5.3 FREEMASONS, ILLUMINATI AND JEWS

Conspiracy theories and the French Revolution

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**Introduction**

When writing his famous *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), Edmund Burke was in touch with French émigrés who had fled to Great Britain. One of these refugees was the Abbé Augustin Barruel. In his book, Burke drew upon many of the arguments already developed by French anti-philosophes prior to the revolution. Interpreting the revolution as a thorough break with the past, he attacked the arbitrary rejection of experience, tradition, historical developments, religion or natural hierarchy that came with it (McMahon 2003; Aston 2004). Warning of coming upheavals, he wrote: ‘Many parts of Europe are in open disorder. In many others there is a hollow murmuring underground; a confused movement is felt, that threatens a general earthquake in the political world’ (Burke 1790: 229). In a footnote to this passage, Burke referred to the correspondence of the Illuminati Order (1787), which had been published at the behest of the government of Palatinate-Bavaria.

While Burke was no mere conspiracy theorist, this footnote has been taken to establish a link between a conservative interpretation of the French Revolution and conspiratorial thinking (Freeman 1978; Armitage 2000). Although the debate on the causes of the French Revolution has cooled off noticeably, these conspiratorial explanations still form the ideological foundation of many contemporary conspiracy theories. Freemasonry and the Illuminati, in particular, are supposed to be hidden actors with revolutionairy intentions who, in essence, plot a conspiracy against society as a whole.

This chapter will evaluate the impact of the ideas of the Enlightenment with regard to a conspiratorial interpretation of the French Revolution. Taking three major publications as examples, it will show how conspiratorial thinking emerged as a reaction to changes and developments of the eighteenth century, which culminated in the French Revolution. The three publications are contextualised and the networks behind the texts are shown. After the evaluation of real Masonic influence on the French Revolution, this chapter examines the conspiratorial interpretation of revolution as a travelling concept, particularly in New England. It concludes by showing how anti-philosophe, anti-Masonic and anti-Illuminati conspiracy theories combined with antisemitism in the nineteenth century to create an ideological hotbed that led to the publication of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. 

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The Enlightenment and the revolutions – a conspiratorial era

Gordon S. Wood (1982) has pointed out that, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in Britain and North America at least, conspiratorial thinking was a common way of lending meaning to particular events, conditions and developments. It was widely accepted that some men had the (secret) power to be the driving force behind any kind of observable change – a belief that was shared across all social classes. It was François Furet (1978) who drew attention to the fact that Rousseau’s political ideas, such as his concept of the general will, an invisible power, led to conspiratorial thinking. Jakob Tanner (2008) has highlighted that the year 1776 saw not only the drafting of the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia and the founding of the Illuminati Order in Ingolstadt – a well-known coincidence that is debated in various conspiracy theories today – but also the publication of Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*, whose metaphor of the ‘invisible hand’ could be (misleadingly) understood as the product of forces obscured from view. No wonder that the nexus between the great revolutions of the eighteenth century and Enlightenment ideas, as well as the emergence of secret societies, has been a contentious issue ever since.

It would be a mistake to believe that conspiracy theories only arose in conjunction with the French Revolution. Indeed, the early modern era is full of conspiracy theories (Coward, Swann 2004; Zwierlein, de Graaf 2013; see also Chapter 5.2 in this volume), but only the one focusing on the supposedly revolutionary aims of Freemasonry became a lasting element of Western conspiratorial thinking throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It prevailed over others, such as the famine plot (Kaplan 1982), the various conspiracy fears following the outbreak of the French Revolution known as the Great Fear (Lefèbvre 1932) or the alleged infiltration by an ‘Austrian Committee’ during the first phase of the revolution (Tackett 2000), all of which proved to be ephemeral by comparison.

But it should be emphasised that, during the French Revolution, much of the revolutionary discourse and the struggle for interpretive sovereignty were themselves highly conspiratorial. While Furet tried to explain this using Hegelian dialectics, Timothy Tackett (2000) provided empirical insights: He found that, during the first phase of the revolution (1789–1791), actual conspiracies were thwarted. It seems that these real plots and conspiracies that contaminated organised politics (Hunt 1984: 43), along with the radicalisation of the revolution, led to a widespread belief in numerous conspiracy theories. By late 1791, the fear of a ‘Grand Conspiracy’ had become a staple of revolutionary rhetoric.

