76). The first Arabic translation of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* was even published by local Christians in Palestine and Syria during the mid-1920s (Webman 2011: 175–95).

However, during the postwar years – and especially after the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 – anti-Jewish conspiracy literature has been distributed in large numbers in this region. At the time of the Six-Day War in 1967, at least nine Arabic translations of *The Protocols* had been published. In Egypt alone, 50 political books based on the text were issued between 1965 and 1967. *The Protocols* was adopted by nationalist, Islamist as well as leftist writers (Webman 2011: 171–95). The Islamist organisation Hamas even cited it in their 1988 Charter (Hamas 1988). After the terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center, Osama Bin Laden sought to legitimise Al Qaeda’s actions by using anti-Jewish conspiracy narratives. In his *Letter to America*, first published in Arabic, and then translated by British Islamists, he claimed that the Jews controlled American politics, the economy and the mass media (*Guardian* 2002).

Even Holocaust denial became widespread in the Middle East from the 1950s onwards (Litvak, Webman 2009: 156). In contrast to Western denialism, which has been located primarily on the far-right fringe, here it has been articulated within the political mainstream. In 1964, Egyptian president Nasser told the German *National-Zeitung* that ‘no persons, not even the simplest one, takes seriously the lie of the six million Jews that were murdered’ (Litvak, Webman 2009: 161). In 2011, the deputy chair of the Egyptian Wafd Party stated in an interview with the *Washington Times* that ‘the Holocaust is a lie’ (Birnbaum 2011).

In the last couple of years, anti-Jewish attitudes within Muslim communities in Europe have also received public attention. In an overview of surveys published in 2015, historian Günther Jikeli claims that, the level of anti-Semitic attitudes is significantly higher among Muslims than among non-Muslims, although many European Muslims do not share anti-Semitic beliefs” (2015: 19). One particularly aggressive form of antisemitism is the totalitarian and anti-Jewish worldview proclaimed by Islamist extremism. In 2015, Islamist extremists also committed fatal attacks against Jews in France and Denmark.

**Antisemitism as a tradition of conspiracism**

The history of antisemitism, like all other historical phenomena, is marked by both continuity and change. In one sense, antisemitism has functioned as a flexible prejudice that has been rearticulated and reshaped in different historical, ideological and social circumstances.

Still, antisemitism as a long-time phenomenon also has some persistent traits. One recurrent feature is the representation of ‘the Jew’ as a threatening other: Powerful, well-organised and evil. During the medieval and early modern era, the Jews were accused of undermining the Christian order as well as the Christian majority. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they were represented as a national and ‘racial’ threat, and as the hidden force behind ‘decadent modernity’. Within the Nazi worldview, the Second World War was represented as an apocalyptic battle between ‘the Germanic peoples’ and the alleged conspiratorial entity termed ‘International Jewry’. After 1945, a ‘Jewish conspiracy’ has been accused of fabricating the history of the Holocaust. In this sense, the history of antisemitism proves how conspiracism works from a long-time historical perspective: How narratives of the threatening other survive changing historical conditions, and how they change over time.
References

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