Campbell et al. (2007) have also highlighted this connection between both real and imagined conspiracies and their unstable historical context. The outbreak of the French Revolution certainly opened up a communicative space that referred to new values such as publicity or the justification of national claims. Conspiracy theories were one, if not the only, answer to questions about justifications for various actions of revolutionaries, and noticeably the use of political violence. In addition to these legitimation discourses as political means, the practice of denunciation also developed. This became more and more apparent in various partial diffuse suspicions of conspiracy, expressed in the most important newspapers (Münch 2008).

Anti-revolutionary conspiracist narratives: Barruel, Robison and Starck

The year 1797 came to be a culminating point for modern conspiracy thinking: Augustin Barruel published the first two volumes of his *Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire du Jacobinisme* and, almost simultaneously, John Robison, an Edinburgh professor of natural philosophy, accused the Illuminati of being the main perpetrators of the French Revolution in his equally famous *Proofs of a Conspiracy against all the religions and governments of Europe, carried on in the secret meetings*
of Freemasons, Illuminati and Reading Societies. In his book, Barruel developed the conspiracy theory that the French Revolution was the end result of a conspiracy of Enlightenment philosophers (Voltaire, d’Alembert, Diderot and King Frederick II of Prussia), high-degree Freemasons and the Illuminati, all of whom preceded and inspired the Jacobins. Barruel traced the core ideas of the French Revolution back to the Manichaean concepts of ‘equality’ and ‘freedom’. He regarded Mani as a paternal father of Freemasonry and the Knights Templar as their precursors. Barruel’s conceptual acuteness of the Illuminati in his first two volumes was still very vague. Only through the mediation of Johann August Starck and his comrades-in-arms was his conspiracy theory specified in the third and fourth volume.

Robison was already convinced of the Illuminati conspiracy in 1797. His *Proofs of a conspiracy* have overshadowed his central importance for the Scottish Enlightenment. Robison wrote his book as a professor of natural philosophy and secretary of the Royal Society of Edinburgh. Delivering what appeared to be, at least at first glance, a factual political analysis, Robison also showed the reader that he was a Masonic insider. According to him, fanaticism had spread in the French lodges throughout Europe because of the influence of the Illuminati. He described this process in the following important passage:

I have been able to trace these attempts, made, through a course of fifty years, under the specious pretext of enlightening the world by the torch of philosophy, and of dispelling the clouds of civil and religious superstition which keep the nations of Europe in darkness and slavery [...] till, at last, an association has been formed for the express purpose of rooting out all the religious establishments, and overturning all the existing governments of Europe. I have seen this association exerting itself zealously and systematically, till it has become almost irresistible. And I have seen the most active leaders in the French Revolution were members of this association [...]. And, lastly, I have seen that this association still exists, still works in secret, and that not only several appearances among ourselves show that its emissaries are endeavoring to propagate their detestable doctrines among us.

*(Robison 1798: 11–12)*

In 1803, Johann August Starck anonymously published *Der Triumph der Philosophie im 18. Jahrhunderte*, two volumes in which he set out to correct the record and supersede Barruel and Robison. In addition to being a scholar trained in oriental languages and Enlightenment theology, Starck served as a Protestant court preacher, first in Königsberg and then in Darmstadt (Vesper 2012) and had also been an active Freemason. Because of disputes with the Illuminati and with German Enlightenment figures, he was well known in Germany in the second half of the eighteenth century, and a plethora of publications for and against him has been published. He is the author of Masonic books, academic disputations about the history of religion and, above all, of conspiracy theoretical writings. His *Triumph* is different from Barruel’s and Robison’s books, in so much as Starck knew some of the alleged conspirators in person.

The *Triumph* is, as far as the first part is concerned, a history of ideas about the origin of the term ‘philosophism’. For Starck, this term stood for the wrong notion that philosophy sought to destroy monarchies, to repress the influence of religious faith and to spread equality everywhere. For him, this kind of philosophy was nothing less than fanaticism. In his book, he attributed the spread of ‘philosophism’ to the rise of printing in the early modern period and accordingly wrote a history of a conspiracy. Starck was one of the key figures in the making of the Illuminati conspiracy theory and his writings, networks and biography should be given much more consideration in English and French publications (Luckert 1993).
The crucial impact of networks

Barruel came to be supported by Johann August Starck and his network of like-minded men through an intermediary in Great Britain, the Swiss scientist Jean André Deluc. Robison remained outside the networks of Barruel and Starck due to a scientific dispute. Deluc was an old friend of the famous physician, popular philosopher and conspiracy theorist Johann Georg Zimmermann. After Zimmermann’s death in 1795, Deluc remained in touch with his widow, Luise Margarethe, who also acted as an intermediary between Barruel and the German critics of the revolution (Oberhauser 2013). A letter by Deluc, dated 23 October 1797, was printed in the Mémoires of Barruel. Deluc warned that the book might be met with great resentment in the press and suggested that Barruel should send him a copy first and get in contact with other important people, above all Edmund Burke; Barruel had made the acquaintance of Burke upon his arrival in London, in 1792. He sent him the newly published first volume of the Mémoires and asked him for his opinion about it. Burke had this to say about them, in a letter to the author dated 1 May 1797:

I cannot easily express to you how much I am instructed & delighted by the first Volume of your History of Jacobinism. The whole of the wonderful Narrative is supported by documents & Proofs with the most juridical regularity & exactness. […] I long impatiently for the second Volume; but the great object of my Wishes is, that the Work should have a great circulation in France, if by any means it can be compassed; & for that end, I should be glad upon the scale of a poor Individual to become a liberal Subscriber.

(Burke 1978: 38–9)

Barruel was very pleased by Burke’s flattering words and promptly sent him the next instalment of the Mémoires and asked for permission to make use of the letter. Since Burke died soon thereafter, his thoughts about the second volume were never recorded. Barruel had always spoken positively about England in his writings. He did not interpret English Freemasonry as part of the conspiracy, nor did he mention Britain as an important branch of the Jacobins (Schilling 1950).

These networks clearly show that, with regard to these conspiracy theories, there has been a transnational transfer of ideas bound to different actors; the German networks in particular worked to send Barruel different materials and to change his perspective. It should be emphasised that it is research into these networks that helps to move beyond the mere interpretation of the various published works. In fact, many people participated in the making of these conspiracy-theoretical writings and, through their actions, shared responsibility for the dissemination of these ideas.

A common ground: Counter-Enlightenment

Barruel, Robison and Starck had in common a reliance on earlier criticism of the Enlightenment and of Freemasonry (Oberhauser 2013). Darrin McMahon (2003) has rightly pointed out that focusing on the historical context of the rejection of the philosophy of Voltaire and the Encyclopédie means seeing the construction of Enlightenment discourse as a struggle against the opponents of Enlightenment movements. Therefore, the opponents helped sharpen the arguments of Enlightenment thinkers (Garrard 2006). Regarding Barruel’s conspiracy theory, he built on strong discursive strands; the anti-philosophical discourse in particular played a major
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role in his work. Indeed, Barruel had already made a name for himself in this respect before the revolution when he tackled in a highly polemical manner the main ideas of the French Enlightenment in his pamphlet Les Helviennes (Hofman 1993; 1988). Barruel also contributed to the journal L’Année littéraire, the leading journal of French anti-philosophers. To some extent, his later conspiracy theory was coined before the outbreak of the revolution.

Nevertheless, concerning French anti-Masonry, it appears that several anonymously published writings formed the basis of Barruel’s book (Lemaire 1985). One of the first and most important French conspiratorial authors quoted by Barruel is Abbé Lefranc (1791, 1792), who already blamed the outbreak of the revolution on the Freemasons. Barruel himself published in 1793 (as an emigrant) the study Histoire du Clergé, in which he interpreted various events of the first phase of the revolution in a conspiratorial way. Barruel also referred to books by Cadet de Gassicourt (1796), a former Mason, and Christophe Félix Louis Ventre de la Touloubre, called Galart de Montjoie (1795, 1796). However, Barruel initially wanted to write about the theosophical Illuminés around Saint-Martin and what has been called ‘Super Enlightenment’ (Edelstein 2010), but decided through the intervention of Starck and his colleagues to write about the German Illuminati. Although the French anti-philosophical context played a major role in Barruel’s writings, the historically momentous link between the outbreak of the revolution and the Illuminati could only be construed on the basis of German materials and publications.

In fact, anti-Masonry was a Western European issue: Anti-Illuminati discourse was constructed in Germany, but adapted by the writings of Barruel, Robison and Starck. General works tend to highlight the impact of Barruel’s and Robison’s conspiracy theories, overlooking Starck’s publications, but it was Starck and the publications in his corresponding circles that made Mémoires and Proofs of a conspiracy possible (Valjavec 1951; Epstein 1966; Rogalla von Bieberstein 1976; Klausnitzer 2007).

From this perspective, it should be noted that conspiracy theories about the Illuminati from this period are a specific product of mostly German Masonic debates on the origins of Freemasonry and what ‘true’ Freemasonry should be like. These debates culminated in the Masonic congress of Wilhelmsbad in 1782 (Reinalter et al. 2019).

The religious and political dimension of anti-Masonry

The spreading of Freemasonry on the European continent in the eighteenth century went hand in hand with an increasingly powerful anti-Masonry ideology. The democratic potential of the Masonic lodges created a problem with the authorities in several European countries, especially in the second half of the eighteenth century. However, as early as 1698, a leaflet distributed in London warned of anti-Christian Masons (Knoop et al. 1978). Subsequently, English writings dealt with the moral reprehensibility of the secret society and the very idea of secrecy. In this early phase, the two great ideological guidelines of anti-Masonry emerged: First was the notion of secrecy itself, of the Freemasons holding information accessible only to the initiated, which was certainly guided by religious implications; second, were the debunking notes of former Freemasons.

The second phase is a mixture of English resentment with an aggressive French-Spanish discourse. Soon after the founding of the first lodges in France, religious writers such as José Torrubia or Abbé Larudan claimed that Freemasonry was intent on destroying religion, especially the Christian faith. In 1738, Pope Clement XII signed ‘In Eminenti’, the first bull directed against Freemasonry as an organisation; Freemasonry was referred to in the bull as a sect whose members protected themselves by an oath and had secrets and therefore could hide heretical ideas. Some (Mellor 1961) argue that the condemnation by the Pope had a political motivation
as well: He probably wanted to protect the Catholic Stuarts from the Protestant lodges. These allegations were repeated by Benedict XIV in 1751 (Ferrer Benimeli 1976–1977).

In addition, the disputes about origins and future direction from within German Freemasonry itself contributed to the suspicion about the organisation, while the reappearance of the Knights Templar created a target from the Catholic side. Freemasonry was banned in a number of countries and cities: 1735 in Holland and Frisia, 1736 in Geneva, 1737 in Tuscany, 1738 in Hamburg and in Sweden, and 1794 in Russia under Empress Catherine II, and many Masons were imprisoned. Elsewhere, despite the assurances of the Masonic lodges that behind their closed doors nothing political or blasphemous was going on, Freemasonry was placed under state supervision: In 1785 by Emperor Joseph II in his dominions, in 1788 in Prussia, in 1799 in Great Britain. In 1795, the lodges were forced to close by Emperor Francis II (Oberhauser 2018).

The real Illuminati

This repression underlines the fact that the late eighteenth century was obsessed with the idea of ‘unknown superiors’ in possession of powerful secrets. This was exacerbated by the development of various secret societies pretending to be in possession of knowledge. Among these, with regard to conspiracy theories, the Illuminati occupy the most prominent position. The Illuminati Order was founded in 1776 by Adam Weishaupt (1748–1830), a professor of canon law, in Ingolstadt, Bavaria. His aim was to establish a secret structure to train young men destined to obtain important administrative positions. Though not Masonic from the outset, the Illuminati system, as developed by Adolph von Knigge on the basis of Weishaupt’s teachings, came to incorporate the degrees of Freemasonry. The Illuminati degrees were meant to divulge more and more secrets and insights as the candidate ascended through the ranks (Wäges, Markner 2015). In less than a decade, the Illuminati attracted about 2000 members, among whom were a few well-known German Enlightenment intellectuals as well as high-ranking Freemasons.

Knigge left the order in 1784, due to irreconcilable differences with Weishaupt, the order was banned a year later in Bavaria and the Illuminati went into decline. Burke refers in his work to the publication by the Bavarian government of the so-called Originalschriften, which contain correspondence, some degrees and other instructions, of the Illuminati. Around them, a conspiracy theory arose, based on real events and on imagined conspiracy mythemes that still exists today. The main one is that the leading Illuminati member Johann Joachim Christoph Bode, on a journey to Paris in 1787, met Masons of the ‘Amis réunis’ lodge to bring the Illuminati to France. The outbreak of the French Revolution was then attributed to this journey.

The principal proponents of the Illuminati conspiracy theory were based in Darmstadt, Hanover and Vienna, all connected with Johann August Starck. Opponents of the Illuminati, such as Leopold Alois Hoffmann, Ludwig Adolph Christian von Grolman, Heinrich Martin Gottfried Köster, Christian Girtanner and Heinrich August Ottokar Reichard, contributed to the journals Wiener Zeitschrift and Eudämonia and were the authors of very influential conspiracy theoretical books about the Illuminati and other secret societies (Weiß, Albrecht 1999). Hoffmann, for example, also worked as a spy to gather information about radical societies in Hungary (Silagi 1960). Von Grolman, an Illuminati renegade possessing first-hand knowledge about the secret order, published anonymously the book Die neuesten Arbeiten des Spartacus und Philo (1793), which was heavily used by both Barruel and Robison. A few years later, this same group helped translate Barruel’s Mémoires into German.
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Robison’s ‘good authorities’

Since Robison did not work with this network of correspondents, he depended on other people to provide him with sources and literature. For *Proofs of a conspiracy* he harvested the review *Neueste Religionsbegebenheiten* published by Köster. In addition, Robison presumably corresponded with anonymous experts, the ‘good authorities’ mentioned on the title page of his *Proofs*. Two Scottish monks of the Scots Monastery in Regensburg, Germany, have been identified as Robison’s sources (Hammermayer 1966; Dilworth 2004). Maurus (Alexander) Horn, the monastery’s librarian, a staunch adversary of the French Revolution who repeatedly mentioned the Illuminati in autobiographical documents, shared pertinent material with Robison (Beattie 1849: 116). The second monk, Gallus (James) Robertson came into contact with Robison. He told him in January 1798 that, ten years earlier, he had been in Ratisbon, when in Germany the exposure of the Illuminati was a much-discussed subject, and, travelling from Munich to Edinburgh, he had taken a copy of the *Originalschriften* with him. While he was assured that Scottish Freemasonry had nothing to do with the Illuminati, Robertson also told him that there was evidence of correspondence between Germany and Scotland (Oberhauser 2013).

In his *Proofs of a conspiracy*, Robison quoted several Illuminati letters from the *Originalschriften*, but in an unreliable fashion (for an example, see Robison [1798 (1797): 134] and Markner et al. [2005: 214–7]). In addition, there are sentences in Robison’s version that cannot be found in the *Originalschriften*. Robison’s false translations and compilations were often quoted in this form, despite the publicly available writings of the Illuminati (Oberhauser 2013).

Secret societies and the French Revolution

Any discussion of the intellectual origins of the French Revolution will have to touch upon the role of Freemasonry (Mornet 1933). The problem of researching secret societies is that there is a vast number of pseudo-scientific books about alleged actions of those societies. Therefore, scholarly work has to focus, on the one hand, on the ‘empirical’ history of secret societies and, on the other hand, on the ‘imagined’ history. This latter aspect was analysed by John Morris Roberts in *The Mythology of Secret Societies* (1972), studying the mythological representations and assumptions about the clandestine work of secret societies. Albert Soboul (1974) pointed out at least three ways of conceiving the role of Freemasonry in bringing about the French Revolution. First, Freemasonry has been accused of being the main protagonist in the causes that led to the revolution, a revolution that was nothing but a conspiracy conceived in the lodges. This counter-revolutionary reading was called ‘barruélisme’ in reference to Augustin Barruel (Ligou 1982). The second extreme position considers Freemasonry as the culmination of Enlightenment ideas, which contributed to a large part to the outbreak of the French Revolution. The third position is more moderate: It concedes that Freemasonry played a role in the propagation of Enlightenment ideas, but was not the deciding factor. The lodges were divided among themselves, had no unique and homogeneous ideologies and philosophies, and certainly not all were politically interested. This means that Freemasonry in itself was not capable of leading a large conspiracy, as it is supposed by conservative thinkers.

François Furet (1978) believed that the French Revolution should be conceptually grasped in order to prevent being overwhelmed by the various interpretive approaches. He reintroduced the books and ideas of Augustin Cochin as his point of reference in the debates. Cochin was accused of being a follower of ‘barruélisme’, but to Furet he was a conceptual thinker. Cochin tried to avoid conspiratorial thinking by using sociological categories: He interpreted Freemasonry and other societies as a revolutionary ‘machine’ that led to the outbreak of the French
Revolution. Drawing upon Cochin’s work, Furet regarded these philosophical clubs – *sociétés de pensée* – as a force that controlled public opinion and ultimately culminated in the Terror. Daniel Roche’s investigations put these interpretations on an empirical foundation. He was able to show clearly that the number of Masonic lodges had increased dramatically since the 1750s. With regard to social composition, it can also be stated that Masonic lodges were distinguished from other societies by the fact that they were more socially diverse, with more members from the third estate, especially members working in trade and commerce. In contrast to other societies, these lodges seemed most to demonstrate the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity.

It should be noted that, although the Masonic lodges did not play a direct role in the events of 1789, some of its members were important to the course of the French Revolution (Ligou 1989). However, Masons can be found across the political spectrum in relation to the revolution, from avid supporters to staunch opponents (Roche 1989 [1978]). Beaurepaire has pointed out that some Masons even sympathised with anti-philosophical and conservative ideas (Beaurepaire 2013). It should be noted, therefore, that, in view of the short-term events that led to the outbreak of the French Revolution, there is no evidence that there was anything like a Masonic plot. However, it remains unclear what influence Freemasonry had in terms of long-term developments.

More recent research on the age of the Enlightenment and, in particular, research on radical Enlightenment currents, paints a differentiated picture of radical thinkers and discourses. Interpreting Freemasonry as a radical society is in any form controversial. Margaret Jacob, as one of the leading researchers in this field (1981, 2013), assumes that there was a connection between Masonic lodges and freethinkers in the Dutch Republic and England, and that clandestine literature led to the spreading of these radical ideas. This would mean that certain lodges served as a means of transporting materialistic, if not atheistic, thought. But, this position is not commonly shared by other researchers and has been strongly criticised (Israel, Mulsow 2014), as there were various strands of Freemasonry that emerged throughout Europe. The same can be said with regard to the interpretation of the Illuminati, whose founder is said to have radiated a ‘diffuse radicalism’ (Markner 2017), or the idea of the ‘Deutsche Union’. In the end, the question remains about how radical these societies were.

**The transfer of the Illuminati conspiracy theory to New England**

Illuminati-related conspiracy theories became a travelling concept in 1798 and 1799 when they reached New England (Stauffer 1918). Jedidiah Morse’s sermon on National Fast Day on 8 May 1798, held in Connecticut, was the first to deal with the Illuminati in the U.S.A. Morse relied on *Proofs of a conspiracy* despite the fact that Robison himself had only vaguely hinted at the possible existence of several lodges of the Illuminati in the U.S.A. before 1786 (Robison 1798 [1797]: 202). In two further sermons, Morse tried to prove Robison’s assumption about possible American Illuminati. In this he clearly failed, but his conspiracy theory spread quickly anyway and permeated the circles of conservative Federalists such as Theodore and Timothy Dwight, David Tappan and others, before reaching the newspapers. Even presidential candidate Thomas Jefferson was accused of being one of the Illuminati. After his election victory in 1800, however, interest in the matter waned and the scare was over. But, this example shows how the Illuminati conspiracy theory could be used in critical situations. The theory was constructed by Morse and others to show that evil people from abroad were in the country to undermine the principles of liberty and equality. It was also a weapon in the fight for a conservative Calvinist tradition, which was at stake at these times (Moss 1995).

In a similar vein, the Anti-Masonic Party was founded in New York in 1828 and found its strongest following in New England. Its supporters saw it as a democratic opposition (Butter
2018: 170–8) against populist President Andrew Jackson. Freemasonry was seen as an elite body directing American politics and aiming at the destruction of civil liberties. This party, whose voters mostly lived in the countryside and suburban areas, existed until about 1838, and later merged with the Whig Party (McCarthy 1902; Vaughn 1983). During the party’s national convention in 1830, former Mason Moses Thatcher presented a history of anti-Masonry that drew upon Barruel and Robison (but not mentioning Starck). Another renegade Mason among the party’s members, Henry Dana Ward, used Robison and Barruel as reference sources in his books and pamphlets (Oberhauser 2013).

**Conclusion: Freemasonry and antisemitic conspiracy theories**

In the mid-1780s, Starck became a target of the Berlin Enlightenment around Johann Erich Biester, Friedrich Gedicke and Friedrich Nicolai, who were famous authors and editors of journals. He was accused of secretly furthering Catholic aims while overtly fulfilling his duties as a Protestant court preacher. Starck responded to these allegations with an unsuccessful lawsuit as well as several publications. In one of them, a scathing satire, he accused his detractors of being crypto-Jews, and Freemasonry of having Jewish roots and being subverted by Jews. This incident shows, among other things, that the relationship between Judaism and Freemasonry, although not a strongly discussed topic, was not friction-free (Katz 1970).

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the founding of the Jewish Masonic Lodge ‘Zur aufgehenden Morgenröthe’ in Frankfurt by Sigmund Geisenheimer took place. Although the lodge wanted to accommodate both Jews and Gentiles, it almost always remained a purely Jewish affair. Johann Christian Ehrmann, himself a Freemason as well as a former member of the Illuminati Order, wrote the short pamphlet *Judenthum in the Maurerey 1816*. The author branded the Jews as a people who helped to bring about the atrocities of the French Revolution and Napoleon’s triumph. In regard to the lodge, Ehrmann claimed that the Jews were infiltrating Freemasonry in order to fulfil their role as a chosen people and bring the world under their control. Ehrmann’s short pamphlet would later be used in Nazi propaganda (Rosenberg 1920).

With regard to conspiracy thinking at that time, Jews played only a minor role in the works of Barruel, Robison and Starck. But, their role in these great conspiracy-theoretical syntheses about the interpretation of revolution was dramatically changed by a single document (Oberhauser 2015).

On 20 August 1806, Augustin Barruel received a letter written by one Jean-Baptiste Simonini in Florence. Simonini introduced himself as an avid reader of the *Mémoires*, and congratulated Barruel for having written them. But, he believed that Barruel should have covered the Jews as well, since they were in fact the ‘unknown superiors’ behind Freemasonry and the Illuminati. Realising that this might seem an exaggeration, Simonini tried to convince Barruel by sharing some autobiographical reminiscences with him. Simonini described how, as a young man growing up in Piedmont, he had become friends with Jews who, one day, wanted him to become part of their large conspiracy and so divulged their secrets to him. They had inaugurated him in Turin, disclosing their concealment tactics, plans and goals achieved. They claimed Mani and the Old Man of the Mountain were Jews; and Freemasonry and the Illuminati were founded by two Jews; that anti-Christian sects, which descended from Mani, had millions of followers in various positions throughout the world, with over 800 adherents within the Italian clergy and many members in Spain. They claimed that the Bourbons were the greatest enemies of the sect; and that Christians were led astray through false baptismal certificates. They described to Simonini how they planned to use money to take over governments and, since they now had...
the same rights, they would rob Christians by usury. In less than a century, they wanted to become the rulers of the world and enslave those of other faiths (Cohn 1967: 33–6; Taguieff 1992: 109–13).

Simonini’s letter was first printed in 1878 in the Catholic journal *Le Contemporain* as part of the memoirs of Père Fidèle de Grivel, who had become a close friend of Barruel towards the end of his life (Taguieff 2013: 32). The letter, forwarded by Barruel to Grivel in 1817, was accompanied by comments in which Barruel explained that, when he had convinced himself that Simonini’s letter was genuine, he had brought it to the attention of the chief of the Paris secret police, Pierre-Marie Desmarest, as well as Cardinal Fesch and Pope Pius VII, who all confirmed Simonini’s credibility. Barruel then explored the matter further and found that many Jews had indeed ascended to the higher degrees of Freemasonry. In 1819, Barruel told Grivel that he had learned that the Grand Orient was run by the ‘Très-Grand Orient’ with its own Grand Master, a secret body without a fixed seat consisting of only 21 members, nine of them Jews. The communication, which was based on a system of constantly changing headquarters, seemed to have worked well, as the conspiracy was supposed to have reached the smallest villages.

Since Simonini’s letter was only published in 1878 and no original has ever been found, some researchers have assumed it to be a forgery. It was even suggested that it had been fabricated by the French secret police under Fouché (Markner 2014: 256). However, archival findings demonstrate that Barruel pondered over this letter from 1806 to 1820. Meanwhile, at least three copies of it are still extant in Western European archives, all of which were commented upon by Barruel himself (Oberhauser 2013: 269). Little is known about Simonini, apart from the fact that he did exist and was not an offspring of Barruel’s imagination. He had the rank of captain in the Sardinian army and was dispatched to the Aosta Valley in 1815 on behalf of the government in Turin (Markner 2014: 254–5).

Barruel refrained from publishing the letter himself because he feared that it might trigger a pogrom. Grivel received the letter in 1817 but chose not to publish it either. Fidèle de Grivel, initially a Sulpician who joined the Jesuits in 1803, became acquainted with the famous conservative thinker and conspiracy theorist Joseph de Maistre in Saint Petersburg. Recent archival research by Anastasia Glazanova has established that Simonini’s letter circulated in Russian elite circles due to the popularity and influence of de Maistre. It is highly likely that de Maistre received his copy of the letter from Grivel.

In his memoirs, Grivel also reported that Barruel had burnt two unfinished book manuscripts two days before his death, one of them a refutation of Kant’s philosophy. The other one was a history of ancient Jacobinism. Barruel had intended to prove that the revolutionary slogan ‘liberté, égalité’ had its origins in ancient Greece, from where it was passed on by the Manicheans to the Knights Templar, who in turn founded Freemasonry.

Four years after its first publication, Simonini’s letter was reprinted in the Jesuit journal *La Civiltà Cattolica*. Strangely, there was no reference to Grivel, but instead the letter was presented as a hitherto unedited document, allegedly confirming that the ‘Jewish race is the natural seat of high masonry’.

In the same year, the sixth edition of the conspiracy-theoretical work *Les Sociétés Secrètes* by Nicolas Deschamps was published with Simonini’s letter in its third volume (a compilation of posthumous material that Claudio Jannet provided with annotations and documents). This work strongly recalled the ideas of Barruel as the anti-Masonic conspiracy theory was recounted and related to the subsequent revolutions of 1830 and 1848. Freemasonry itself was blamed in this book for social changes since 1789.

The influence of Masons under Jewish direction was emphasised by various other European authors in books, newspapers and journals throughout the nineteenth century. With regard to
the history of the Judeo-Masonic conspiracy theory, the role of the Jews in these texts changed noticeably. Among these was the prominent title *Le juif, le judaïsme et la judaïsation des peuples chrétiens* by Gougenot des Mousseaux, published in 1869, which Alfred Rosenberg brought onto the market as a German translation in 1921. The work claimed that the Jews were not only the enemy of Christianity, but also of the whole world, with a world republic as their goal. Above all, it denounced the so-called ‘kabbalistic Jews’, allegedly connected with Freemasonry. The well-known occultist and anti-Semite, Édouard Drumont, regrouped the relationship: Freemasons were not the motor of Jewish emancipation, but the Jews were the secret superiors of Freemasonry. In his voluminous work *La France Juive* (1886), he sought to demonstrate that Freemasonry was controlled by Jews intent on destroying Christianity. Barruel, Deschamps and Jannet were also quoted in 1893 by the Jesuit Léon Meurin in his work *La Franc-Maçonnerie Synagogue de Satan*, which cited Simonini’s letter in an attempt to prove the link between the Jews and the Manicheans.

Finally, Simonini’s letter would again resurface in pamphlets interpreting the First World War as a conspiracy. Most importantly, Nesta H. Webster discussed it in her book *World Revolution* (1921) and became the first author to connect this letter and *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Having read both Barruel and Robison, she used their conspiratorial approach in order to explain the nature of historical revolutions in general. In her widely read publications, the anti-Illuminati tropes were merged with antisemitic and anti-Bolshevik elements.

The legacy of Simonini’s letter leads to Alfred Rosenberg, known to be one of the publishers of a German edition of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. *The Protocols*, whose author is still unknown, were also based on a fabricated story about the plan of a Jewish elite group wanting to seize world domination through the infiltration and instrumentalisation of Freemasonry. But, far from being only an interpretation of history, this forgery proved to be a propaganda weapon with tragic consequences.¹

**Note**

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